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Women with short hair

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WOMEN WITH SHORT HAIR

A Thesis submitted to
The Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English

by
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I dedicate *Women with Short Hair* to J. D. and M. K. I am one step closer to telling your stories. Moreover, I dedicate this collection to all English graduate students, present and future, who decide to write a thesis on top of taking classes and comprehensive exams, working, and maintaining a social life. Know that the writer's block will pass, and the all-nighters will end. Remember to stretch, or your legs will ache from sitting in one position for too long. But above all, hang in there. And once your thesis has been approved, be human again. Celebrate.

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ABSTRACT: *Women with Short Hair*

Amanda Layne Stephens

Women with Short Hair is a short-fiction collection that centers on the lives of four women who live in West Virginia. Each story depicts a female character during a different developmental stage: childhood in “In Casino Daycare,” young adulthood in “*Felis domestica*,” adulthood in “Date Night at the Beach,” and middle-age in “Women with Short Hair.” Short-fiction collections that influenced *Women with Short Hair* include Flannery O’Connor’s *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, and Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time*. Symbolism, repetition, the objective correlative, and free indirect discourse constitute reoccurring literary devices while reappearing themes include female bonding, the longing for connection and acceptance, sex as a means to assert dominance, twenty-first century beauty ideals, and the inability to escape unfulfilling and often destructive home lives.

Women with Short Hair: A Semi-short Account of Characters, Arrangement, and Craft

I

This is a moment of joy. After an intense year and a half of writing, meeting with thesis committee members, revising, and editing, my first short-fiction collection, *Women with Short Hair (WWSH)*, is finished. More importantly, the collection is reader-ready, and I am delighted to share it. In this introduction, *WWSH*'s characters, arrangement, and aesthetics are explored.

II

In "Why Do You Write?" Margaret Atwood states, "Tell what is yours to tell. Let others tell what is theirs" (1620). All of *WWSH*'s stories center on female characters. As a woman and a friend of many other women, I identify with the woman's perspective. I celebrate it in this collection by infusing my heroines with experiences I have had or women I know have had to convey verisimilitude, to make my stories, our stories.

Beginning with "In Casino Daycare," the first story of the collection, the protagonist is six-year-old Kelsey James. Clumsy, imaginative, and an articulator of sadness she is too young to understand, Kelsey is a child thrown into an adult world. Her father died when she was very young, and her mother spends most of her time working, gambling at the casino, or with her new boyfriend who Kelsey refers to as the purple man because he wears a purple suit. To cope with her fatherlessness and frequent abandonment by her mother, Kelsey fantasizes of an ideal dad who will "rescue her from all the bad people in the world" and make her family complete—expectations she imposes upon her mother's boyfriend with unfavorable results (28).

Aside from Kelsey, Kelsey's mother, and the purple man, other important characters include Mrs. Hensley and Miss Amy, both of whom are casino daycare employees, and Dharma and Charles, two children Kelsey encounters in the daycare. Although tertiary characters, Mrs. Hensley and Miss Amy fulfill the much-needed maternal role in Kelsey's life better than her own mother while Dharma and Charles represent the main character's key foils. Unlike Kelsey, these children do not act out by stealing another child's toy or pinching a playmate, thus implying they do not endure the abusive home life all too common for the young central character.

Because of the protagonist's young age, I utilize third-person limited narration, which creates the distance necessary to tell Kelsey's story in a logical manner and with a vocabulary that extends beyond the first-grade. However, at the time, this narration type enables readers to "live through the character's mind and feel as the character does," as Jerome Stern asserts in *Making Shapely Fiction* (190).

While writing "In Casino Daycare," I envisioned myself with a camera in hand, zooming in and out of Kelsey's perspective to comment on different issues, which is exactly what happens throughout. For instance, distance from the child's viewpoint is created in the first sentence to communicate what has already happened before the story starts: "By the time her mother came into the living room, Kelsey had already spilled grape juice on the floor" (20). Providing this information makes it easier to understand why Kelsey's mother becomes angry shortly thereafter. On the other hand, zooming in to her point of view enables me to examine ordinary objects and events with fresh eyes and imagination: "Walking through the living room, she found her stuffed unicorn wedged into a corner underneath the table. She'd forgotten she'd put him back in his house" (24).

To most adults, a table is just a piece of furniture. We set our car keys, bills, and coffee mug on it. But to Kelsey—who does not have to worry about driving, paying bills, or drinking coffee to stay awake yet—a table represents the residence of her stuffed unicorn.

Because “In Casino Daycare” concludes with the child protagonist’s destruction of innocence, the second story, “*Felis domestica*,” can be interpreted as the pessimism that can result as the child enters young adulthood. But the heroine is no longer Kelsey. Rather, the central character is Les Flynn, a hot-headed yet bright nineteen-year-old who also may have been forced into adulthood prematurely. Moreover, because Les has recently learned the details of women’s oppression from taking Women’s Studies courses in college, she projects her frustrations upon the two male figures in her life—her father, Jack Senior, and brother, Jack Junior. Both men lounge in the living room while her mother, Cheryl, assumes all the household responsibilities, thus making the main character’s anger justified. But when Les goes to the extreme by attempting to force Cheryl to rebel against her homemaker role, Les learns that that approach may not be the best way to help her mother return to the empowered, assertive woman of her youth. Furthermore, although the “Jacks” (39), as the heroine calls them, represent tertiary characters, they still play an integral role because they validate Les’s reason for wanting to liberate her mother.

In my second story, I also employ third-person limited narration but not because Les, as a first-person narrator, would lack the vocabulary and ability to tell her story in a coherent fashion. Rather, this narration type is utilized because the main character is too much like me. Les is only five years younger than me, thus putting us close in age, and we share many of the same interests (e.g., we both enjoy women’s literature). Therefore,

using third-person limited narration allows me to separate myself from the character to tell her story, not mine. Moreover, this form of narration enables me to critique her behavior and hence highlight the dividing line between the protagonist and narrator/author. For instance, when Les decides to chop a head of lettuce without washing it first, Cheryl places “her thin fingers over her mouth and [shakes] her head” (46). Undoubtedly, her mother’s reaction accentuates the protagonist’s naiveté. Most people know that vegetables need to be washed prior to consumption. However, by using third-person narration, I (acting as the narrator) am able to emphasize Les’s ignorance on another issue: she has contributed to her mother’s subjugation just as much as her father and brother by not learning how to properly perform this task, which would help liberate her and her mother. If Les (or her father and brother) learned how to cook, she (or they) would become less dependent on Cheryl, and Cheryl would have one less homemaker duty for which she is responsible. So as much as I endorse Les’s objective to liberate her mother from her domestic role because I believe the protagonist has good intentions, I also interrogate it by undercutting her credibility.

In “Good Country People,” Flannery O’Connor also employs third-person narration to comment on her characters’ behavior and actions. Nevertheless, O’Connor takes a more complicated approach by focusing on three characters’ viewpoints—Hulga/Joy Hopewell, Mrs. Hopewell, and Mrs. Freeman—instead of one, thus making it third-person unlimited narration (or third-person narration that is limited to three characters). Furthermore, the author offers a more drastic critique of her characters. Whereas Les is only made to appear temporarily foolish in the lettuce-chopping incident in my story, Hulga loses her leg, literally.

Even so, Les and Hulga are remarkably similar. Much like Les, Hulga, a thirty-two-year-old who holds a Ph.D. in philosophy, is a free thinker and dedicated to academia. What is more, as a result of their obsession with intellectual affairs, neither Les nor Hulga “have a grain of [common] sense,” to use Mrs. Hopewell’s words in reference to her daughter, Hulga (268). So when Hulga has her artificial leg stolen by a young Bible salesman and Les ends up looking ignorant in front of her mother in the lettuce incident, O’Connor and I (acting as narrators) forewarn the dangers of being too committed to not only an academic ideology but also to any ideology, whether it is academic, religious, or political.

Having looked at the corruption of childhood purity in the first story and the ensuing bitterness during young adulthood in the second, in my third story, “Date Night at the Beach,” the fictional lens turns on the apathetic attitude that sometimes accompanies adulthood. The protagonist/unnamed narrator is a thirty-year-old restaurant manager who is unhappy in her marriage to Drew, a physical education teacher, but not unhappy enough to divorce him. Nevertheless, her indifferent perspective on her marriage dramatically changes when Drew deceives her, and she is forced to make a decision.

Other key characters include Sherry (the narrator’s mother-in-law) and El Ranchito’s (the restaurant where the narrator and Drew go to dine) female server and female owner. Over the past ten years that she and Drew have been married, the narrator and Sherry have established a solid relationship (e.g., they bond over their enjoyment of yoga), partly explaining why the protagonist has stayed with Drew for so long despite the fact that her relationship needs (e.g., emotional and sexual) often remain unfulfilled.

Moreover, the narrator creates connections with the server and owner because she began in food service as a server but is now a manager. Thus, she is able to empathize with both women, the one not in the position of authority and the one who is. Although the relationships the heroine establishes with the women at the restaurant seem minor, their formation remains nonetheless important because they represent the first bonds she forms outside of her marriage, an event that has a significant effect on the decision she makes regarding her marriage in the end.

“Date Night at the Beach” represents the only story in the collection in which first-person narration is employed. Utilizing first-person narration allows me to accomplish two goals: (1) the intimate exploration of the protagonist’s attempt—or lack thereof—to find meaning as a woman living in the twenty-first century and (2) to “create a distinctive voice, a character, and personality with the first words of the story” (Stern 178). Concerning the first goal, using this form of narration enables me to exist in the mind of the narrator as she struggles to find happiness with what she has—a husband, career, and house. In the modern era, where women are no longer expected to have children to make their lives complete, having these things (a relationship, profession, and house) should provide my female character with meaning in the form of contentment, confidence, and security. But they do not. And because my narrator’s life seems meaningless to her, I did not, unlike all of my other female protagonists, give her a name. She does not know who she is or how to make herself happy. Only in the conclusion and with the help of the kind women who work in the restaurant is she given a glimpse of the person she could be and what happiness might look like for her. What is more, by

withholding her name, I enable readers to sympathize with how the main character feels throughout much of the story.

As far as the second goal is concerned, first-person narration allows me to infuse the narrator of my third story with the strongest voice in the collection, which compensates for her self-centeredness and indifferent outlook on life. For example, in first paragraph of “Date Night at the Beach” the reader is immediately exposed to the narrator’s bluntness and her “I-do-not-care” attitude: “Nothing on TV. Didn’t feel like swimming—I’d swum all day in the Atlantic. So I fucked my husband” (58). As the passage illustrates, the narrator does not care enough about her life to even write about it in complete sentences. So she uses sentence fragments. Moreover, she has sex with Drew because she is bored, not because she wants to share an intimate connection with him.

The last story, “Women with Short Hair,” provides unity to the collection by returning to a character like Kelsey who has hope that her family’s life will improve. However, like the narrator in the third story, the central character of “Women with Short Hair,” Beth Marcum, is an unhappily married woman albeit with a more complicated situation. She is a forty-four-year-old server at a country club without a college education and with a son, Caleb, whose debilitating neurological condition is getting more difficult to manage. What is more, Philip, her husband, and his paint and house repair business is failing, which places most of the financial burden on Beth. And as if that were not enough for the protagonist to deal with, the story begins with a teenage server, Chloe, making a nasty comment to Beth about her age and physical appearance at work, an event that forces the heroine into action. As soon as she leaves the country club, she goes to a hair salon and gets a dramatic new hairstyle. Not only does Beth get the haircut to make

herself feel better about herself on the outside but also to escape her unhappy home life. Dealing with Caleb's condition has financially, mentally, and emotionally exhausted both her and her husband. His illness has been a major contributor to the fact that she and Philip do not share the intimate connection that they enjoyed during their youth.

Furthermore, aside from the characters mentioned, other important—if minor—characters include Jamie (Beth's hairdresser), Arlene (another hairdresser), and Beth's two pet goats, Sue and Lemon. The connection that Beth forms with the women in the salon facilitates her character change by empowering her to think about her needs and desires as opposed to everyone else's. But the main character's bond with the goats, especially Sue, bears equal significance as it enables her to release the sadness, frustration, and guilt she experiences as a wife and mother. Beth desperately wants her marriage and her son's condition to improve and yet is powerless to effect change in either of these areas.

Whereas third-person limited narration is utilized in my second story to create distance between myself and the protagonist because we share too many similarities, in "Women with Short Hair," I have the opposite problem. Not only is Beth about twenty years older than me, but she is also married, has a child—with a disorder—and does not have a college education. She has a tough life I could only imagine actually living, a main reason for me to write her story through third-person limited narration. Using this form of narration allows me to go into her mind, but not as completely as first-person narration allows. Because I have not experienced most of the struggles Beth endures in this story, I do not feel qualified to tell her story in first-person narration. But I do, however, spend

about thirty pages (making it the longest story in *WWSH*) trying to understand and sympathize with her situation.

III

As one can infer, the collection represents each female character during a particular phase of life. *WWSH* begins with a story about a little girl (Kelsey), thus symbolizing the childhood stage, and ends with a story about a woman in her forties (Beth), thus exploring the middle-age stage. The other two stories embody the phases in between—those of young adulthood (Les) and adulthood (the narrator of “Date Night at the Beach”). This arrangement of *WWSH* to mimic the life cycle comes from James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, also arranged to mimic the stages of childhood, young adulthood, and adulthood.

Beginning with a story that focuses on a child character and ending with a story that centers on a middle-aged character allows me to reflect the progression of the protagonists’ thought processes and writing styles, an interesting effect that perhaps inspired Joyce to use this method of organization as well. Like my prose in *WWSH*, Joyce’s prose in *Dubliners* “ages,” meaning it becomes more sophisticated or changes, as his characters age and change from story to story. For instance, in “An Encounter,” Joyce employs simple sentences to capture the voice of his boy narrator: “The man [...] smiled. I saw that he had great gaps in his mouth between his yellow teeth” (17). In the passage, the boy’s simple, yet vivid characterization of a male stranger, who tries to befriend the protagonist and his schoolmate in a field, suggests he is poor as he cannot afford dental care. Furthermore, the depiction of the stranger’s mouth as having “great gaps” and off-color teeth also functions as an objective correlative because the external description

implies the man's internal state of madness. Indeed, following the narrator's account, the man exhibits bizarre behavior that hints of mental illness. To illustrate, while conversing with the boy, the stranger rambles on and on about his thorough enjoyment of "looking at a nice young girl" (18) and the importance of boys "[getting] a nice warm whipping" (19).

Likewise, "In Casino Daycare," I use simple sentences to create a similar effect when Kelsey describes the purple man: "He was smaller than most of the daddies she had seen at school [...] He smiled. His yellow teeth were too large for his mouth" (22). But whereas Joyce utilizes the objective correlative in the form of missing teeth to suggest the man's "missing" sanity, I utilize symbolism in the form the purple man's short stature to suggest he represents an unsuitable father for Kelsey. Just as her mother's boyfriend literally falls short in terms of height in comparison to the fathers Kelsey sees at school, he also falls short in terms of being a good father figure to the main character. For instance, when the child walks in on her mother and the purple man having sex, the purple man, instead of discontinuing intercourse with her mother or having the decency to get up and shut the bedroom door, stays in position and says, "Go play" (24). Thus, the protagonist's description of her mother's boyfriend functions on two levels: as a simple sketch but also to convey his inability to measure up to the kind, nurturing parent that Kelsey needs.

In order to highlight the progression of writing styles from child to adult characters, the descriptions from "An Encounter" and "In Casino Daycare" will now be contrasted with the descriptions in Joyce's "The Dead" and my story, "Women with Short Hair," which center on adult protagonists. In "The Dead," Gabriel describes Lily,

the caretaker's daughter, as "a slim, growing girl, pale in complexion and with hay-coloured hair" (Joyce 177), and, in "Women with Short Hair," Beth depicts the Webster boys, the young men who live near her, as "[standing] shirtless and barefoot in gym shorts that glinted like rubies and sapphires in the sun" (96). Both examples illustrate the adults' use of more complex, sophisticated language to provide an image of another character. But in all four examples of imagery, form fits function. One would not expect the boy narrator from "An Encounter" to offer such a poetic representation as Gabriel does of Lily. Based on the boy's interest in reading westerns and detective stories and his lack of interest in the stranger's discussion about girls, he is not especially interested in women yet. Likewise, one would not expect Kelsey to use the words "rubies" and "sapphires" in her descriptions, let alone know what gemstones are.

Of course, I do not follow Joyce's model completely. Whereas Joyce focuses on characters (both male and female) and experiences common to Dublin, I focus on characters (but mostly female ones) and experiences common to West Virginia. I am from here, so I know what the people and atmosphere are like. Therefore, as West Virginia is a state that does not have a lot of money, my characters' lives reflect that. Their socio-economic statuses range from middle-class (in "*Felis domestica*" and "Date Night at the Beach") to lower-middle-class ("Women with Short Hair"), to a single-parent, low-income household ("In Casino Daycare"). Moreover, because West Virginia contains both rural and urban settings, I tried to showcase both. In "Women with Short Hair," for example, a rural setting is depicted as Beth drives home from the hair salon:

Swaying and dipping on the gravel road, she drove over patches of dandelions. Their golden heads disappeared underneath the shadow of her pickup and reappeared in her rearview mirror. She drove home to her husband and son, her right foot barely resting on the gas that summer

evening. She passed knee-high grass, oaks, and evergreens flanking the road on either side. A split-rail fence ran along the left side of the road and surrounded their three acres of land. (95)

Although I grew up in an urban area with a park and small businesses close by, I had friends, like the main character from my fourth story, who lived twenty to thirty minutes away from town in houses surrounded by woods and acres of land. My friends and I even had a term for living in this country setting—O.W.—which means Out Wayne and represents where most of them lived. Wayne County is in the southwest part of the state and is generally considered a less-industrialized, more rural county than, for instance, Kanawha or Cabell. And Wayne has a lot more beautiful scenery (and probably less pollution) as a result. Thus, although I set my fourth story on the outskirts of Beckley, West Virginia (and actually my second story as well), thus making it O.B. (Out Beckley), I revisited memories of growing up with children from O.W.

On the other hand, in “In Casino Daycare,” the setting is a city/neighborhood and very much resembles my own hometown: “[Kelsey] and her mother lived in a brick apartment building next to a gas station and a Family Dollar store. They walked to the park sometimes to feed bread to the pigeons” (23). When I was a child, I often walked to the park with my grandmother to feed bread to the birds and squirrels, and sometimes, we stopped by the Family Dollar store on the way. Thus, I clearly draw from my own experiences to create setting in my first story. Furthermore, the only story that is not set in my home state is “Date Night at the Beach,” which takes place in North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, a common vacation spot for West Virginians, partly because it is relatively inexpensive.

IV

Thus far, I have only discussed my collection's characters and arrangement. Although these are significant, an explanation regarding my craft and aesthetics must be included. Nothing is better than getting so caught up in a story that I forget the time, the TV, and the crazy online post my friend just put on Facebook. Moreover, during these moments of immersion while writing my collection, I tend to employ—often unconsciously—the following literary devices: repetition, the objective correlative, and free indirect discourse.

When communicating an intense emotion of a female protagonist in *WWSH*, I often use repetition, a technique I learned from reading Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*. For example, in "Big Two-Hearted River: Part 1," the narrator repeats the word "black" to reflect Nick Adams's traumatized internal state:

The grasshopper was black. As he walked along the road, climbing, he had started many grasshoppers from the dust. They were all black. They were not the big grasshoppers with yellow and black or red and black wings whirring out from their black wing sheathing as they fly up. They were ordinary hoppers, but all a sooty black in color. (135)

Nick, after recently returning as a soldier from World War I, goes on a camping trip near Lake Superior. Of course, the grasshoppers turned black on account of wild fires that recently broke out in the camping area. However, Nick's fixation on the insects' coloring indicates his inability to leave behind the horrible events he saw in the war. Indeed, he seems so affected by WWI scenes that the color black, which symbolizes death, dominates his perception of the world. Further, just as the grasshoppers are "ordinary" insects that happen to turn black, Nick represents an ordinary man who goes to war and returns in a fragile and troubled mental state.

In the following passage from “*Felis domestica*,” I also employ repetition. But unlike Hemingway’s example, I do not use this technique to communicate the protagonist’s solemn viewpoint as a result of a traumatic experience. Rather, I repeat the word “no” in front of a sequence of hyphenated words, all of which pertain to typical behaviors associated with femininity, to illustrate the confidence, the rush, Les derives from subverting these behaviors: “Of course, some things—like the feminist swagger—the no makeup-wearing, no shit-taking, no bra-wearing walk down the street on a hot summer day while bra-wearers scoff and business-types gaze—couldn’t be taught” (36).

Furthermore, by utilizing this technique during the exposition, I emphasize the point in which Les formulates her methodology for liberating her mother from the domestic sphere. She believes her mother’s reading of women’s literature will assist in the matter, but Les is realistic. She acknowledges that simply reading women’s works will not help her mother learn how to do “the feminist swagger,” a strut that takes time to master. Undoubtedly, the walk Les describes is her walk, not the kind she expects her mother to have. Nevertheless, she aspires for Cheryl to gain the female empowerment necessary to develop her own swagger.

Another instance of repetition occurs in “Date Night at the Beach,” but the technique is employed to communicate the main character’s nostalgic mood rather than the protagonist’s melancholy (in “Big Two-Hearted River”) or self-assuredness (in the last example from “*Felis domestica*”): “We made love—real love, pausing-to-stare-into-each-other’s-eyes love, moving-fast-then-slow-to-savor-it love, nipple-sucking-ass-grabbing love that ended with sweaty foreheads and stomachs and “Yes! Yes! Yes!” (59).

But like the selection from my second story, I repeat certain words—in this case “love” and “yes”—and utilize a series of hyphenated words. Nevertheless, in my third story, the hyphenated words emphasize the narrator’s longing for the invigorating sex life she and Drew used to have during the beginning of their relationship. Further, by using this technique, a division surfaces early on between what can change and what cannot at this point in the character’s marriage to her husband, a drawing line that also appears between Les and Cheryl in the excerpt from “*Felis domestica*.” While Les realizes she cannot teach her mother the “feminist swagger,” and so she does not waste her time by trying to teach it, the narrator of “Date Night at the Beach” realizes she and Drew cannot go back to the fulfilling relationship they used to have. Therefore, the narrator does not attempt to rekindle her romance with Drew because she knows it is pointless.

As the passages from *WWSH* illustrate, a favorable byproduct from using repetition is that it creates flow or rhythm and moments of intensity when executed within a single sentence. Les’s feeling of female empowerment and the narrator’s longing for a past romance must be depicted via short, repetitious utterances to reflect the force of their emotions. Nonetheless, at the same time, these instances of repetition must also illustrate a separation from the prosaic prose that comprises some of my second story and much of my third story. What is more, these selections represented the most enjoyable to write. As I became enthralled by each character’s voice and viewpoint, their personalities started to come off the page, thus providing readers with a sense of what my characters are like.

In opposition, the repetitiveness of the word black in the passage from “Big Two-Hearted River,” while it creates rhythm, becomes excessive after a certain point. How

many times does the narrator need to repeat the word black for the reader to comprehend that Nick has become fixated on this color because of the monstrosities he witnessed in the war? Three or four times would have been sufficient, but the narrator repeats the color six times in that excerpt and three more times in the paragraph from which the passage came, making a total of nine times. In the examples of repetition from my stories, however, I only repeat “no” three times in “*Felis domestica*” and “love” five times in “Date Night at the Beach.” Furthermore, because I use the device all in one sentence as opposed to the narrator of “Big Two-Hearted River,” who spreads out the repeated word for an entire paragraph, readers can read the repetition and go on to the next sentence. Additionally, to modernize the technique, I employ hyphenated words to enhance the flow and the excitement that accompanies the emotions conveyed.

As much as the excerpts, both from Hemingway’s story and my stories, represent instances of repetition that convey the protagonist’s emotion, the passages also represent examples of the objective correlative. Utilizing the objective correlative enables fiction writers to indicate a character’s emotion without resorting to sentimentality. So in “Big Two-Hearted River,” the descriptive passage of the black grasshopper suggests Nick’s troubled internal state while in “*Felis domestica*,” the descriptive passage of the “feminist swagger” implies Les’s excitement over her ability to perform the strut. Moreover, in “Date Night at the Beach,” the narrator’s account of the fulfilling sex life she used to have indicates both the excitement of her past romance with Drew and her longing to return to that past.

Objective correlatives, like repetition, represent a reoccurring stylistic feature in *WWSH*. A great aspect about using the objective correlative is that it helps make my

characters seem real. The things they do to convey their feelings represent actions that real people would do if they were in the same situation. So in my first story, instead of Kelsey saying, “I’m mad!” she slams a door when her mother and the purple man decline her offer “to play” (24). In my second story, rather than Cheryl telling Les that she is upset, Cheryl cuts a tomato “into tiny, red cubes,” thus conveying her emotional state of being ripped apart by her daughter’s comment—that being her mother is not enough to earn Les’s respect (46). With my third story, instead of having the narrator state that her marriage to Drew has negatively impacted her well-being in ways she cannot fathom, I show her in the shower trying to wash out “the grime” (i.e., the sand and bits of seashell) that she “couldn’t see” and would “never be able to get ... out” (61). And, in my fourth story, rather than Beth saying, “I’m angry!” when Chloe calls her a nasty name, Beth “[slams] her toweled fist on the island” (83).

In addition to being an example of repetition and the objective correlative, the excerpt from “*Felis domestica*” regarding Les’s “feminist swagger” also represents an instance of free indirect discourse because it is ambiguous whether these thoughts derive from the character or narrator. Moreover, although Hemingway tends to utilize free indirect discourse in his stories, I actually picked up the technique from reading Anton Chekhov’s short fiction. To illustrate, in Chekhov’s “A Gentleman Friend,” the narrator becomes infused with the main character, a prostitute named Vanda, when describing the heroine’s frustration over only receiving “a ruble” in exchange for her ring in a pawn shop: “[What] can you get for a ruble? You can’t buy for that sum a fashionable short jacket, nor a big hat, nor a pair of bronze-color shoes, and without those things she had a feeling of being, as it were, undressed” (34). Clearly, the narrator is so immersed in the

mind of Vanda that it is impossible to differentiate between the two. Is it the protagonist who exhibits a love for fashion, or is it the narrator?

In *WWSH*, I also employ free indirect discourse because it allows me to practically live in the minds of my protagonists. But whereas Chekhov uses the technique in “A Gentleman Friend” to emphasize Vanda’s shallow fixation with materialistic possessions, I typically use free indirect discourse to emphasize my characters’ positive traits and qualities. For instance, in “Women with Short Hair,” just after Beth’s supervisor, Laura, does not introduce Ricky, the country club’s dishwasher, to the new servers, the main character becomes upset. Immediately following the event, Beth thinks to herself: “Didn’t Laura’s mother teach her any manners?” (81). And although I use third-person limited narration, it is difficult to differentiate between Beth’s voice and the narrator’s. But more importantly, the heroine’s ability to empathize with another person is illustrated. If I were Beth, I would be upset by Laura’s actions as well, especially as Beth experiences the same kind of maltreatment as Ricky at work because she and he are not college educated. So by blurring my sentiment with hers, I sympathize with my character while Beth empathizes with a character in the story.

While I use free indirect discourse to draw attention to Beth’s ability to empathize in “Women with Short Hair,” in “In Casino Daycare,” I employ this technique to accentuate Kelsey’s longing to have a family, another reputable quality: “Were they going to be a family now—she, her mother, and the purple man?” (35). The passage comes from the end of the story when Kelsey’s mother and the purple man come to pick Kelsey up from daycare. Furthermore, like the last example from my fourth story, I leave the question my protagonist asks unresolved because the character does not know the

answer. Both Beth and Kelsey only know what they want—Beth longs to be respected at work while Kelsey longs to have a complete family, which means a mother and a father based on her six-year-old understanding of the world. And by revealing my characters' aspirations via free indirect discourse, I also reveal who they are and that they are worthy of the reader's sympathy. If I worked at the country club, I would definitely want Beth as a friend. If I worked in the daycare and knew about Kelsey's home life, I would turn her mother into Child Protective Services immediately. What is more, by utilizing free indirect discourse, I prevent my prose from being cluttered with such phrases as "Beth thought" or "Kelsey concluded." I am wordy enough.

V

While reading *WWSH*, I hope you connect with a few phrases or details. I tried to create realistic characters who, like most (or at least some) of us, have experienced abuse, neglect, not knowing what they want, or a desire to want more than what they have. With that in mind, I invite you to sit back, grab an iced tea, and read.

In Casino Daycare

A

By the time her mother came into the living room, Kelsey had already spilled grape juice on the floor. She sat cross-legged beside the over-turned glass and purple stains on the blue carpet. Even the sleeves of her white turtleneck had not survived the spill. But there was no hiding the evidence now. Although she had been watching *ALF* and eating a strawberry Pop-Tart—her usual Saturday morning routine—Kelsey stopped watching the furry alien and put down her breakfast half-eaten. She watched her mother and waited for her punishment. Her mother yawned as she went into the kitchen and turned on the coffee pot. She was still wearing the black dress she had worn to the casino the night before.

She and her mother had been spending a lot of time at the casino lately but only on the weekends. During the week, her mother had to call people and sell stuff. Kelsey had school. While her mother played in the casino, Kelsey played in the casino's daycare. She didn't think it was so bad. At six, she was a little older than most of the kids there, but at least there were animal crackers.

Her mother came back into the living room. Rubbing her face, she said, "Morning, baby." Then she saw the purple stains and the glass over-turned. "Kelsey! What did I tell you about putting drinks on the floor?" Bending down, she pinched Kelsey on the arm, her red fingernails sinking into the soft white skin. "Bad girl." She shook her index finger. The red fingernail was a claw ready to strike again.

Kelsey rubbed the sore spot on her arm. She was pretty sure she was the only kid in first grade who got pinched for being bad. But at least she didn't get the belt. She had

heard scary stories on the playground about getting hit on the bottom. But that was what daddies did, and Kelsey had never seen her daddy. Her mother had told her once that he was living with other daddies in the sky.

Fat tears bubbled up in Kelsey's eyes as she watched her skin change from white to pink. She knew better than to set her glass on the floor. There was a table right behind her. And she didn't know how the glass fell over. It was as if a ghost had come and knocked it over when she wasn't looking.

Things had been spilling around her a lot. Yesterday, her bowl of Cheerios spilled on the kitchen floor. Her mother hadn't gotten mad about that. The Cheerios and milk came right off the tiles with a dishrag. The day before that, a glass of orange juice spilled on her bedroom carpet, just seconds after she had launched her stuffed unicorn across the room. Was it her fault that unicorns, unlike Pegasus, couldn't fly? She covered the yellow stain up with a teddy bear, so her mother wouldn't find out.

As Kelsey's mother set the glass on top of the black-and-white TV, her hand bumped into the rabbit ears, turning the screen to snow. She switched it off. Her breast slipped out of the low-cut dress as she kneeled and pulled Kelsey close.

Resting her cheek against her mother's breast, Kelsey heard her mother's heartbeat as she cried.

"Mommy didn't mean it," her mother said, tucking her breast inside the dress. "Just be careful next time."

The glass wobbled and fell back to the floor.

B

A little while later, a man came over. A dark-purple hat covered most of his face, and his dark-purple suit clung to his thin body. Kelsey had seen her mother talking to the purple man many times at the casino. But he had never come over before.

Her mother ran around in her pink bathrobe picking things up off the living-room floor. She set the brown cushion back on the brown couch. She picked up a fashion magazine, Kelsey's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* coloring book and crayons, and Kelsey's half-eaten Pop-Tart. She threw the Pop-Tart away in the kitchen and set the other things on the table in the living room. "Sorry about the mess," she said.

He stared at the purple stains on the carpet.

"Grape juice."

"That's too bad," the purple man said. He bent over toward Kelsey. He was smaller than most of the daddies she had seen at school. "Hey, kid." He smiled. His yellow teeth were too large for his mouth. He pulled a small candy cane out of his shirt pocket and handed it to Kelsey.

She grabbed it and hid behind her mother. With the candy cane dangling from her mouth, she stuck her head out from around her mother's large hips. She smiled. The mint was cool and fresh.

"Kelsey, what do you say to Mr. Smith?"

Kelsey wrapped her arms around her mother's waist and squeezed.

"Kelsey?" She pulled Kelsey out from behind her and held her by the shoulder.

"Say Thank you."

She felt her mother's red claws through her turtleneck. Kelsey told the purple man thank you and hid behind her mother's body again. It was warm and soft.

They talked about Kelsey as if she had disappeared.

"Sorry. She's not usually shy."

"She's a kid."

Her mother laughed then said, "Got a candy cane for me?"

The purple man pulled Kelsey's mother by the arm and led her to the bedroom down the hall. He hid her there for what seemed like forever.

Sitting by the door, Kelsey listened to her mother moan like the kitty-cats outside their apartment at night. Although her daddy lived in the sky, she still wondered about the purple man. She liked the color purple. Maybe they could wear purple together and go to the park and play. The park wasn't too far from home. She and her mother lived in a brick apartment building next to a gas station and Family Dollar store. They walked to the park sometimes to feed bread to the pigeons. Kelsey always tried to catch one for a pet, but they always flew off in a big group as soon as she got close. All she caught was wind.

She wondered if moaning and hiding was a new game she could play with her mother and the purple man. Kelsey opened the door and saw her mother on top of him in the bed. She was wearing his purple hat. Her back was shiny, naked, moving up and down. The white sheets moved with her. The purple man grunted, breathed heavily. Her mother seemed to be winning whatever game she and he were playing.

"Kid's in here," he said.

Her mother's back froze.

Kelsey rested her head against the wood doorframe. “What are you all doing?” she asked.

“Jesus, Helen. Aren’t you going to say anything?”

Her mother didn’t move.

As he adjusted his body, the hat fell off her head. His flushed face appeared from around her mother’s back. “Nothin’,” he said. “Go play.”

Kelsey slammed the door. She didn’t want to play with them anyway. The purple man couldn’t be her daddy after all because daddies liked being around their kids.

Walking through the living room, she found her stuffed unicorn wedged into a corner underneath the table. She’d forgotten she’d put him back in his house. Using his long, golden horn, she dragged him over the purple-stained carpet to the window where their white Christmas tree stood. Only a little taller than Kelsey, the tree had blue lights, gold balls, and a Santa head Kelsey had made out of red- and skin-colored paper and glue. She had used her mother’s cotton balls for his beard.

Through the window, she saw snowflakes fall from the milky-white sky. In front of brick houses and apartment buildings, colored lights hung in trees and bushes. She hugged the unicorn’s dull-gray coat, glad that Santa came to homes without daddies.

When the purple man and her mother came out of the bedroom, Kelsey turned away from watching a TV show about ugly, spotted dogs to stare at them. They looked liked they had been swimming. The purple man’s face was wet, and his purple jacket was folded over his arm. He put on his hat. Her mother’s long, golden hair was matted to her

forehead. She was wearing clothes again, a dark green dress that flowed out from her body like a mermaid tail.

Her mother turned off the TV just after a mommy dog had given birth. Goo and slime covered the baby. Kelsey wrinkled her nose. She was still a believer in the stork story of how babies were made.

“Let’s go,” her mother said. “I haven’t eaten since yesterday.”

After putting on his jacket, the purple man helped her mother into the black coat with a fur collar. Her mother always wore that coat when she and Kelsey went to the casino.

“Wait,” he said. He looked down at Kelsey and held out his hand like he was going to give her another candy cane, but his hand was empty. “Listen, Kelsey, I’m sorry about earlier. You weren’t supposed to see that.”

“Don’t talk to my child about S-E-X,” her mother said. “She’s too young.” She grabbed Kelsey’s blue winter coat from the hooks by the door.

S-E-X. Kelsey sounded out the word in her head. Sex: a word she had heard fifth-grade boys whisper in the school lunchroom. She thought it was a game older kids and grownups played together, a game that must be really top-secret because her mother didn’t want to talk about it, but the purple man seemed like he wanted to. Maybe the rule about sex being top-secret didn’t exist where he came from. Then her mother and the man started to yell. Instead of listening to them, Kelsey pretended she wasn’t there. She pretended to fly in the blue sky in summertime with her own magical horn and magical wings that took her all around the world. Her mother held open the blue coat as Kelsey slipped her arms inside.

C

The leather seats in the purple man's car were cold and large and squeaked when Kelsey moved. Even in her seatbelt, Kelsey still slid around a little in the backseat. She liked her mother's car better. The seats weren't leather, and she got to sit up front during short trips to the grocery store. Her mother wouldn't let her sit up front during long trips, like to the casino, because she was afraid of the passenger-side airbag releasing during a wreck and decapitating Kelsey. That's how Kelsey learned the word decapitation. Sometimes, she used the word during recess to impress her friends, saying things like, "My mommy's afraid I'm gonna get decapitated," and "I like to decapitate my carrot sticks."

In the front seat, Kelsey's mother took out a tube of reddish-orange lipstick and smeared it over her lips while the purple man drove. "Frosty the Snowman" played on the radio.

"I'm going to win big tonight, baby-girl! I can feel it," her mother said. She put her hand on his shoulder.

He brushed it off.

Her mother always said that she was going to win big. Many times Kelsey had watched her mother sit for what seemed like forever in front of the machine with the handle that she pulled down to get the shiny quarters. Her mother really liked them, but the quarters hardly ever came back out.

Kelsey tried to cross her arms, but the puffiness of her coat made them spring back down to her sides. Wearing her winter coat made her feel like she had been stuffed inside a pillow. She hated wearing the coat. She didn't want to go to daycare. She wanted

to watch cartoons. Forcing air out of her cheeks, she made her lips tremble and sound like a horse when it whinnies. She frowned.

Her mother turned around from the front seat. “Look at you being a Bad News Bear.” Lipstick smudges at the corners of her mouth made it look like she had just eaten spaghetti. “It’ll be fun. You’ll get to see old Mrs. Hensley and Miss Amy.”

Trees zipped by along the highway. It had stopped snowing. Shivering, Kelsey thought the trees looked cold without their leaves, the way their limbs wiggled in the wind trying to keep warm.

D

The casino daycare used to be a place for grownups only, like the rest of the casino, Kelsey had heard her mother say once, a place where special grownup drinks were served and card games played. But now stuffed animals, building blocks, and large red and blue cushions littered the carpet. The flat, round cushions reminded Kelsey of a much larger version of the little red and blue circles her mother and her mother’s friends tossed onto the kitchen table when they played cards. The circles were called chips but not the kind she liked to eat.

On one side of the gold room was a tall, wood counter where a tray of empty baby bottles and clear plastic cups sat. Across the room from the counter, cribs seemed to tower toward the ceiling on wood stilts. The babies sounded as if they were crying while falling, falling while crying—like princesses waiting to be rescued. Above the cribs, the windows revealed a gray-blue sky. It would be dark soon. Miss Amy’s upper-body disappeared as she rescued a baby from a crib, carried her off to a couch, and sat down. Mrs. Hensley went from child to child. She stooped to wipe away a blonde-haired girl’s

drool. Then she scooped up a blonde-haired boy in her thin, wrinkly arms, whisking him away to a changing table.

Kelsey stood in the center of the daycare reaching for the gold ceiling as if it were a balloon. Standing on her tip-toes with her red high-tops untied, she extended her arms as far as she could. The grape-juice-stained sleeves of her white turtleneck slid back and revealed a small bruise on her arm. Unlike the other pink spots her mother had given her on the arm for being bad, this spot had stayed.

Light-brown eyebrows furrowed. Kelsey didn't know why the gold sky wouldn't float down to her hands. Frowning, she began to think she would never taste the shiny glass stars dangling from it. Her daddy was up there somewhere sitting on a star and waiting to rescue her from all the bad people in the world. Round cheeks drooped. Suddenly Kelsey wanted to cry. But she didn't. It was time to stop being a cry-baby. She would be a second-grader next year. There would be spelling tests and compound sentences and homework—something second-graders did that didn't sound very fun.

As she dropped her arms to her sides, Kelsey watched dusty flecks float down through the light from the glass stars. Then she planted her high-tops back onto the faded red carpet and tumbled to the floor. Her chin-length brown hair fell in front of her eyes. She pushed her hair away from her face. It fell right back.

In the front pocket of her jean overalls, she found a cinnamon animal cracker that she had saved from her afternoon snack in the daycare. She bit into the giraffe's legs tasting the sweet sting of cinnamon on her tongue. Kelsey stared at the coats hanging from hooks by the glass door that led to the casino. Her mother was out there somewhere playing without her, making Kelsey hurt inside like she'd gotten a bellyache without

eating any candy. A mermaid fountain with a baby gate around it stood in the corner by the door. Water dripped from her shiny brown head, then over her chipped tail, and into the small pool beneath.

In front of the counter, a girl Kelsey had never seen before sat on a blue cushion. Curly black hair sprang from her head in two small puffballs. She cranked the yellow handle of a jack-in-the-box—daDA, daDA, daDA-da-da-da.... The puffball girl moved her head back and forth to the beat of the music.

Kelsey's green eyes widened at the curious-looking girl and the more curious-looking toy. She didn't have a jack-in-the-box. Although Santa would be coming in a few weeks, Kelsey couldn't wait. She walked over to the girl and box.

Looking up at Kelsey with large brown eyes, the puffball girl, laughing, cranked the handle faster—daDa, daDA, daDA-da-da-da, daDA, daDA....

Kelsey swayed her head like a cobra in a cartoon. Her hair entangled her eyelashes and tickled her ears while she swayed.

A red-haired boy sat beside the puffball girl. He stopped stacking his wood blocks. He was a regular, like Kelsey, a four-year-old named Charles. Pushing his blocks out of the way, Charles scooted closer on his red cushion to watch the jack-in-the-box.

After one final crank, a yellow elephant head with rose-painted cheeks and white trunk sprang from the box. The clownish face with a red snake for a body landed between the three children.

Charles reached, but Kelsey grabbed the elephant trunk first. "Mine," she said.

He snapped his hand back as if he had been bitten. Looking down, he scooted on his bottom back to his block pile. He left his red cushion behind.

The puffball girl clutched the purple box. She moved it from the carpet onto her lap. “Mine,” she said.

Feeling the cord pull, Kelsey took a step forward. She switched her grip from the trunk to the head. With her other hand, she pinched the puffball girl on the arm. The smell of vanilla wafted from her creamy brown skin.

The girl yelped, but she didn’t let go. She lifted the box up toward her stomach and stuck out her tongue.

The cord tightened, pulling Kelsey closer to the puffball girl. Still gripping the head, Kelsey pinched her again, in the same spot. “Bad girl,” she said, smiling. Kelsey watched the girl’s skin color change from brown to white to brownish pink and her fingertip outlines fade. This was not like her own skin, which changed from white to pink to purple.

The puffball girl dropped the box. Thick tears trickled from her eyes, rode over her cheeks, and fell onto her jeans leaving little wet spots. “Mama,” she cried. “Maaa-ma.”

“Hey, hey, what’s going on here?” Mrs. Hensley said. From the gold sky, she peered down at Kelsey through frosty-blue shadowed eyelids. “Kelsey James, you can’t go around pinching other kids. Do it again, and I’ll tell your mommy.”

“Mommy?” Kelsey said. She dropped the elephant head onto the floor. She didn’t want it anymore.

The old woman shrank as she bent down on one knee in front of the puffball girl. She dabbed her tears with a pale-green washcloth and rubbed her back. “There, there,

Dharma. It'll be okay. I ain't your mama, but she'll be back soon." Mrs. Hensley picked up a stuffed turtle from the floor and put it in her arms.

The puffball girl wandered toward the door with the turtle in her arms and sat down by the mermaid fountain. Staring at the glass door, she sucked her thumb while the stuffed animal lay in her lap. Kelsey had sat by the door many times waiting on her mother to come back and wondering why she was gone for so long.

After draping the washcloth over her shoulder, Mrs. Hensley stared at Kelsey and placed one hand on her hip. "Now as for you," she said, shaking a wrinkly finger, "play nice." She looked at Kelsey's feet. "For Heaven's sake, stop untying your shoes."

She watched the old woman shrink again as she bent down on one knee.

"Now, stand still," Mrs. Hensley said. She placed Kelsey's hand on her bony shoulder. "Hold on to me."

Charles started to cry.

"Oh, Charles," Mrs. Hensley said, "not you, too. Give me a minute. Okay?" She called for Miss Amy to come over. The young woman was still sitting on the couch with the baby in her arms.

Mrs. Hensley tied Kelsey's right shoe and then her left shoe. Kelsey watched the old woman's hands, like a puppeteer's, make the shoelaces dance over and under each other and through loops. She wiggled her toes underneath the worn canvas of her high-tops while keeping her legs straight. She was pulled close to Mrs. Hensley's warm body, a mother's body, a body she could live in. Kelsey's mother would never tie her shoes for her. She always made Kelsey do it herself.

As she strolled over from the couch, Miss Amy cuddled the baby against her chest. “What’s happenin’?” she said.

The baby grabbed a clump of purple hair that dangled from the young woman’s side ponytail. The baby tried to put the colored hair into her mouth. Without looking, Miss Amy shooed the tiny hand away.

“Kelsey pinched Dharma,” Mrs. Hensley said.

“Kelsey,” Miss Amy said, looking down at Kelsey with large blue eyes and shaking her head. She looked at Mrs. Hensley. “Sorry I wasn’t watchin’ better. I’ve been busy calming this one down.” She combed the baby’s few threads of blonde hair with her bright-orange fingernails. “Isn’t that right, Sarah? Huh? Yes, a-boo-bah-boo-goo.”

The baby’s mouth opened into a smile and revealed one front tooth.

While the women talked, Kelsey went to see Charles. He sat crossed-legged in front of the counter not stacking his blocks. He used his elbows resting on his tan pants to prop up his face.

Kelsey sat down beside him, took two of his blocks, and stacked them. She hadn’t liked playing blocks since preschool, but she liked playing blocks with Charles when there was nothing else to do. She took a third block and set it in front of him. She waited. With the sleeve of his sweatshirt, Charles wiped his wet face and left the snot dribbling from his red nose. He placed the block on top of her stack. She added another. He added another.

Kelsey thought Charles was cute—for a kid. She would never ask him, a preschooler, to be her boyfriend or anything. She only asked boys in her grade to be that. She had had only one boyfriend, Mike, in kindergarten. Mike liked to wear cowboy boots

and hold hands at recess. She broke up with him after two days because he wouldn't give up his Popsicle at lunch.

"Well, look at you two playing nice," Mrs. Hensley said, staring at Charles and Kelsey. She threw the washcloth stained with tears into the clothes hamper behind the counter. Then she turned to Miss Amy. "We need to start filling up the tray and setting the high-chairs up at the bar."

"I'll do the tray," Miss Amy said. She put the baby back in a crib. Picking up the tray of cups and baby bottles off the counter, she opened the glass door and went into the casino.

While Mrs. Hensley got the high-chairs out of the daycare closet, Kelsey and Charles continued to play.

"Let's play a game," Kelsey said.

"Okay," he said.

Unlike children her age, Charles never fought over what game to play. She got to be the boss. Kelsey tried to remember what she had seen her mother and the purple man doing in the bed. If she played that game, then she'd really be a big girl, and her mother would be proud. She shoved the blocks out of the way. She unlatched her overalls and pulled them down by her waist. She took off her shirt. Charles took off his shirt. She was surprised he had two red berries on his chest like she and her mother had. She had thought boys would look different naked. Kelsey stood there for a second thinking what to do next.

"Lie down," she said.

He did.

Kelsey sat on Charles's pale stomach. He had a light-brown birthmark on his side. Sitting on top of him wasn't hard at all. Their bodies fit together like puzzle pieces. Her body went up and down on his with the rhythm of his breath. Kelsey rocked her hips a little from side to side, then up and down. She started to feel a little tickle below her belly button, but it wasn't the kind of tickle that she wanted to stop.

Charles looked up at her and tilted his head. He smiled. "You're pretty," he said.

The tickle feeling grew and grew inside of Kelsey. Looking up at the gold sky, she imagined unicorns and butterflies and Pegasuses and pigeons circling the glass stars above her like moths around light. Was this why her mother didn't speak when Kelsey opened the door? Was she thinking about daddy?

Miss Amy came back into the daycare with the tray. All the cups were filled with apple juice and the bottles with milk. "Kelsey!" she said, dropping the tray. The cups and baby bottles fell onto the carpet.

The pictures in the ceiling vanished. A baby bottle rolled over toward Kelsey and Charles. He was starting to squirm underneath her. "Scream," she said, remembering another important part of the game.

He did. She did. Kelsey and Charles screamed and screamed and screamed. His scream was as high-pitched as hers. They woke the babies, and the babies screamed with them. Charles stopped, but Kelsey kept going. She screamed as if she were the most scared girl in the world.

Mrs. Hensley dropped a high-chair she had been carrying over to the counter and pulled Kelsey off of Charles. "Get her mother," she said.

E

Kelsey sat in front of the glass door, where Mrs. Hensley told her to stay until her mother arrived. She had her clothes on again. Kelsey looked through the glass into the casino while Mrs. Hensley ran around behind her trying to calm Charles and the other children down. The babies were still crying.

Glass stars, like the ones in the daycare, hung from the ceiling in the casino. But there were many more of them. They lit up the bright-red carpet and faces that Kelsey didn't recognize. The casino was the biggest room she'd ever seen. Her elementary school could fit inside it. Clusters of people sat at the machines with the handles that her mother liked or sat around a counter watching a big TV where cars went around and around a track.

Kelsey placed both hands on the glass and pressed her nose against it. Her breath created a cloud, and she felt the coldness against her skin. Finally, she saw her mother, Miss Amy, and the purple man. They grew larger and larger as they neared the door. Were they going to be a family now—she, her mother, and the purple man?

“Kelsey.” Kelsey saw her mother's mouth as she came up to the door. Her mother placed a hand on the glass above Kelsey's outstretched palms while grabbing the doorknob with her other hand. The purple man put his hand on her shoulder. They all looked sad.

Standing on her tiptoes, Kelsey tried to line up her hand with her mother's hand on the glass. But she couldn't reach. The grape-juice-stained sleeve of her white turtleneck slid back and revealed a small bruise on her arm. She watched her mother cry for the first time.

Felis domestica

Les Flynn, a young woman of nineteen-and-a-half years with short red hair, sat at the dining-room table not helping Cheryl with dinner, not that Cheryl would have asked for help. Cheryl had become accustomed to staying on her feet eight hours a day as a high-school English teacher and then coming home to work her second job as housewife. And although she was Les's mother, Les refused to call her by that name. Referring to her as "Mother," "Mom," or any of its variations would only interfere with Les's summer project: to change Cheryl's identity, to free her from her domestic role.

As a Women's Studies major at Shepherd University, a small liberal arts school in West Virginia's eastern panhandle, Les had poured over Sappho's fragmented love poetry, skimmed Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, nodded as she read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in her single-room dormitory, flew through Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and screamed when she read about the housewives across America who suffered from identity crises in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*.

Les refused to let Cheryl spiral down the identity-crisis hole. She didn't want to wake up one morning to find Cheryl passed out at the kitchen table and clutching a Windex bottle with her shell-pink fingernails. So she must intervene with her feminist toolkit now. Of course, some things—like the feminist swagger—the no makeup-wearing, no shit-taking, no bra-wearing walk down the street on a hot summer day while bra-wearers scoff and business-types gaze—couldn't be taught. Cheryl would have to learn that on her own.

Cheryl stood at the stove in a light-pink blouse buttoned up to her neck. The shirt hung loose on her thin body, and her pale legs, covered with webs of blue veins, poked out like toothpicks from her khaki shorts. With her back turned from Les, her bob haircut tamed down to a uniform mass of silver and blonde, she stirred at a pan with a wood spoon. Beef sizzled and crackled. Two retrievers, Hambone and Murphy, sat like furry statues behind her, their tails spread like golden fans on the off-white linoleum tiles.

Tonight, Cheryl was making her award-winning meat and cheese pie. For three years in a row, the recipe had won first-place at the Shady Spring Country Cooking Contest. Shady Spring was their home, a tiny town just outside of Beckley, West Virginia. On the wood counter beside the stove sat a glass casserole dish laden with bread dough. Soon the dough would be layered with cheese and beef and shoved into the oven. Before becoming an ovo-lacto vegetarian in her preteens, Les had loved Cheryl's meat and cheese pie because it tasted like deep-dish pizza.

Watching from the dining room, Les felt no woman could have looked more natural, more comfortable in the kitchen. The oldest of six children, Cheryl had been groomed for motherhood, cooking and cleaning up after her brothers and sisters since she was eleven years old. She could make dresses and entire business suits with nothing but her hands, needle and thread, and a dependable sewing machine. She had made the pirate costume—complete with a white blouse, trousers, and black-and-white stockings—that Les wore to a Halloween party in junior high. So even Les had difficulty imagining Cheryl outside of a household setting, but it was that same setting that inspired Les to transform Cheryl into a feminist.

Les bit the inside of her cheek and tore a tiny piece of skin, a habit she had when she thought heavily. Her *Images of Women in Literature* anthology sat in front of her on the white tablecloth with a pink-rose print. She had just read Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" and thought it might be a good text for Cheryl to read first. It was a short story about a wife who experienced temporary freedom from the private sphere. After Cheryl read that, Les could suggest more difficult readings like Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* poems, *The Second Sex*, and eventually work by Judith Butler and bell hooks. Les couldn't wait to witness feminism seep into Cheryl's veins through her reading of these works.

Taking a breath, Les smoothed the anthology's thin, glossy pages, which were crinkled from being stuffed into her backpack. With her hand propping up her face, she stared out the dining-room window. She saw Christmas trees she and her family had planted over the years—now gigantic and fat, the smoke-brown deck banister that wrapped around the side and back of the house, and the sky, just before sunset.

Once freed from her domestic prison, Cheryl could do many things. Instead of cooking steak and gravy, salmon, spaghetti and meatballs, and chicken fajitas—meals Les had not liked to eat for years now—she could go back to college, learn yoga, travel, and take salsa-dancing lessons.

But Les's fantasies about Cheryl's future would have to be curtailed. The voices of her loud-mouthed father, Jack Senior, and brother, Jack Junior, boomed from the living room. Because the dining room was in between the kitchen and living room, Les knew what went on in both—Cheryl slaving away at dinner in one, her Dad and brother discussing politics in the other. It was just like the 1950s, except Cheryl wasn't wearing a skirt, and Les wasn't in the kitchen honing homemaker skills alongside her mother.

Jack Senior sat back in his brown leather chair and smoked his pipe. His red hair had faded to strawberry-blonde and then white over the years, just like his Santa Claus beard. “Let me tell you,” he said. He leaned forward in his chair. “We should’ve never invaded Iraq. Dumbest thing we ever did.”

With a big smile on his face, Jack Junior paced the Oriental rug. He looked like a young Jack Senior before Jack Senior grew a stomach the size of a beach ball from drinking beer and eating steak. Jack Junior was on the short side, slim, with blond hair like Cheryl. “I thought making Bush president in the first place was the dumbest thing Americans ever did,” he said.

At Jack Junior’s comment, both of the Jacks cackled as if Jack Junior had never criticized the President before, which wasn’t true. In fact, everyone in the Flynn family made fun of Bush. A calendar hung by Jack Senior’s chair that featured a goofy photograph of Bush each month along with a Bushism, an inarticulate comment the President had made while in office. For June, the Bushism was “Rarely is the question asked: Is our children learning?”

Les smirked and shook her head at the saying, knowing that she could easily get up from the table and go into the living room. But she had nothing to add to their conversation. She agreed with them. Instead, she thought of another thing Cheryl could do once liberated herself: stop cooking for the male talk-boxes who did nothing but complain and sit on their educated asses. Jack Senior was a semi-retired wildlife biologist while Jack Junior was in his second year of law school at West Virginia University, but neither of them could make a tossed salad or grilled-cheese sandwich.

Cheryl turned around with the wood spoon in her hand. The statues stood and wagged their tails. “No. No,” she said, shaking the spoon at them. “I’ll feed you guys later.” The statues licked their lips and sat back down. Sitting in a corner of the kitchen were two red bowls, both empty.

“Leslie, what would you like me to fix you? I was thinking a nice big garden salad with cashews and feta cheese?” Her eyes were tiny blue beads behind tortoiseshell eyeglasses.

Les cringed. No one at Shepherd called her Leslie. She went by Les. She considered the “lie” at the end of her name excessive and liked playing in the land of gender-role ambiguity. “Les” for boys and “Leslie” for girls—or was it? Because gender roles for men and women were culturally constructed, she felt compelled to deconstruct them. Why? Because it was fun.

“Don’t worry about it, Cheryl. I’ll make it myself.”

“What did you call me?”

“I didn’t call you anything.”

“Yes, Leslie, you did. You just called me Cheryl.”

“I go by Les now. And I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She coughed. “Cheryl.”

According to Les’s plan, Cheryl’s identity change would have to occur on the subconscious level. Besides reading, encouraging Cheryl to think of herself as Cheryl again—the unmarried, unburdened woman she was during college—represented another way to facilitate her change.

“You just did it again. Call you Les? Are you okay, sweetheart? Let me make you a nice big salad. I don’t mind.”

“Of course you don’t mind,” Les said, recalling the sixteen years (as far back as she could) she had seen Cheryl cook all the meals, clean the house, and do everyone’s laundry without complaint. “But you will soon,” Les whispered.

“What was that?”

“Nothing. You must be hearing things.” Les smiled from behind the prescription-less black-framed eyeglasses she had found in a classroom at Shepherd.

Cheryl shook her head. “Either you’re a strange kid, or I’m losing my marbles.” She turned toward the stove again.

“No. I’m a feminist.”

She picked up the anthology from the dining-room table and joined Cheryl in the kitchen. A wood breakfast table stood in the center. Les set the anthology on the table and went over to the refrigerator.

On the white door, she saw Cheryl’s grocery list. Beer, sirloin, light bulbs, vitamins, trash bags, and coffee—all were written in neat blue cursive on green paper. Beside the list was a photograph of Les at her high-school graduation. Her red hair had been past her shoulders then and straight—hair that radiated with normalcy, conformity, hair that had taken two hours to straighten with a flattening iron, hair that went to romantic comedies without asking why it’s typically the woman who needs a man and can’t find him or has a man and can’t keep him. Les tugged on a curl and felt it spring back. She liked wearing her hair short and un-straightened. Flappers from the 1920s had also cut their hair short in defiance of the male ideal of female beauty, which featured

long, flowing hair. Mermaid hair. But mermaids didn't exist. Flappers did. A little below Les's photograph was a photograph of Jack Junior from junior high when he still had chubby cheeks and acne, and a photograph of Cheryl with her high-school English students.

In the photograph, Cheryl sat among a circle of desks with her students. "Happy Birthday, John Keats!" was written on the blackboard in yellow chalk. It was Cheryl's annual classroom celebration of John Keats's birthday on October 31st, the same day as Halloween. A half-eaten slice of pumpkin pie sat in front of her on the desk, and she held an opened volume of Keats's poetry in her hands. While Cheryl smiled, a female student stood over her shoulder reading a poem.

Les wondered if the student could be reading "Bright Star," a sonnet Cheryl had recited over and over when Les was a child when no music was on in the car. She closed her eyes and tried to recite the first three lines: "Bright Star, would I were steadfast as thou art— / Not lone and slender hung aloft the night, / And watching, with eternal lids apart."

"It's 'Not in *lone splendor* hung aloft the night,'" Cheryl said.

Opening her eyes, Les continued to stare at the photographs. Cheryl and Jack Junior had the same smile. Both had bright, straight teeth, except for a few crooked ones on the bottom row, and one dimple, like a comma, on the left cheek. It was the same smile Les had, minus the dimple and reminded her that Cheryl would have been a kickass college professor had she gone on to graduate school. It was the same smile Les envisioned as her own when she became that college professor, minus the dimple.

Les said, "Cheryl, who cares? It's just another dead white-guy poem."

As she opened the door, she watched Cheryl spoon ground beef onto the dough in the casserole dish, making another meal for men who could learn how to cook for themselves if they wanted, enduring another day as a slave oblivious to her own oppression. Les's face turned hot, red, like her hair. She spotted the head of lettuce, the tomatoes, mushrooms, onions, and green peppers in the bottom drawer. She scooped up the vegetables, feeling their coolness against her arms and kicked the door shut with her black Chuck Taylor sneakers. When she plopped the vegetables on the table, the anthology almost fell off, but she caught it with her hands before it hit the floor and put it back.

“What is with you today, Leslie—sorry—Les? You're calling me by my first name. You won't let me call you Leslie anymore. You're insulting Keats. Is Aunt Flow in town?”

Aunt Flow was Cheryl's polite way of referring to Les's menstrual cycle, a term she had been using since Les started her period in junior high.

Cheryl's arms were crossed. She stood against the counter in front of the microwave.

“I'm not raggin', but while we're on the subject, let's not call my period Aunt Flow anymore. It's that kind of rhetoric that makes women feel like they still need to hide their tampons in their pockets when going to the bathroom at work.”

“Leslie? Ragging?”

“Yes, Cheryl, raggin'—on my period, menstruating, bleedin' between my legs, swimmin' the crimson tide.”

“Are you on drugs?”

Les closed her eyes and imagined steam coming out of her ears. She had never done drugs in her life. She had only drunk cheap pink wine that came out of a cardboard box and only a couple of times on the weekends with her college friends.

“I’m not on drugs. You are. All you do is cook for us and clean and wash our clothes. Stop. Rebel. Don’t shave your legs. Do something for you. I’ve heard of fed-up wives doing it before. I heard it did wonders for their marriage—taught their husbands to do more after work than sitting on their...” Cheryl didn’t like it when Les cursed. It was a good thing she didn’t hear Les around her friends. “Instead of sitting on their rumps.”

Cheryl turned toward the stove. She sprinkled a fistful of mozzarella cheese onto the beef. “You’ve never complained about me doing things around here before.”

“That’s because I hadn’t thought about the cultural implications, Cheryl. Have you ever read Kate Chopin’s ‘The Story of an Hour’?”

“Stop calling me Cheryl. It’s weird.” Picking up the pan by the handle, she dumped the second layer of ground beef into the dish and threw more cheese on top. “Chopin. Chopin. Late-nineteenth-century writer?” She shoved dinner into the oven.

“That’s the one, Cheryl.”

“Stop it.” She stood in front of the microwave again with her arms crossed. “I probably read it a long time ago, back in college.”

“Read it again. Have a copy of it right here.” Les picked up the anthology then set it back down on the smooth surface of the wood.

Cheryl sighed. “I don’t know. I’m not a big fan of nineteenth-century American literature. All that talk of petticoats and living in tenements. So much of it is so trite and didactic, but that’s Realism for you.”

“Please, Cheryl, it’s important. I even dog-eared the page where it starts. ”

“Okay but only if you stop calling me Cheryl!”

“What’s wrong with calling you Cheryl?”

“At school, I’m Mrs. Flynn. To my girlfriends, coworkers, and your father, I’m Cheryl. You and Jack Junior are the only ones who call me Mom. I’m proud to be a mother. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. I just thought you’d want to be known as more than that.” Les sighed.

“Can you please hand me a knife and cutting board, please?”

Cheryl grabbed the glass cutting board from on top of the microwave and pulled a serrated knife out of the knife holder. She handed both to Les and then stood in front of the sink looking out the kitchen window.

“Thanks,” Les said, clearing off a spot on the table. She moved a stack of *Newsweek* magazines, a red tin of brownies Cheryl had made the night before, and the anthology to the other end. Les corralled the vegetables into a pile. Then, standing and staring at the red-and-blue plaid placemat underneath, she cut the lettuce head in half remembering all the omelets and pancakes she had eaten at this table, all made by Cheryl. It was liberating for Les to cut the lettuce herself, to feel the crunch as she cut all the way to the glass of the cutting board. She heard sniffing and looked up.

Over by the window, Cheryl took her glasses off and set them on the counter. She pulled a paper towel from the metal dispenser.

“Mom, are you crying? Did I make you cry? I’m sorry, Mom.” Seeing her mother’s tears made Les want to cry herself and drop her stupid summer project all together.

Putting her glasses back on, Cheryl turned around and stared at the lettuce. “You didn’t wash it first.”

“Are you supposed to? Thought they were prewashed.”

Cheryl put her thin fingers over her mouth and shook her head. Her eyes and nose were red. She threw the paper towel away in the trashcan.

Les shrugged. “What? I’ll be okay.” She grabbed a bright-red Fiestaware plate, Cheryl’s favorite brand, from a wood cabinet above the sink and set it on the table near the vegetables. “But are you okay?” She cut one of the lettuce halves into chunks and slid them from the board onto the plate.

Cheryl picked up a spare plastic cutting board from behind the microwave and set it on the counter. She grabbed another knife and set it on top of the board. “I’m fine.” She grabbed a tomato from Les’s vegetable pile. After rinsing it off, she quickly diced it into tiny, red cubes.

“Mom, please don’t do this. Let’s sit down and talk.” Les put her knife down on the cutting board.

“There’s nothing to talk about.” She stepped over to the table and scraped the diced tomato on top of the lettuce on the plate. “Carrying you for nine months, raising you, feeding you, supporting you in everything you did—apparently those things were not enough to earn your respect.”

“Jesus, that’s not what I meant. Why do you always misinterpret everything?” Les banged her fist on the table. She woke up Murphy, who had been stretched out on the green rug in front of the sink. Murphy lifted her head for a second and then settled back.

“Okay. Then what did you mean?” she said, as she grabbed a Yuengling Light from the refrigerator and flipped off the cap. Cheryl sat down at the other end of the table, where Les had set the magazines, tin, and anthology.

Pulling out the other chair, Les sat down, too. “I want you to start doing things for yourself. To rebel.”

“And do what?”

Les picked up a chunk of lettuce from the plate and tore it into tiny broken leaves.

“Well?”

“I don’t know. Go back to school?”

Cheryl sighed. “Thought you’d say that.” She took a sip of beer. “I considered going back in my forties when you all had grown up some. Thought about getting a master’s in British Lit. But I’m—God—fifty-six years old.” She took another sip. “Sorry to be a disappointment, but I’m tired.”

Les rolled her eyes. “You’re not a disappointment. I just thought you’d want some intellectual stimulation, something that defines you other than clean laundry and brownies. Mom, don’t you care about women’s history—about our sex being subordinate to men?”

“Do we have to go into all that right now?” Cheryl opened the red tin and showed Les the brownies. During Christmas, Cheryl used the same tin to store her homemade chocolate chip cookies. “Here, have a brownie. They’re good. I made ’em from scratch—your great-grandmother’s recipe.”

They *did* look good—rows of fluffy, cakey, chocolaty cubes. The sweet smell filled the air. Les’s nose was in love with it. But she wasn’t here to discuss brownies her

mother made to meet patriarchal expectations. “Mom, I’m being serious. Don’t you care about the way women have been treated?”

“Here, just have a taste.” Cheryl pinched off a quarter-sized piece of brownie from one of the squares and handed it to Les.

Les waved her hand in the air, declining the sweet. “Mom, I don’t give a shit about your brownies right now.”

Cheryl’s blonde eyebrows narrowed. “Fine. I’ll eat it.” She put the brownie in her mouth and chewed slowly.

Les hadn’t cursed in front her mother since high school. She felt the familiar gray-blue eyes judging, burning a hole through her two-dollar black t-shirt with Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Hell is other people” printed across her braless chest. She crossed her arms over her breasts and stared at Murphy who was asleep again on the floor. Les thought how simple life would be if she were just a well-cared-for dog.

With chocolate wedged into the corners of her pink lips, Cheryl stared down at her shell-pink fingernails. “You really care about this woman stuff, don’t you?”

Les stared at the bottom corner of the placemat beneath the cutting board. She nodded.

“Les, I used to think about these things a lot when I was your age. At my college—you have to keep in mind that this was back in the 1960s—we weren’t allowed to wear pants on campus because someone might see us. God forbid. It wasn’t like we were angels.” Cheryl grabbed a white napkin from the rooster holder and wiped her mouth.

“What did you do?” Les moved the board, so she could rest her elbows.

Cheryl took a sip of beer. Les thought about how disgusting brownie and beer had to taste together.

She held her face with her hand. “Wore ’em anyway. Bell-bottoms were in.” A dreamy expression came over Cheryl’s face. “I wanted to look ‘fierce’ as you kids say these days. Back then, we said ‘cool.’ My male professors and friends wore pants. I didn’t see why they could, but I couldn’t.”

“Go, Mom!” Les said. Murphy lifted her head, snorted, and lay back down again. “You never told me this.” She felt the hole in the kneecap of her jeans that she had ripped herself with scissors. With her fingers, she ripped the hole a little more.

“It never came up.” Cheryl shrugged. “And your great-grandmother was a suffragette. She marched with women in D.C.”

“So it’s in my blood,” Les said, staring at the brownies.

Cheryl nodded.

“Maybe I will have one.” Les took a small brownie out of the tin and ate it whole. She felt the cake stick to the roof of her mouth as she mumbled, “So good.”

Cheryl picked up her partly eaten brownie and finished it. “You’re more assertive about feminism than I ever was. That’s good, though. That’s just how you are about things—assertive—like the time you demanded to have that teddy bear by the register at Kroger’s. You wailed and carried on until Daddy and I bought it for you. I think the cashier was even willing to buy it for you at one point, just to get us out of there.”

“I was three!”

Cheryl smiled. “I know.”

“So why don’t you care about feminism anymore?”

“I don’t know. It’s not that I don’t. I got married, had children, had dogs. I started full-time at Woodrow High.” She petted Hambone. He was sitting by her knees underneath the table. “You’re a good boy, Hammy. Aren’t ya? Aren’t ya? Yeahhhh.”

Les nodded. She sort of understood. When she was five, she had taken ballet classes. She liked dancing well enough and stuck with it for a couple of years until she discovered baseball. “Do you ever get angry that Dad doesn’t help out more around here?” She picked up the bell pepper in front of her, rolling it back and forth on the placemat, catching it with her hands.

“Sometimes. But your father does things that I don’t want to do—fix the toilet when it runs, clean dog poop out of the yard, change the oil in the cars. He’d be like a bull in a china shop if he tried his hand in the kitchen or attempted to do laundry. Remember the time he tried to make his own coffee? It was a disaster.”

“Yeah, but if he can learn thousands of different bird and reptile species, he can learn to wash a dish.”

“True. But I do have my own system.”

“I hope you don’t expect me to be like that.”

“Sweetheart, you’re way more coordinated around the kitchen than your father without even trying. You can make coffee.”

“No, I mean, work a full-time job and be a mother.”

“Of course not. I want you to do what makes you happy. That’s what I want for both of my kids.”

“So if I wanted to never get married, never have kids, and instead wanted to get a Ph.D. and gazillion cats, you wouldn’t mind?”

As Cheryl took another drink, Les noticed that she had drunk half of the Yuengling.

“Not at all, as long as you were happy, and the cats didn’t come with you when you visited.” Cheryl pointed with her beer bottle at Les’s laundry bag in the dining room. “Does all this feminist stuff mean that you don’t want me to do your laundry anymore?”

Les considered the pros and cons of learning how to do her own laundry. She could easily tell Cheryl “No.” Then Cheryl would do the laundry because that was Cheryl. However, Les would eventually have to learn anyway. But she’d seen Cheryl do laundry, and it didn’t look like much fun. Les would need more time to think about an answer. “Something like that. But only if it’s so that I can do my own laundry—not so that I can do the laundry for some unappreciative husband.”

“What unappreciative husband? You’re nineteen and don’t even have a boyfriend.”

“I’m on strike from dating right now.” Her last boyfriend, Thomas, had called her a Fem-Nazi. That comment alone had rendered him an unsuitable life partner. To teach him a lesson, she broke up with him in front of his friends at McDonald’s. She stared at her laundry bag. “Will you teach me how to do it?”

“Sure. Maybe I’ll teach you how to wash and chop vegetables while I’m at it. Your lettuce looks ridiculous.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“It’s dirty. Some of the chunks are too large. ”

“I have a big mouth.”

They shared a smile.

“True,” Cheryl said, picking up the anthology. She thumbed through it for a few minutes while finishing her beer and then set the book down. “I want to show you something.” She left her empty beer bottle on the table. She never did that.

Jack Senior walked into the kitchen with his pipe hanging out of his mouth. Removing it, he kissed Cheryl on the lips and then put it back in his mouth. “What are my two girls up to?” he said.

It had always amazed Les that he could talk with that thing in his mouth. “I’m my own girl,” Les said, standing up.

“Of course you are, sweetheart. But you’ll always be my little girl.” Taking his pipe out of his mouth, he kissed Les on the forehead and then put it back. Bending down, he petted Hambone then Murphy. “Hey, guys,” he said to the dogs in a high-pitched voice. “I didn’t forget about you. No. I didn’t. Noooooo. I didn’t.”

Les pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. She looked at Cheryl. “What did you want to show me?”

Cheryl told Jack Senior that she and Les would be right back. She patted him on the back as she walked into the dining room. “Where’s Junior?”

“Out on the deck talkin’ on the phone,” he said, walking over to the refrigerator. “What about dinner?” He opened the door and grabbed a bottle of Sam Adams.

Cheryl checked the time on her wristwatch. “We’ll be fast.”

Jack Senior opened his beer and went back into the living room.

As Les followed Cheryl into the dining room, Les hoped they were not off to look at old family photo albums in the oak bookcase. Les would gladly burn the infamous

baby bathtub photos if she didn't think Cheryl would kill her. But she led Les past the bookcase and into the spare bedroom on the first floor.

Les sat at the foot of the double bed while Cheryl slid open the closet door. She pushed the hanging winter jackets to one side, and from the top shelf, she pulled out a stack of wool sweaters. She set the sweaters on the rocking chair next to the dresser.

"What are you looking for?" Les said.

"Hold your horses," Cheryl said. "It may take me a second to find them." She pulled down a cardboard box and looked inside. "Nope." She set the box on the beige carpet.

Les got up from the bed to look in the box. She saw old report cards from elementary school, three of Jack Junior's plastic army men, and a green pumpkin hat that she had worn for Halloween in kindergarten. Actually, the hat had been her brother's. It was passed down to her when his head grew too big. She pulled the pointy hat onto her head—a tight fit, especially because of her curls, but she could still get it on.

"Here we go," Cheryl said, carrying a new box over to the bed.

Les watched as Cheryl pulled a bundle of silk scarves and a white cardigan from the box. Setting these on the bed, she continued to dig inside the box. Finally, she pulled out an old pair of bell-bottom jeans. Unfolding them, she held them up to her waist.

"I'd have to use pliers to zip these up now," Cheryl said, laughing. "No way they'd fit." She stared at Les's hat. "Aw. The pumpkin hat. You made the cutest little pumpkin. I wonder where the rest of that costume is."

"You brought me in here to show me some old bell-bottoms?"

“Not just any bell-bottoms. These are the bell-bottoms.” She handed them to Les. “Want ’em? They’d probably fit you.”

“The ones you got into trouble for wearing?” Les pulled the pumpkin hat off her head and let it fall on the floor.

Cheryl nodded.

“Sweet!” Les said, taking the jeans and holding them up to her waist. “I can’t believe you kept them.” She kicked off her sneakers.

After picking up the hat and setting it back into the appropriate box, Cheryl shut the bedroom door while Les took off her jeans and put on the bell-bottoms. They fit around the waist, but they were much too long. She was a good three inches shorter than Cheryl. Les walked on the bottoms of the jeans to the mirror that hung on the back of the door.

Cheryl came up from behind Les and kneeled on the carpet. She rolled up the cuffs. “I’ll hem these for you.” Standing up, she hugged Les from behind. “You’re beautiful.”

They swayed together in front of the mirror. They had the same gray-blue eyes, the same oval face, and bony wrists. The last time they had hugged like this in front of the mirror was before Les’s first prom. She had worn a long, sparkly red gown that had cost way too much, but her mother had bought it anyway. That night Les had felt beautiful, too, almost as beautiful as Cinderella or Supermodel Cindy Crawford—a shorter version of course. The gown had made Les feel that way, the illusion of cleavage and how it was so tight she could barely breathe. Or maybe it had been the make-up

caked on her face to cover up her cystic acne or her hair fashioned into a French twist by a stylist. But now she felt just as beautiful without the gown, make-up, and hair.

How many women could claim that? Staring at Cheryl's eyelashes coated in black mascara, Les wondered if her mother would ever feel good about herself whether she was wearing make-up or not, cooking dinner or not.

"I love you," Les said.

The smoke detector went off.

"Oh my God! Dinner!" Cheryl said, dropping her arms from Les. "Move."

Les moved out of the way as Cheryl ran out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. Holding the bottoms of the jeans like a dress, Les rushed into the kitchen behind her.

As Cheryl grabbed for an oven mitt by the microwave, she bumped into table, knocking the anthology off on top of Hambone. He yelped and ran into the dining room with his tail between his legs. Murphy stood in front of the table barking.

Jack Senior rushed into the kitchen. He took his pipe out of his mouth. "What's goin' on?" he said.

"The meat and cheese pie!" Cheryl said. "It's only supposed to cook for thirty minutes." Smoke billowed as she lifted the glass dish out and placed it on top of the stove. The top layer of the cheese was crunchy and black. It looked liked cockroaches had climbed into the oven and gathered on top of it.

Standing on a chair in the kitchen, Cheryl waved the oven mitt with a pink-rose print in front of the smoke detector. Les opened the window above the sink.

With his pipe back in his mouth, Jack Senior probed the burnt pie with a fork, examining it like one of his specimens. "Yeah," he said, laughing, "I'm not eating that."

After the smoke detector had stopped, Cheryl got down from the chair. “Why didn’t I smell it burning?” She sat down at the table and held her forehead in her hand.

Jack Junior slid open the screen door in the living room and came inside. Staring first at Cheryl and then the stove, he said, “Mom burned her meat and cheese pie? Aw man.” He bent down and petted Murphy, who was still barking. “Calm down, girl. It’s okay.” Then, seeing Hambone hiding, he went into the dining room and tried to coax him out. “What’s wrong, boy? Are you sad you won’t be getting Mom’s famous meat and cheese pie for leftovers tonight?”

“No. He’s sad that a book fell on his head.” Les picked up the anthology and set it back on the kitchen table.

Jack Junior picked it up and skimmed the table of contents. “Feminism. Poor Hammy. That must’ve hurt.”

“I don’t know what happened,” Cheryl said. “I haven’t burned dinner in years.”

“Sweetheart,” Jack Senior said, “don’t worry about it. It’s not like I’m going to trade you in for a new wife. Just don’t let it happen again.” He stood behind her and massaged her shoulders. He smiled. “Kidding.”

Cheryl brushed him off.

“Yeah, Mom, don’t worry about it,” Jack Junior said. “Let’s just get takeout.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Les said.

She went into the dining room and grabbed the phonebook. She sat down at the table trying to help in the only way she knew how. The burned dinner was her fault, not Cheryl’s. Still, Les couldn’t regret what had happened. If she regretted a burned dinner, this would be a different story.

Les smiled. Thinking pizza, she flipped to “P” in the Yellow Pages.

Date Night at the Beach

I

Nothing on TV. Didn't feel like swimming—I'd swum all day in the Atlantic. So I fucked my husband.

Drew had managed to get off. Good for him. I hadn't gotten off in months.

Afterward, I stood topless in front of the mirror wearing red bikini bottoms.

Turning to the side, I estimated how much my breasts had sagged over the past ten years. Pushing my breasts up above my rib cage, I decided they had sagged about a half-inch. Turning again, I saw white stretch marks, scaly pink nipples, and a mysterious black hair that had sprouted on my left breast a few days ago.

How often had I scrutinized my body in front of a mirror instead of focusing on things that mattered?

I let my breasts go and plopped back on the hard mattress. The ceiling, like the walls of the bedroom, was grayish-pink. I didn't know why Drew's parents, Sherry and Rick, had painted the bedroom that awful color. Drew and I were vacationing for a week at their condo in North Myrtle Beach. I didn't know why my marriage with Drew had fallen into a miserable pile of disconnect. Even if there were one reason I could pinpoint, like our careers getting in the way, I didn't think it would matter at this point. We didn't have any children. Our life together had shrunk to watching reality TV shows in the evenings. We sat on separate couches sipping Diet Coke zoned out in our own little universes. When we did talk, it wasn't about anything significant in news or politics, topics we couldn't get enough of in college.

When 9/11 happened, we were seniors and had been dating about a year. We had sat on the same couch then, watching news coverage of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers in our apartment. We watched it over and over—the crash, the orange flames, the people jumping out of high windows—until we couldn't take it anymore. We cried, drank beer, cried some more. We thanked God we hadn't been there when it happened although we weren't religious. We made love—real love, pausing-to-stare-into-each-other's-eyes love, moving-fast-then-slow-to-savor-it love, nipple-sucking-ass-grabbing love that ended with sweaty foreheads and stomachs and “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Now we repeated stupid gripes about the stupid things stupid people did for fame. When washed-up celebrities appeared on VH1's *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew*, we laughed at them from the TV room of our one-story brick home in West Virginia. During commercial breaks, we said things like “I always knew he liked the sauce” or “I always knew she snorted the white stuff” without looking at each other.

It could have been worse. At least we weren't the alcoholics or coke-heads we watched on TV. At least neither of us was cheating, not because we hadn't been tempted—hot guys go in and out of the electronics store beside my work all the time—but because neither of us had the energy to cheat. We had jobs—another thing to be thankful for—that required us to get up early. I was a Bob Evans restaurant manager and had to be at work by six a.m. Drew taught physical education at an elementary school. By four p.m., we were exhausted.

I found my bikini top, t-shirt, and jean shorts folded on the spare double bed. Although I was ready for a shower, I put my clothes back on to make up the other bed. Making the bed naked in his parents' condo would have just been too weird. Sherry and

Rick had probably had sex in this room. As I pulled the white sheets up to the headboard, I shuddered and tried not to pursue any further image of Rick's saggy butt climbing on top of Sherry.

I picked up Drew's blue oxford from the floor, folded it, and set it on the white dresser below the mirror. The dresser was decorated with seashells and starfish. A small crucifix with Jesus nailed on front was propped up against the mirror. I shoved the crucifix into the top drawer where Drew had put his boxers, thinking Jesus had seen enough for one day. On the edge of the dresser lay my cell phone—7:02 p.m. And we hadn't gone to dinner yet. I should be hungry although I wasn't. I hadn't eaten since noon when Drew and I walked to Basil's. Even then, I had eaten only half of my small veggie pizza. Seeing my regulars at Bob Evans eat sausage gravy five days a week had ruined my appetite for meat. Recently, I had been losing my appetite even for vegetables and fruit. I didn't know why. I just didn't feel like eating.

After finding the purple condom wrapper underneath the bed, I threw it in the wastebasket by the dresser. The dirty condom was already there.

The toilet flushed. With a July issue of *Motor Trend* in hand, Drew came out of the bathroom. He was tall, dark-haired, with green eyes. I used to enjoy looking at him. But now his body was just a body that didn't make me feel much of anything.

"I'm hungry," Drew said.

"Let me get a shower, and we'll get something to eat," I said. As I moved past him to get to the bathroom, he patted me on the ass.

I used to love that. He'd grab my ass as we went into the bedroom, not after we came out. That was the difference. Now I hated it.

Drew went into the small TV room and sat down on the couch. “I’d wait before I went in there if I were you. I just let off a bomb.” He laughed as he picked up his cell phone from the end table.

I didn’t need to ask who he was calling. Drew had been calling his parents every Saturday evening since we met.

“I’ll manage. I want to shower and get out of here.”

As I undressed in the mint-green bathroom, I noticed my tweezers sitting on the sink. I thought I had put them back in the medicine cabinet this morning after thinning my eyebrows. I must have forgotten. Staring at the black hair on my left breast, I picked up the tweezers and thought about plucking it. But knowing the hair would just grow back and no one besides me knew about it—Drew hadn’t even noticed—I changed my mind. Opening the medicine cabinet door, I put the tweezers back.

While washing in the shower, I found sand behind my ears and between my legs. I tried to remove it, all of it, using my hands and a bar of soap. Seeing the trail of sand and white suds go down the drain, I realized I had removed only a fragment of the grime. There were still gritty bits of seashell and dirt stuck inside me. I couldn’t see them. I’d never be able to get them all out. Scrubbing the delicate pink lips between my thighs, I felt the sting from all that soap.

II

While I sat in the passenger seat, Drew drove along US-17 North Highway, where beachgoers sought out food and entertainment. North Myrtle Beach had a trend of repeatedly building the same establishments only six-year-olds would enjoy. In the past five minutes, I had counted five Waffle Houses, six Eagle’s Beachwear Stores, and six Jurassic-themed miniature golf courses. Eating waffles, buying a hermit crab that would

die on the drive home, and putting a pink golf ball through a brontosaurus's legs—I couldn't think of a better way to spend my summer vacation.

I should've just stayed in the ocean. I had drifted out in my inner tube for hours today. I watched the ocean and sky blend, not knowing where the one began and the other ended as I paddled past where the waves break. The water lapped over my shoulders and felt warm from the sun. I think I fell asleep at one point, not knowing or caring where Drew was.

Looking over at him in the driver's seat, I watched his lips, large and pouty, relax into a smile. I felt sorry for him. He had no idea I didn't love him. He was probably thinking about food. He loved to eat healthy food (grilled chicken, baked potatoes, salmon), and he jogged five miles just about every day. But right now his eyes were focused on the road. At 7:30 on a Saturday, mini-vans, motorcycles, and pickup trucks were packed into parking lots and on the highway. Ahead, a man drove a bright-red truck with "Toyminator" written across the back of the bed. He was probably one of those nerds who had unwrapped Batman dolls stored in his closet along with his dirty magazines.

We finally came upon a stretch of US-17 with eateries other than Waffle House. Clusters of sunburned families sat outside seafood places and steakhouses. Seeing mothers bounce fat babies on their tan knees and little girls run around in sundresses made me glad Drew and I hadn't had kids. Kids were too much work, and I would never bring up a child in a marriage that was falling apart.

My mom and dad never divorced. They should have. At thirty, I still thought about the times Mom had screamed at Dad in their first-floor bedroom directly below

mine. It was always the same argument: Dad spent too much money, and Mom didn't like it. Dad didn't think Mom had a say on what he spent because she wasn't the one making the money.

“Where are we going?” Drew said.

I twisted the white-gold wedding ring around on my finger. “I don't know,” I said.

“How about Mexican?”

Last night, we had Japanese. The night before, we tried to save money by eating at Subway. I ordered a six-inch veggie sub but couldn't finish it.

We stopped at a red light. He looked at me.

It had been a long time since he had expressed interest in my input. Drew usually just did what he wanted. Last year, he bought a car after I had told him it would be better to wait because we had just put a down payment on our first home. Unlike my mother, I had a say because Drew and I made about the same amount of money. Then when he brought the car home, he was shocked that I wasn't happy. Although the Honda turned out to be a good car (that's why we drove it to the beach instead of my Buick), he still went behind my back to buy it.

Drew beeped the horn. The Toyminator was talking on his cell phone and didn't see the light change.

“If you don't want Mexican,” he said, “I found a Mongolian restaurant in the phonebook. We could try it.”

I dug my fingernails into the leather seat. “Not hungry.”

The Toyminator was still jabbering away. Drew beeped the horn again.

He turned around in his seat and looked at us. The Toyminator wasn't a nerd at all. He had black hair that was slicked back, bronze skin, and wore black aviator sunglasses. He slapped his cell phone shut as I tried to stop myself from drooling. I envisioned drinking strawberry margaritas and imagining what the Toyminator looked like naked.

"Mexican's fine," I said.

We were moving again.

Drew looked over at me but only for a second. "Your hair looks nice."

"I haven't done anything different." I pulled down the visor. Staring into its mirror, I ran a few fingers through the short, light-brown hair with a few blonde streaks from the sun.

"Well, you look pretty."

I laughed. "What are you buttering me up for?"

Drew didn't usually compliment me, and I hadn't joked around with him like this since my twenty-eighth birthday two years ago.

"Can a husband not compliment his wife?"

"Depends on who the husband and wife are."

His cell phone rang. His ringtone was a recording of an umpire screaming, "Steeerrriike, steerrriike," over and over.

"I'll get it." I wanted to shut the umpire up.

His phone was in the console. I reached past his hand on the gear shift to get it.

Drew put his warm hand on top of mine, which was now on top of the phone.

"Love you," he said.

The last time he had acted this sweet to me was when he wanted to buy the Honda. What did he want now—a motorcycle, new golf clubs? He and Rick liked to play golf together.

“Steeerrriike. Steeerrriike.”

“When are you going to change that God damn ringtone?”

“Whenever you want.” He smirked. “That thing you did with my ass today—it makes me crazy.”

Now I knew he was full of it. “I’ve always grabbed your ass during sex. You’ve never said anything about it before.” With his phone in my hand, I moved my hand out from underneath his.

“Well, I really liked it this time.”

“Steeerrriike. Steeerrriike.”

“Cut the crap. What do you want?” I watched his mouth open to say something, but seeing “Mom” show up on the caller ID I said, “Never mind. We’ll talk later. It’s your mother.”

He slapped his mouth shut. As I answered the phone, he said, “Wonder what she wants?”

I shrugged. Sherry didn’t usually call back on the same night after she and he had talked.

“Hey, Sherry. How are you?”

“Great—a little sore. Mary taught yoga today.”

Was it wrong that I liked my mother-in-law more than I liked my husband? My own mom and I were not as close as Sherry and I were. Despite all the arguments she had

had with my father, my mom never understood why I wanted to get my master's degree in Business instead of becoming a stay-at-home housewife. Sherry, a nurse practitioner, did.

“Mary’s a killer,” I said. “My quads are still recovering from all those warrior poses.”

Sherry and I took a yoga class together on the weekends at the Y. She was more limber and fit now than I was even in my twenties.

“How’s Rick?” I said.

“Playing golf every chance he gets. You know how it is,” she said.

“Oh, do I ever.”

Sherry giggled. “How are you liking Beth?” she whispered.

Beth was my cleaning lady. At Sherry’s suggestion, I had recently hired Beth to clean the house on Sundays while Drew golfed with his father. Sherry had been doing the same thing for twenty years. Neither man knew about it.

I turned toward the window and whispered back, “She’s great.”

“What are you all talking about?” Drew said, glancing at me.

We were approaching another red light, but he wasn’t slowing down.

“Nothing.” I took the phone away from my ear and pointed at the red light.

“Drew, red light.” Putting the phone to my ear again, I told Sherry to hold on. This time I yelled: “Drew, red light!”

He slammed down on the brake and stretched his arm across my stomach like the steel bar that comes down over passengers just before a roller coaster takes off. We thrust

forward in our seats as the car stopped, just inches away from the Toyminator. I dropped the phone. Cars honked behind us.

“Stupid fuck!” the Toyminator said, shaking his tan fist out the window.

Drew opened his window. “Fuck you, Toyminator!” he said and closed it. “You okay?” He brushed the hair out of my face and tucked it behind my ear.

I pushed his hand away. The phone lay on the floor mat by my feet. I picked it up.

We were moving again.

“You kids okay?” Sherry said. “What happened?”

“We’re fine. Drew wasn’t paying attention and had to slam down on the brake.”

“Don’t tell her that!” he said, pulling into the parking lot for El Ranchito Restaurant and Bar. The hole-in-the-wall restaurant was sandwiched between a powder-blue wedding chapel on my right and an Eagle’s on my left. Hanging above the beachwear store’s entrance were inflatable turtle rafts. I wondered how much they cost.

“Why wasn’t he paying attention?” Sherry said.

Drew parked the car. “We’re here. Time to go.”

He always got irritable when he was hungry, but not this irritable. I told him to hold his horses, a suggestion my mother used on me when I was a child.

I stared at the parking lot. Aside from our car, the only other vehicle in the lot was a white Jeep that had its trunk open, probably the owner’s. Not a good sign. Good restaurants were usually busy. Around the Jeep, a boy rode a bicycle with training wheels.

Although I'd rather stay on the phone with Sherry, maybe ask her about my mysterious boob hair, I said, "Sherry, we're about to eat. Want me to have Drew call you later?"

"Actually, I was calling to talk to you. I tried your phone. But all I got was the voicemail."

I rummaged through the big black purse that went everywhere with me. I saw my lip gloss, wallet, grocery store receipts, change, a comb, hair clips, cinnamon gum, and tampons that I always kept for emergencies but no cell phone. "Must've left it at the condo. Thanks again for letting us stay there."

"You're welcome," she said. "This will only take a second. I just wanted to tell you I heard the good news."

"Jesus," Drew said. He sighed. "Give me the phone. This isn't girl-talk time."

He tried to grab the phone away from my ear, but I pushed his hand away.

"Seriously." He reached for the phone again. "Give it to me."

I smacked his hand away. If he wanted to act like a child, then I'd treat him like one.

"What good news?" I said, looking over at Drew. The only good news I could think of at the moment was that Drew had given up trying to take the phone. He stared out the window at the boy.

"That you and Drew are trying," she said. "I hated the idea of changing diapers and breastfeeding until I changed my mind when I was your age. Actually, I think I was a year or two younger than you."

I disregarded Sherry's "you're old" comment for the moment and told her that I would talk to her later. I got off the phone.

Sitting back in my seat, I crossed my arms and bit the inside of my cheek.

He opened the car door, saw my face, and shut it again. "What's wrong?"

"I can't believe you." I hit Drew in the shoulder with my purse. "You told your mother that we were trying to have kids without talking to me first?"

He blocked my purse on the second try. "Watch it. That kid might see," he said. "My mother has the biggest mouth in the world. I was going to talk to you about it right when she called. I swear."

Drew pointed at the boy. "Look at him," he whispered. "Isn't he adorable?"

I didn't want to see.

Leaning forward, I rested my elbows on my knees and held my head with my hands. I felt Drew's large, warm hand on my bare back. My black summer dress tied at the neck. I had a habit of dressing up when I wanted to cheer myself up.

"Is the thought of us having kids so terrible?" He rubbed my back. "I think it might be good for us."

"So this was why you were being sweet to me."

I brushed Drew's hand off and stared at the scar on my kneecap from flipping over the handlebars of my first bicycle. The scar was still white, still protruding. The slight tan on my legs made it appear whiter. I thought about Sherry's use of the word trying, as in Drew and I were trying to get pregnant now. I felt queasy, like I had just flipped over my handlebars again and images of the dirty condom in the wastebasket and my tweezers on the mint-green counter came to mind.

I sat up. He wouldn't. Would he? He had gone to the bathroom while I was getting undressed. I thought he was going to pee. And if he did do something to the condom, wouldn't I have felt something? But no man had ever come in me before, so I didn't know what that felt like.

I looked at him. "Why were my tweezers lying out in the bathroom when I went to shower?"

"What?"

"My tweezers—why were they out?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

He always said that when he was lying. When I asked him why he took the stapler out of my home office and didn't put it back, he said he didn't know. When I asked him why he bought the Honda when I said it would be better to wait, he said he didn't know.

"Was it a ghost, Drew? Did a ghost take my tweezers from the medicine cabinet and leave them out?"

"What are you getting at?"

"What you did." I patted the leather seat.

He put one hand on the wheel and stared at El Ranchito's blinking red "OPEN" sign. "You're going to bring that up again? That was like two years ago."

"It's one year. And I'll bring up whatever I want to bring up. You never think of me or how I feel. Just yourself."

He sighed and ran his hand through his hair.

"Look at me." I stared at the chicken pox scars on his cheek, my face growing hotter from his silence.

He rolled his lips inside his mouth and stared down at his khaki shorts.

“Why were my tweezers out?” I punched him in the arm. “Tell me.” I punched him again. I wanted him to admit what he had done.

“Hurts. Cut it out.” He caught my hand, squeezed it, and set it in my lap. “Maybe I poked a tiny hole in the tip. It probably didn’t work. I mean, the hole was so small.”

I slumped back in my seat and put my hand over my face. “Well, that explains why I didn’t feel anything.” Tears spilled down my cheeks. “Your mother know?”

“She’d kill me.”

Pulling my hand from face, I looked out my window, vision blurry with tears. The coral and purple sky blended in with the powder-blue chapel like a watercolor picture. I wiped my face, trying to read the banner hung on the side of the chapel: “Make your dream come true! Get married today for \$49.99!” I slapped Drew in the face, grabbed my purse, and slammed the car door.

Leaning against the warm metal, I put the hand that slapped him on my stomach. It was red. My fingers stung. I imagined cells rapidly dividing in my uterus. I had no control over my body, over anything. I stared at the boy on the bike as he raced up and down the sidewalk outside El Ranchito. He pedaled faster and faster until he got to the handicap ramp. Then he glided down into the parking lot. Poor thing, I thought. Wretch. Look at how happy he is riding his bicycle, repeating the same circuit over and over. Someday he’ll meet some girl or guy, fall in love, get lied to, and have to scrape his ass off the blacktop like a grownup.

I walked up the ramp, noticing how dark the restaurant looked. Were there any lights on? I went inside and sat down at a table near the door. I watched the sunset alone

wishing I were home. I would've been in my Buick by now and driving. Where? I don't know, probably to my parents' house or Dairy Queen. Here, I had nowhere to go, no one to go to. I was nine hours away from my own car and had left my cell phone at the condo. I should've just stayed in the ocean.

III

Drew followed me in soon afterward. He sighed as he sat down across from me. I refused to look at him and looked around the restaurant instead. Excluding the felt-green pool tables in a room off to the side and the red door of the unisex bathroom, everything was black—tables, chairs, stools, walls, floor. A bartender stood behind the bar polishing beer mugs. Behind her was the door to the kitchen. We were the only customers.

Why did Drew bring me to this deserted hellhole? El Ranchito shouldn't advertise itself as a restaurant and bar. This was a bar. That's why there weren't any customers here yet. All the bars in my college days didn't get crowded until around eleven. In fact, El Ranchito reminded me of Fluid, a bar I had gone to with my girlfriends before I met Drew. Now that I thought about it, Fluid was where I met Drew. Both drunk and underage, we had stumbled into each other while trying to sneak into the unisex bathroom to down tequila shots. We ended up in the bathroom together, downing our shots, and making out. I didn't even remember who he was when he called the next day until he said, "tequila" and "bathroom." After that, it all came back. I had given him my phone number, a choice I now saw as a huge mistake.

Drew reached for my hand. "We'll get through this, okay?"

I pulled my hand away and crossed my arms. It was cold inside El Ranchito. A black ceiling fan spun directly above us. Little hairs on my arms and legs perked up.

The bartender came over. She was a short young woman with an oval face and hazel eyes. She wore a lavender halter and black shorts. A smattering of fairy and butterfly tattoos appeared on her ankles.

“What would y’all like to drink?” she said.

“I don’t know. What do pregnant women drink?” I said.

“You’re pregnant?” she said. “Congratulations!”

I didn’t say anything. I looked at Drew for the first time since he entered. It looked like a red starfish had been sucking on his cheek and had just fallen off. I felt the urge to give his other cheek a starfish to match.

“Well, we don’t know for sure yet.” He smiled. “She’ll have water with lemon. I’ll have a Modelo Especial.”

The bartender went behind the bar.

“I’m sorry. What I did was really wrong.” He folded one arm on top of the other on the table. “But I’m sick of being around kids all day—teaching them how to play kickball and baseball but not having my own kid to teach those things to. Is the idea of us having a kid so terrible?”

I stared at the blender on the bar and the tall bottle of strawberry margarita mix on the shelf behind it.

“I could get another job so that you could stay at home with him or her. Not have to work,” he said.

“I’m not quitting my job,” I said, recalling the many evenings I had helped my mother wash dishes while my father watched the sports channel in the living room.

“Okay.” He threw his hands in the air. “Whatever you want.”

I laughed. “You haven’t got a clue what I want.”

The bartender returned with our drinks. “Y’all know what you want?” She set two small napkins down and then our drinks.

Laminated menus were still stacked between the salt and pepper shakers on the table. Drew picked one up and browsed while I sat with my arms still crossed.

“I want a margarita,” I said with my jaw clenched.

Drew smiled as he looked at the bartender. “She’s kidding.” He looked back down at the menu.

“You’re right. Margaritas aren’t strong enough. I want a Long Island Iced Tea.”

The bartender’s hazel eyes widened. They looked like they were going to jump out of her eye sockets.

“Hormones,” Drew said. “It’s her hormones talking.” He looked at me.

“Sweetheart, you don’t want to hurt the baby.”

“You’re crazy if you think I’m keeping it—if I’m pregnant.” I remembered Sherry’s comment about how she was still in her twenties when she had Drew. “I’m probably so old that my eggs are stale.”

“You’re thirty, not sixty,” he said.

“You’re right. Just in case, I want a Long Island and the morning-after pill.”

“I’ll give you a few more minutes,” the bartender said. She raised her eyebrows as she walked off.

“Please, don’t do this, sweetheart. Let’s eat. You’ve got to be starving. Then we’ll go back to the condo and talk. Promise.” He put his hands together like he was praying.

“Fuck off.” I turned my chair away and noticed a sign taped to the wall behind the bar that said “CASH ONLY.” “We can’t eat here.” I pointed to the sign. Neither of us carried much cash around with us anymore, only debit cards that also functioned as ATM cards.

“You’ve got to be kidding?” He called the bartender over.

The bartender took out her notepad and an ink pen. “Ready?”

“Hold on,” he said. “Is it true you only take cash?”

“Is that a problem?” the bartender said.

He didn’t answer. “Just gimme the chicken fajitas and the vegetarian fajitas for her.”

I narrowed my eyes at Drew as she jotted down our orders and disappeared into the kitchen.

“Thanks for ordering for me, asshole,” I said although I was surprised he knew my favorite Mexican dish. “How are we going to pay for this?”

“I’ll just go find an ATM.”

The bartender came out carrying a small tub of silverware and a stack of white napkins. She rolled the silverware up into napkins and piled them on the bar.

I leaned in. “You can’t leave me alone in this hellhole. I’m coming, too.”

He stood up. “Someone has to wait on the food. I’ll be fast.” He kissed me on the forehead before I could duck.

“Pick me up a morning-after pill while you’re at it,” I said to his back. I knew most pharmacies were closed by now. I just wanted to say it.

The bartender came over to the table with two rolled sets of silverware.

I told her I was sorry she had to see the argument, but that, as a restaurant manager, I thought she had handled the situation well. She put the silverware on the table. She thanked me and assured me she'd seen worse. Sighing, I told her I had too, that I had had to ask couples to leave the restaurant because they were screaming so loud. She asked what restaurant I managed.

“Bob Evans,” I said. “Not here. In West Virginia.”

She smiled. “I love their biscuits.”

I told her everyone said that. The bartender seemed like a young woman just trying to get through college. I thought about asking her to spit on Drew's fajitas, but that wasn't her job. I could do it myself.

She disappeared again and returned with a red basket of chips and a small bowl of salsa.

Oil dripped from a tortilla chip as I picked it up. The taste of corn and salt and the crispiness made me realize I was starving. My stomach turned over in delight as I dunked the biggest chip I could find into the salsa and ate it whole. Delicious. The salsa was spicy, Drew's favorite style. He was missing out. Too bad.

I stared out the window. The kid was still riding his bike, and I noticed he had no shoes on, only dark socks that stopped short of his powerful, little mocha-skinned calves. Whose kid was he? It was getting late for him to be riding his bike outside alone, not that I cared. If he were mine, he'd have shoes on and me with him in the dark. But he's not.

Rubbing my stomach, I tried to send “I'm not pregnant” vibes down to my uterus while wishing I'd stayed in the ocean. I should've just floated out in my inner tube a little

bit longer. Then Drew would've been too hungry to fuck, and I wouldn't be having a pregnancy scare. But pregnancy scares were for sixteen year olds. So why was I scared?

I looked at the bartender, thinking maybe the kid was hers while the chips kept magically appearing in my mouth. She was still preoccupied with rolling silverware. I remembered when I used to be a server and had to do that. I preferred cloth to paper napkins because they could be reused. A small mountain of rolled silverware sat on the bar now, but the way she rolled it, awkwardly stacking the knife on top of the fork instead of the other way around, made me conclude the kid couldn't be hers. She was still a kid herself. She looked too young to want a child, too caught up showing skin and getting fairy tattoos.

The bartender went back into the kitchen and returned with the fajitas. Pretty fast, but Mexican restaurants were typically fast getting the food out, especially when they weren't busy. I handed her the red chip basket for a refill. That was how hungry I had been.

Her hazel eyes widened as she took the empty chip basket and salsa bowl.

"What?" I said. "I might be eating for two."

She took the basket and bowl and went into the kitchen.

Drew still wasn't back. The polite thing to do would be to call Drew from El Ranchito's phone and tell him the food was ready and to hurry his ass up, but he didn't deserve it. Besides, I didn't know his cell phone number. My cell phone had always kept track of it, so I didn't have to. Still, ten years of being together, and I didn't know his cell phone number by heart. Biting the inside of my cheek, I thought I should wait on him. I didn't. I gathered green peppers, onions, mushrooms, and refried beans onto my tortilla

and took a huge bite, feeling the liquid dribble down my chin. I set the rest of the tortilla back on my plate and speared one of Drew's chicken pieces. It was juicy, a little crispy on its outer edges, just how I liked it. The chicken was so good that it made me want to go back to eating chicken again. Maybe I would. I scooted Drew's chicken fajitas over on my side of the table. I ate his tortillas, his vegetables and chicken, and scarfed down all his refried beans and guacamole.

The cook came out of the kitchen with more chips and salsa, and I saw that the kid was hers. They had the same mocha skin and black hair. She was taller than me with thick, curly hair pulled back into a pony tail. She set the chips and salsa on the table. I thanked her although I knew I couldn't eat another bite. With a Spanish accent, she asked if everything tasted okay.

Patting my stomach with my hand, I said, "Everything was great."

We shared a smile, and then she went over to the front door. She opened it and called, "Miguel!" She said something else, too, in Spanish, so I couldn't understand it.

The boy rode into the restaurant on his bicycle. He drove it to the back corner, near the bathroom. While the boy rode his bicycle in small circles, I took off my wedding ring and spun it on the table, watching the white gold flash as it went around and around and fell on its side. This was the first dinner I had eaten alone in a long time. I didn't have to worry about food getting stuck in my teeth, looking like a pig from eating too much, or trying to talk about pointless TV shows and eat at the same time. But I guess there's a first time for everything—first time eating alone, first morning-after pill, first divorce—things I couldn't avoid by drifting out to sea in my inner tube. At some point, my hands got wrinkly, and I had to get out.

Women with Short Hair

1

Beth Marcum stood at the stainless-steel kitchen island with the waiters while the chefs prepped for the lunch special. Dressed in white jackets and black-and-white striped pants, the chefs flitted between the stock room and kitchen carrying sticks of butter, salmon, and asparagus. A dishwasher, Ricky, was hard at work in a room off the kitchen. Beth heard his high-powered sprayer cleaning dessert plates from a wedding reception held at Preston's Country Club the night before.

The four new waiters standing across from Beth had lineless skin, bright eyes, shiny hair, and even shinier teeth. Every summer, Preston's hired waiters because every fall most of them quit. Because they were young and it was their first day, they seemed excited. Beth remembered the thrill of meeting other young people and was envious of their anticipation. Back then all she had had to worry about was if she would meet So-and-So at her new summer job and if he'd ask her out. But that was nearly thirty years ago. Now she had a husband, Philip, and an eight-year-old son, Caleb, who had been recently diagnosed with Tourette's syndrome. His condition had placed a lot of strain on her marriage, which was strained already because Philip's small paint and repair business had had trouble getting work. Last month, he had had to drive an hour from their home in Beckley, West Virginia, to Lewisburg, just to get a few house-painting jobs. Somehow she and Philip had always managed to get through it all together. But, recently, she had begun to wonder how much more she could take.

The waiters, who had worked at the club for awhile, including Beth and three twenty-something waiters, stood on Beth's side of the island. Laura, the assistant manager, stood at the head. She was in her early thirties with short blonde hair that

flipped out from her shoulders. The stainless-steel swing doors stood behind Laura, reminding Beth of the entrance to a palace. Just beyond was the grand ballroom, where club members held their events.

Laura smiled with her small pink mouth as she introduced newcomers to veterans. She told the new waiters things like “working here is fun,” “we’re all like family,” and “you’ll learn a lot.”

Beth picked at her nails and pushed her cuticles back. She knew she’d be the one doing the teaching. Laura hobnobbed with club members while Beth taught the young waiters how to move tables out of storage and set them, how to roll silverware and carry a tray, how to tell the difference between a dessert fork and a salad fork, and how to put on their cummerbund. The country club required all waiters to wear men’s black tuxedos without the jackets.

At forty-four, Beth was close in age to the young waiters’ mothers and had been at the club longer than anyone else. They listened to her. But even though she had twenty years of restaurant work experience, she didn’t get paid the assistant manager’s salary. She didn’t have a college degree.

Laura stopped talking when Ricky, a thin young man, rushed into the kitchen carrying a large plastic tub filled with silverware. “Out of the way,” he said. His black ponytail swung behind him as he walked.

The new waiters moved together like a school of black-and-white angelfish toward the other side of the island. Ben, the tall college guy with a nice butt, stood beside Beth. As Ben moved to make room for the new waiters, he brushed his shoulder against Beth.

“Sorry,” Ben whispered.

Beth flushed from her face to her arm. “It’s okay,” she whispered back. Being touched by a man had felt good, especially by a young, good-looking man. It had been months since she and Philip had made love.

Ricky plopped the tub down on the island while Laura stood silent, smiling, not introducing him to any of the new waiters. Beth shook her head. Didn’t Laura’s mother teach her any manners? Although he was moody at times, Ricky always came to work and did his job. Like Beth, he didn’t have a college degree but worked hard. After he disappeared down the shadowed hallway to the dishwasher’s room, the new waiters moved back in one body to their side of the island.

Laura checked the time on her gold wristwatch and compared it with the time on the kitchen’s white-faced clock. The clock hung on the white cinder block wall above the swing doors. It was 9:15 a.m. She said, “We’ll start serving at 11. I’ll leave you to get acquainted while you polish. Have fun.” Her strappy yellow stilettos clacked on the terracotta tiles as she rushed through the swing doors.

Beth rolled up the white sleeves of her dress shirt. She grabbed a stack of plastic silverware racks and a stack of raggedy white dishtowels from the metal shelves behind her. On the island next to the tub of silverware, she spread the racks into evenly spaced rows and set the towels on the other side of the tub.

Fork prongs scraped her arm as she dug out a wet spoon. Underneath the fluorescent lights, Beth dried and polished the spoon with a towel until she saw her face upside down and elongated like in a funhouse mirror. Her forehead seemed to stretch past the floor. Her blue eyes bugged, and her nose looked round and pink as a balloon.

She set the spoon into the silverware rack in front of her. Staring down the line of new faces, Beth offered her most enthusiastic smile, proud of herself for showing her teeth this time. “Welcome and dig in,” she said. She grabbed a butter knife out of the tub.

Ben and two other waiters who had worked at the club for awhile picked up a towel and began to polish. The new waiters did the same, except one, Chloe Wescott. Beth recognized her because her parents were members. They ate at the club on Sunday afternoons after Chloe’s father finished his round of golf. She had chin-length black hair that was longer on one side than the other. Her hot-pink fingernails were pulled up over her mouth as she whispered to another new waiter, a chubby girl wearing pink sparkly eye shadow. The chubby girl looked across the island at Beth, shrugged, and tossed a butter knife into a rack.

“Hey, lady,” Chloe said, “what’s your name? Beth? Aren’t you’re a little old to be waitressing at a country club?”

Beth shrugged. “I like what I do.”

Every so often, there were waiters like Chloe, rich girls who got bored over the summer, who wanted to look cute in front of their daddies and daddies’ friends by waitressing at the club and parading around in men’s tuxedos. They never made good waiters. Beth just tried to ignore them until they quit.

Beth finished polishing the butter knife and set it in the rack. She dug out another spoon. She liked polishing spoons the best for some reason, the way the curvature of the spoon felt on her thumb from inside the towel. Sometimes, when she worked the evening shift, Beth liked to stay after everyone had left just to polish the silverware, to get into the silent rhythm of it.

“What’s your husband do?” Chloe asked. “Does he wait tables, too? I don’t have a husband, but my boyfriend is going to go to law school like my dad. I don’t know what I want to do yet, but I think I want to be a radiologist. My friend’s dad is a radiologist. They make tons of money.”

Here we go again—another spoiled brat coming to make work hell. This was not what Beth needed right now. Her sterling silver wedding band gleamed as she set the towel down on the island with the spoon inside of it. “Are you here to talk or work?” Cocking her head to the side, she assumed her most polite, passive-aggressive expression: eyes wide but not so wide that the eyelashes touch the skin above the eye, lips pursed into a little grin, jaw clenched but only slightly. She finished polishing the spoon and threw it in the rack.

Chloe picked up a spoon and towel. “Ugly old bitch,” she whispered.

Beth slammed her toweled fist on the island. The chubby girl jumped and dropped a butter knife onto the floor.

Chloe nudged the girl with her arm. “Way to go, retard. Now they’ll have to wash it again.”

Retard: the label that had followed Beth’s son like a rain cloud ever since he had started elementary school. Beth knew children could be cruel, but they were especially cruel to those with a condition that they didn’t understand. Some young people would grow out of their cruelty. She had a feeling Chloe never would.

Walking around the island, Beth picked up the butter knife and handed it to the chubby girl. “What’s your name again, sweetie?”

“Ashley,” she said while looking down at the tiles. “Sorry about droppin’ that ma’am.”

Beth put a hand on her shoulder. She pointed with the butter knife to the dishwasher’s room. “Ashley, please take this back to Ricky.”

Ashley’s hazel eyes widened. She kept looking at the hallway that led to the dishwasher’s room and back at Beth.

“Go on. His name’s Ricky. He won’t bite.” After watching Ashley walk down the hallway, Beth placed one hand on her hip and rested the other on the island next to Chloe. She bit her bottom lip and tapped her fingernails on the island. She would guilt Chloe into being a better employee—or at least a tolerable one—by talking about how generous Chloe’s father was. Mr. Wescott often tipped the waiters very well, sometimes forty percent, when he and his family dined at the club. “I see your father play golf here every Sunday. Nice man. Think he’d like it if he heard what you just said?”

The girl took her pink cell phone, covered with rhinestones, out of her pants pocket. While chewing her gum with her mouth open, Chloe stared at her phone with her shit-brown eyes and punched in numbers on the phone’s keypad. She had white-gold rings on almost every finger.

Nothing Beth had said was sinking in, not that she had expected it to. “It’s a shame that you’re too much of a brat to take after him.” Hand over her chest, Beth walked out of the kitchen and turned down a narrow hallway in the stock room. She jogged down peach-carpeted steps, taking the back entrance to the women’s locker room.

The carpet was peach, the lockers—almond. Beth sat down on a velvet-cushioned stool in front a makeup mirror. Rows of lockers stood behind her.

“Ugly old bitch?” she said while looking into the oval mirror. She could take being called a bitch. Beth had been called worse. She could even get over Chloe’s use of the word retard. Other young waiters had used it around her, especially when they joked with each other. It was the ugly and old comment that had gotten to her. She propped up her elbow on the smooth surface of the wood and held her chin in her hand. Never in a million years did she think an eighteen-year-old rich girl would ever be able to teach or show her anything, except what a real Louis Vuitton handbag looked like or the best place to get a spray tan. But Chloe had. She had reminded Beth what a dowdy, worn-out matron she had become, outside and inside.

Beth’s light-brown hair hung in a ponytail. As she undid the band, her hair fell over her shoulders, down her back, and dragged her face down with it. Gray hairs appeared in clumps on the sides. Her hair hadn’t been cut or colored in over a year. She couldn’t really afford to have a nice haircut, and even if she could, would a haircut make a difference?

From one makeup table over, the glossy covers of fashion magazines taunted her. She would sometimes thumb through them on her breaks if no members were in the locker room. The magazines made losing weight and looking beautiful seem so easy: “Lose Ten Pounds in Two Weeks!” “How Not to Dress Your Body Type: Real Women Share Their Clothing Disaster Stories,” “Look Younger in Ten Easy Steps!”

Beth picked up the June issue of *Glitz* with “Look Younger” written in hot-pink across the cover. Below was a photograph of actress Sienna Miller who had recently traded in her long blonde hair for a short, shaggy look. Her hair had been clipped above her chin and layered on the sides and back. Beth wondered if there were something to getting a haircut—some magical, transformative power able to change how she felt about herself. It couldn’t hurt to try.

She took the black hair-tie from her wrist and re-gathered her ponytail. Tucking the *Glitz* magazine underneath her arm, she rose and walked to a small lounging area at the back. A telephone sat on an end table between a blue sofa and chair. Sitting down on the sofa, she dialed Philip’s cell phone number. He was the only one in their immediate family who had a cell phone because he needed it, he said, for work.

Philip coughed then said, “Hello.” He’d been a smoker for almost thirty years, a habit that Beth detested. Her father had died of lung cancer when she was in her early thirties.

Although she had hoped to hear hammering and drills in the background, she heard instead the theme song of the crime show *Law and Order* booming from their television. “Hi, baby, it’s me. I’m gonna be late coming home tonight. I’m gonna get a haircut.”

“What time you be home?”

“I don’t know.” She looked up at the white-faced clock in the lounge area. It was 9:41 now, and she got off work at 5. Fernie’s Hair Salon was just a five-minute drive from Preston’s. Getting the haircut itself wouldn’t take long, but waiting in the line (it was Friday, so Fernie’s might be crowded), getting hair color, and the twenty-minute

drive home would. They lived in a little A-frame house on the outskirts of Beckley.

“Round seven?” she said although she thought it could be closer to eight.

He coughed. “How much you plannin’ to spend?”

The magazine sat on her lap. She stared at Sienna’s sassy hairstyle and dirty-blonde locks. She estimated the cost. “About fifty?”

“Jesus! That much for a trim? It usually just cost me twelve bucks. I’m in and out in fifteen minutes.”

“Can’t be more than the money you spend on cigarettes every week. I’m not gettin’ just a trim.”

“Don’t start.”

“You don’t start. I’ll work a double next week to make up the money.”

“Whatever. Just don’t go too short.”

A club member walked into the locker room wearing a short white tennis skirt and carrying a racket. “I gotta go. Remember to pick up Caleb from school at 2:50.” She hung up. It would be another week before Caleb was out for the summer.

Rolling her eyes, she repeated what Philip had said, “Just don’t go too short.” She would get her hair cut how she wanted. She was the one bringing in most of the money these days, not him. Carrying the magazine with her, Beth went back to work hoping she could get through the rest of her shift without strangling Chloe’s spray-tanned neck.

3

By 5:30, the line at Fernie’s had dwindled considerably. Only Beth and an old lady wearing a purple sweat-suit and pearls remained. Her white hair was clipped to her chin and so thin that Beth could see through to her yellowish scalp. They sat in blue

chairs by the entrance with an empty seat between them while a radio played a mixed bag of songs. One minute, Beth heard the soothing voices of The Mamas and the Papas' "California Dreamin.'" Minutes later, she heard Nelly's "Ride Wit Me." Beth had heard of the rapper's song from the young waiters. They often played it on the kitchen radio when she worked the evening shift.

Fernie's was a little brick building within a small shopping complex. A Little Caesar's Pizza and Family Dollar store were next door. A blue reception counter and a metal bookcase with hair products stood in the waiting area while framed posters of hair models covered almost every inch of the salon's white walls. Most of the models were young white women with shiny black, red, or blonde hair that streamed over their shoulders. All smiled with their straight, too-white teeth. Beth doubted that a haircut could really make anyone look that beautiful, be that happy, but she was still willing to try. Anything was better than being an ugly old bitch.

Through the windows that spanned the sides of Fernie's, Beth saw a tan, heavysset woman whose blonde hair had been dyed so many times it looked orange. Raising an eyebrow, she hoped the woman had not gotten her color done at Fernie's. About Beth's age, she wore large black headphones and held a Little Caesar's sign above her head as she jumped around and shook her hips in the parking lot. Beth had not had the best day at work, but at least she didn't have to do that for a living.

A hairdresser appeared behind the desk, a tall, voluptuous woman in her mid-twenties with brown curly hair pulled back into a ponytail. Looking in the notebook of appointments, she scanned for the next name on the list. Fernie's didn't have a receptionist. The hairdressers, on top of cutting and styling, had to jot down customers'

names, appointment times, and ring up customers at the cash register. Beth understood. On top of serving club members at Preston's, she also had to play mommy to the waiters and, sometimes, to the members. As a matter of fact, she remembered having to hold back a cardiologist's wife's hair while she vomited in the women's locker room. It had been during the country club's last New Year's Eve party, and it hadn't been the first time.

"Ready, Millicent?" the hairdresser said.

"Are you?" the old lady said.

"You're sassy today," the hairdresser said. "I like it."

"Been singing the Lord's prayer all afternoon."

"Church on a Friday?" She came out from behind the desk and stood in front of Millicent, the black apron obscuring the size of her breasts.

"Worshippin' the Lord is somethin' I do every day. Mm-hm. When you going to come to church with me?"

The hairdresser put a hand on her hip. "Now, now Millicent."

Beth restrained the desire to roll her eyes. She didn't believe a lick of that Christian mumbo-jumbo. What good did it do to pray when bad things happened any damn way? She could pray all she wanted, could go to church every Sunday, but that wouldn't make Caleb or her marriage better. Of course, she kept her opinion to herself. She was a lady.

The hairdresser looked at Beth. "Are you Beth?"

Beth nodded.

“I’m Jamie. I’ll be with right you after I handle this one.” Rolling her eyes, Jamie took Millicent by the arm and helped her out to the hairstyling chair.

As Beth watched inches of her hair fall onto the gray tiles, she tried to estimate how much her haircut would cost. She wanted to color her gray hair, which would drive up the price. If it were more than fifty dollars, Philip would be angry, and she’d have to work two doubles to make up the money.

“You already look so cute!” Jamie said. “It’s already laying nicely.”

“Thanks,” Beth said. She had always had fine hair, not thick hair like Jamie had. She wasn’t at all surprised that it looked better short. Sighing, she tried to put Philip and their money troubles out of her mind. Even if she had to work three doubles, she deserved this haircut.

“Ever had hair this short before?”

“Maybe when I was ten but not since. You know how men are.”

“Mm-hm. I’ve dated men like that. I’m glad my husband isn’t like that. He’d love me even if I shaved my head bald.”

“He’s had my twenties and thirties. My forties are for me.”

Beth watched herself in the mirror as she placed her hand over her mouth. She smiled. She couldn’t believe she had just said that. As more hair fell away, her eyes began to pop, began to change from the dusty gray-blue color they had become in her forties to topaz-blue, as they had been in her youth. As her cheekbones began to reappear, she mouthed “goodbye” to the ugly old bitch that was deteriorating before her eyes in the mirror.

The *Glitz* magazine with Sienna Miller on the cover lay on top of the pink counter at Jamie's station. Beside it, her tools—hairdryer, curling iron, and straightener—sat in black holsters. Beth stared at the small photograph of Jamie's family wedged into the bottom corner of the mirror. The hairdresser, her husband, and her two small sons wore pastel polo-shirts and khakis. The colors reminded Beth of spring and Easter. She smiled, knowing that those boys probably couldn't wait to get those silly things off.

"You've got a nice lookin' family."

Jamie set the cutting shears and black comb she'd been using on the counter and picked up *Glitz*. "Thank yah, sweetie. I tell yah, those boys are a handful. Now, do you want it as long as she has hers in the back? Like a shag?"

"I understand what you mean." Because of Caleb's ritualized tics in the morning—pushing kitchen drawers in and out, picking up his fork to eat his scrambled eggs and putting it back down—Beth had been getting him up an hour earlier (5:30 instead of 6:30) to make sure he arrived at school on time. "No shag. I want it shorter than hers in the back and cut straight across." She stared at Jamie's hairdresser's license on the counter. "Say, where'd you go to beauty school? I was trying to read the print on your license, but I'm afraid it's too small for me to read." She laughed. "Old age."

"Oh, quiet now! I'm gonna have you lookin' ten years younger once I'm through with you." She put down the magazine and picked up her cutting shears again. "I just went to this little place in Virginia. Head down, please."

"Like it?"

Beth felt Jamie gently tilt her head down to start cutting the back.

"You thinkin' of going to beauty school?"

“No. I was thinkin’ of going to college. Maybe get a degree in business or somethin’.”

“Go for it, girl.”

“Thanks. I just might.” Beth knew Philip would never stand for her going to college. He had this crazy idea that if she went to college she’d start to think she was too good and leave him. Philip was mostly a good man, a good father and cook for sure. He just had an inferiority complex. Men got them sometimes when the women in their lives had more education or made more money than they did. Beth had read about it in *Cosmo* once.

“I’m guessin’ you want it layered on the sides like Sienna’s?”

“Yes, please. All I ask is that you don’t give me a mullet or make me look like a man. My husband would never stand for that.”

“You got it. You can raise your head up now. I’ve finished the back.”

“Have you ever given the Sienna Miller haircut to someone before?”

“Oh yeah. Lots of times. If you want your hair to look like that, I can make it look like that.”

Beth watched Jamie smile in the mirror. She had straight teeth that were just a tad yellowed from coffee-drinking but still nice. She admired her confidence. “We need more young people like you working at Preston’s.”

“Me work at that place and serve those rich punks every day? No thanks. Besides, I like what I do. Some people grow up wanting to be doctors. I’ve always wanted to cut hair. I used to practice cutting hair on my Barbies.”

Beth watched more of her hair fall onto the black plastic gown. Only tiny, jagged-edged clumps fell this time. “It ain’t the rich folks that cause trouble. It’s mostly the young people I work with.” She took a deep breath. “One of them, a little witch who thinks she shits gold, called me an ugly old bitch today.” In the past, she had been able to desensitize herself to the nasty comments people said at work. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to dump this all on you. It just came out.”

“Are you hearing this, Arlene?” Jamie took a spray bottle and wet down Beth’s hair on the sides.

Beth felt the black comb dig into her scalp.

Arlene was the other hairdresser working at Fernie’s that day. Her station was down from Jamie’s. She had just finished cutting a young man’s hair and was ringing him up at the register. “That’ll be twelve dollars, love.”

After Arlene put the money in the register, she sat down in the empty hairstyling chair next to Jamie’s station. It was just the three of them in the salon now. Arlene was short, stout, and had broad shoulders like a man. Her hair was short and spiky, platinum-blonde in the front and reddish-purple in the back.

“I heard,” Arlene said. “But I didn’t like what I heard. I would’ve punched that girl in the mouth.” She cackled. She had a smoker’s laugh like Philip. She sounded like she had been smoking for almost thirty years, too.

“Don’t pay attention to her.” Jamie grinned. “She just escaped a mental institution.” More hair fell onto the black gown as she twisted loose knots with her fingers and cut it. “For the layered look.”

Beth couldn't tell if Jamie were joking or not, so she played along. "Ha. What one? Lake Park?"

Lake Park was the name of a mental institution in Beckley.

"No. Johnny Prichard." Jamie laughed and laughed. "Johnny's her ex-husband."

"Now, Jamie," Arlene said, "why'd you have to bring that son-of-a-bitch up?"

"Sorry."

"You know I saw him at the bar last night talking to some little whore. He wasn't happy to see me walk in. No, sir." She got up to take care of a customer who had just entered the salon. "What can I do fer yah, love?"

Jamie looked at Beth in the mirror. "You're adorable! This is perfect for you!" She ran her hands through Beth's hair. "All I have to do is your bangs. A sexy swoop bang would like great. That's what Sienna has. How's that sound?"

Beth felt so much lighter, freer. She felt as beautiful as the hair models—just add gray hair and about twenty years to their faces. "Great. Can we put some blonde streaks in it, too?" Her grays needed to be covered in order to complete her transformation, to make her look as young on the outside as she felt on the inside.

Jamie checked the white-faced clock on wall above the entrance. It looked just like the clocks at the country club. It was 6:02. "We don't usually do color after four. But you've had rough day. So I'll make an exception. Besides, blondes have more fun. Ain't that right, Arlene?"

"I get laid a lot more if that's what you're getting at." Arlene cackled again. She laughed as if that was the funniest thing she had ever heard herself say.

Beth and the red-haired woman, who had just sat down in Arlene's hairstyling chair, looked at each other. At the same time, they raised their eyebrows while goofy grins appeared on their faces.

"Make me a blonde too then," the red-haired woman said.

4

Beth pulled down the visor of her blue pickup to shield her eyes from the steadily sinking sun. Grocery store receipts, a coupon for two-percent milk, and a coupon for SpaghettiOs, Caleb's favorite food, fell into her lap. Seeing that the SpaghettiOs coupon hadn't expired yet, she set it on top of the dashboard. She flicked the rest of the crumpled papers down to the rubber floor mat as if she were flicking off mosquitoes.

Swaying and dipping on the gravel road, she drove over patches of dandelions. Their golden heads disappeared underneath the shadow of her pickup and reappeared in her rearview mirror. She drove home to her husband and son, her right foot barely resting on the gas that summer evening. She passed knee-high grass, oaks, and evergreens flanking the road on either side. A split-rail fence ran along the left side of the road and surrounded their three acres of land.

She rolled down the window, allowing her elbow to dangle outside of it. The hum of the cicadas and the humidity carried her back to her twenties when she and Philip drove country roads with the windows down sharing an ice cream cone of orange sherbet. Before they were married, before Caleb was born, they spent hours staring at each other naked and silent and sipping cheap wine from a box. Smiling. Beth unbuttoned the top three buttons of her white blouse. She wanted Philip to finish unbuttoning the rest like he used to.

In a clearing on the right side of the road, a cluster of white mobile homes lay like a pod of beached whales on the grass. All were owned by two generations of the Webster family. Two of the older Webster boys stood near the edge of the road throwing a basketball back and forth over their family's infamous trash heap. The Websters' trash heap stood about five feet high. There were tires, wires sticking out from an old Boombox, a card table missing two legs, plastic milk jugs with bullet holes, a broken tricycle, and a ripped red-and-white checkered tablecloth.

Beth hardly noticed the trash heap anymore after driving past it so often, but today she smelled the rubber from the tires again.

The boys stopped throwing the ball to watch her as she drove by. They stood shirtless and barefoot in gym shorts that glinted like rubies and sapphires in the sun.

"Lookin' good!" the taller boy said. He bellowed and drew out the word good for several seconds. He seemed to absorb Beth all at once—first through his bright-blue eyes and then through his tan, sweaty skin and sandy blond hair.

The other boy, who was also blue-eyed but had black hair, waited for his brother to stop staring. He held the basketball against his hip and stared at it. Beth guessed the black-haired boy was the younger of the two. He kind of reminded her of her—the way she was always waiting on someone.

Beth held her smile in like a breath until she passed. She didn't want to give them the satisfaction of knowing that she, a grown woman, cared what teenagers thought of her. But "Lookin' good!" was a hell of a lot better than "ugly old bitch." From her rearview mirror, she saw them go back to playing catch over the trash. Beth allowed herself to smile then.

While still driving, she glanced at herself in the visor's small mirror. She pulled several blonde strands against her pale cheek. The hair color would take some getting used to, but at least the gray was gone. It had really started to come in when Caleb entered first grade, when his tics started to appear. Beth noticed strange little things. Caleb began to blink his eyes rapidly when she spoke to him and move his head back and forth at the dinner table. First grade, second grade, and now third, Beth's grays had continued to sprout.

Hers had not been pretty grays. They weren't silver-gray or heather-gray or even blue-gray. These were the shades of elegance. Every Wednesday they gleamed on the sterling heads of ladies who sipped tea at the country club, who wore white gloves and called everyone "doll."

She brushed the loose strands away from her face and behind her ears enjoying the lightness of less hair. Who cares that Philip liked longer hair? Beth loved her new look. The blonde streaks complemented her blue eyes. The short length drew attention to her slim neck while distracting from laugh lines. That was what short hairstyles did. She had read about it in *Glitz*. Seeing the haircut on herself and not on some glamour girl, Beth was beginning to believe she was the glamour girl.

After unpinning the nametag from her tuxedo shirt, she tossed "Beth Marcum" labeled in black on brass into the glove box.

5

It was 7:30 by the time Beth saw the roof of their A-frame rising like a red peak from the woods. Windows covered the front and grew larger as the A-frame widened like a mountain toward its base. The white body stretched out in the top triangular window

grew as she came upon the house. It was Philip's sixteen-year-old cat. He wagged his skinny white tail, seeming to reel her in.

She parked beside Philip's white work van with "Marcum's Paint and Repair" stenciled in black calligraphy on the side. He had painted the letters himself in addition to painting their front door and bathroom. Philip was good at most things when he tried.

Beth pulled a tube of a pinkish-orange lipstick called "Desert Rose" from her black tote bag and smeared it on. "Lookin' good," she said to herself in the mirror. She blew a kiss before putting up the visor.

Hopping down from the pickup, Beth strutted all her five feet and two inches past the vehicles. The black tuxedo pants came up almost to her small breasts and a black bowtie was draped around her neck. With her sleeves rolled up and her shirt un-tucked, she strode over gravel and Queen Anne's lace. She opened the gate and went inside.

The one-inch heels of her black dress shoes sank into the grass. On days that she doubled as waiter and host, she had to wear dress shoes instead of her black sneakers with the non-slip soles. And although her feet ached from running in heels between the ballroom and kitchen, she would not let that destroy her good mood. Nor would she let Chloe's comment have a hold on her any longer. She kicked small green apples, some half-eaten, some untouched, out of the way with the pointed toes of her shoes. The fruit had fallen from the crabapple tree standing thirty feet high beside the house.

Beth stopped. About twenty feet away, the goats were standing in the flowerbed that she kept in front of the house. One solid white and one solid black, they stood with their heads bent down grazing on her zinnias and black-eyed Susans. The four-foot wire enclosure she had put around the garden lay kicked over on the ground.

“God damn it!” she said.

Their names were Sue and Lemon. Sue lazily lifted up her white face while chomping down on an orange zinnia. Orange tear-drops fell from Sue’s mouth and toward her black hooves. She went back to eating. Lemon didn’t acknowledge Beth at all. She tore off another golden head from the stem of a black-eyed Susan.

Two weekends ago, Beth had gardened in her flowerbed. It had been her third attempt in three years at acquiring a green thumb while having the goats. The goats had been passed along to Philip and Beth after Philip’s brother didn’t want them anymore. Now Beth didn’t want them anymore.

Beth grunted. “Eating my flowers....” She marched to the porch while shoving her bowtie into the tote bag, so she wouldn’t lose it. After stomping up the steps, she slung her bag into a wicker chair, and kicked off her shoes. “That’s it.” She slipped on a pair of red clogs. She kept the clogs by the door along with a wicker basket of gardening tools. “I’m getting the leashes out.” The goats didn’t move. “It’s to the shed for both of you.”

Philip had built a shed behind the house for the goats to sleep in during the winter. But during the spring and summer, Beth used the shed to punish the goats when they got into her flowerbed or did other goat things, like the time they had escaped and climbed on the hood of her pickup and put dents in it.

As she grabbed the red dog leashes hanging from nails on the door frame, she looked through the front door’s diamond-shaped window. She saw Caleb planted in front of the television in the TV room watching a gray cat chase a brown mouse. His profile flashed silver-white from the screen. He had inherited the small bump in his nose bridge

from Philip and the round, almost bulbous lower part of his nose from Beth. It wasn't often that she got to notice these things about her son because he rarely sat still. His legs were folded up underneath him. Ten pink toes stuck out from his sailboat-patterned bottom and onto the slate-blue carpet. He looked as peaceful as the day she had had him.

As she touched the glass, Caleb's right shoulder jerked toward the ceiling. Nine or ten times Caleb convulsed. It looked as if a puppeteer were yanking his shoulder up by a string. He screamed, beat the carpet with his fist three times, and went back to watching cartoons as if nothing had happened.

Trying to restrain her tears, Beth bit her bottom lip. Now wasn't the time to break down. She saw Philip flitting around in the kitchen in the back of the house. With a cigarette in his hand, he grabbed a small pot out of the wood cabinet underneath the sink, filled it with water, and set it beside the large pot on the stove. After taking a long drag, he placed the cigarette in a green ashtray on the counter. Beth picked at the red paint on the door with her fingernails. She turned away from the window.

Stepping into her flowerbed, she noticed only the spider plants she had interspersed among the flowers had survived. But their long, thin leaves that had once sprung from the ground like water from a fountain were now flattened. Bending down, she picked up a trampled plant baby that had sprouted from one of the spider plants. She apologized to it and lay it back down.

She hooked the leashes onto the goats' collars, not knowing who smelled worse: her or them. She smelled like the lunch special from Preston's while the goats had more of a mealy smell. But at that moment, she didn't care.

“Honey, that you?” Philip said. The front door thudded as it shut. “I heard stomping.”

“It’s me,” Beth said. She looked up at her husband, a tall, thin man with salt-and-pepper hair. “Little shits got in my garden again.”

“Sorry. Dinner’s gonna be ready soon.” Over an old t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, he wore a black apron with “Kiss the Chef” embroidered in white across the chest. There were burn holes near the bottom of the apron. From the porch, he stared down at her as if the woman he had kissed that morning had died, and he wasn’t sure if he liked her replacement. “Your hair.”

The goats had made her completely forget about her haircut. She stepped out of the flowerbed. While holding the leashes in one hand, she brushed the dirt off her pants. She looked up at him again. “Like it?” She drove her hand down the back of her hair.

“It’s different.” He crossed his arms. His forearms and face were pale, and he was developing a small gut. Philip’s gut was the only good thing about him not working as much. He had always been a beanpole, so Beth thought it was good for him to have some meat on his bones.

She tilted her face to the side. “Good-different?” She allowed herself to smile a little.

“I don’t get what was wrong with it before.”

Beth tugged Sue out of the flowerbed. She came pretty easily with a few jerks from the leash. “Come on, you old fool,” she said to Lemon. Clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth, she tugged.

“Need help?”

“I got it.” Lemon came out of the flowerbed but not without decapitating another black-eyed Susan. Beth asked, “Bad-different?” Then, “Where’s Caleb?” She knew the answer to the second question but asked anyway.

“Inside. Cartoons.”

She petted Sue’s ears. They were long and flopped downward like a bloodhound’s. “How’s he been today?” They had this conversation every day. They were like doctors sharing notes on the same patient.

“It got pretty bad around five, but that’s all.” He took a cigarette and a lighter out of the front pouch of his apron. “He was punching his chest and hollering...” He lit it.

“Was it the Websters who set him off?” She thought about the milk jugs with the bullet holes. Sometimes, the Websters liked to shoot their guns late in the day. Not only did loud sounds and noises tend to set Caleb’s tics into motion, but they also exacerbated them.

Smoke swirled from Philip’s lips. The orange flame from the cigarette made his lips look redder, plumper. “Don’t know.” A lightning bug flew through the smoke. “I think it’s cuz you weren’t home when you usually are.”

“Don’t start.”

“You don’t start.” He took a long step toward the edge of the porch and toward the steps. “How much was that haircut?” He held the cigarette out from his body while his other hand sat on his hip.

“I’m not getting into this. I’m tired, and my feet hurt.”

“What about these pretty shoes on the deck?”

Philip picked up one of her black shoes by the heel. He dangled the shoe in front of her as if he had picked up a skunk by the tail. He set the shoe back down and picked up her bag from the wicker chair. “And this? I can keep going.”

She bent and flexed her toes from inside the clogs. One of them popped.

“I love you, but you’re a son-of-a-bitch sometimes. How long has it been since I have had a nice haircut? One year? Two years? Three years? Do you know what they called me at work today? Ugly old bitch. That’s what the young fuckers call me after asking me why I’m still waitressing when I’m forty-four years old. You know what? I like what I do. I just want to get paid more for it. Those shoes and that tote bag and this haircut are for work so that I can hopefully look good and get a God damn promotion, so we can buy Caleb medication.”

Philip picked up her bag and propped it against the leg of the chair. “You hate how I do everything.” He sat down and took a long drag from the cigarette. “He’s just being a boy.” He coughed. “Rambunctious is all he is. He’ll grow out of it. Doctors say so. He’s just a boy.”

When he looked up, Beth saw that his eyes were starting to get bloodshot. They got like that before he was about to cry.

“I love him as much as you do—Lord knows I do—but he ain’t like other boys. He needs the medication. His tics are getting worse.” The behavioral therapy that their doctor in Beckley had been trying on Caleb wasn’t working. She wasn’t wild about Caleb taking prescription drugs either, but they were the only other option at this point to help get his tics under control.

She stared at the “Kiss the Chef” embroidery on his apron thinking how disgusting it would be to have Philip’s cigarette-flavored tongue in her mouth. “Stop smoking. You’re killing yourself.”

Beth left her bag, shoes, and husband on the porch. While it was true the doctor had said some children with Tourette’s syndrome eventually grew out of the tics, she didn’t see Caleb growing out of them any time soon, especially not with all the stress going on at home. She knew children could sense when something wasn’t right and had their own ways of communicating their feelings.

Kicking mostly half-eaten apples out of the way, she led the goats around the back of the house to the shed where flower-eaters slept.

6

Once inside the shed made out of a reddish-brown wood and tin roof, Beth unhooked the leashes from Sue’s and Lemon’s collars. She draped them around her neck. Yellow straw crackled like flames underneath her feet as she picked up a tin pail, turned it upside-down down, and sat on it. Lemon went over to the corner of the shed, the farthest away from Beth as she could and lay down. Sue stayed close.

Beth scratched Sue’s ears, and then ran her hand along her long, straight back. “What do you think of my haircut?” She stared into Sue’s black pearl eyes swimming in the pond of nothing and kneeled on the hay and dirt floor. She held Sue’s warm body.

“I’m sorry,” she said as black mascara mixed with tears. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

7

The screen door screeched as it reared back on its hinges. Beth entered the house through the back door. She walked past Philip, who was standing at the kitchen counter

chopping up vegetables and putting them into a salad bowl. He didn't acknowledge her as she came in. She hated him for that. After a fight, he used to touch the small of her back, kiss her lips, and say, "I'm sorry. We'll get through this." Now he didn't. Neither of them did.

In the dining room, the table had already been set: three glasses, three sets of silverware, three plates, and three bowls. She fixed the butter knives that were facing in the wrong direction, flipping their sterling bodies over so that the blades faced the plates instead of facing away from them. A glass vase of zinnias sat in the center. Beth had put the vase on the table yesterday when she still had zinnias.

Caleb was still sitting in front of the television in the TV room. A blue recliner, brown couch, and coffee table stood behind him. The couch had been her father's. He used to take naps on it in the evenings after working in the toll booths along the West Virginia Turnpike.

Beth ruffled Caleb's dark-brown hair with her fingers as she walked by. She sighed as she opened the door, tossed her clogs by the wicker basket, and hung the dog leashes back on the nails on the door frame. She was tired. She looked in the wicker chair and on the porch for her bag and shoes. They weren't there. She would deal with Philip later. She sat down on the couch.

"How was school?" she asked. Beth bent toward her feet, picking straw from her black socks. Her feet were hot and hurt around the heels. She took her socks off.

Caleb cleared his throat. "It was okay," he said. "Mrs. Donahue...." He cleared his throat. "Mrs. Donahue wants you...." He cleared his throat. "To call her." He took a breath.

It was exhausting to watch him exhaust himself. “Okay, I’ll call her on Monday.”

Mrs. Donahue was Caleb’s guidance counselor. She made sure Caleb got extra time on tests and projects.

Beth put her hand over her eyes and tilted her head back. She allowed her body to sink into the couch’s giant, velvety cushions.

“Mom?”

“Yes?”

The couch sank as Caleb sat down. He moved her hand away from her face and set it on her lap.

“What is it, baby?” She sat up. On the television, the gray cat still chased the brown mouse.

He sat beside her cross-legged and staring. He cleared his throat. “Your hair.” He cleared his throat. “It’s all gone.” He gently tugged on a blonde strand by her cheek.

“Soft.”

“It’s not all gone.” She tucked the hair behind her ear.

He cleared his throat. “None of the girls in my class have hair that short.” He got up and twirled around three times. “Girls don’t have short hair. Girls don’t have short hair.” He bumped into the coffee table and knocked off a photograph of three of them during Christmas time when Caleb was in preschool. He was sitting on her lap in the same blue chair beside the couch while Philip stood behind the chair wearing a Santa hat. His hand was on her shoulder. They were smiling.

Caleb stopped. With Philip's green eyes, he stared at her. He picked up the brass frame and set it back on the table. "Sorry, Mom." He cleared his throat. He cleared it again.

"It's okay, baby." Beth looked at the row of shoes by the door. She saw Philip's brown work boots, Caleb's grass-stained white sneakers, an old pair of pink flip-flops she wore on the weekends, and her black work-sneakers. But where were her black dress shoes?

"Who says that girls don't have short hair?" she said. "You never know, the girls in your class might go and lop theirs off one day like I did." She looked at the coat rack that hung above the row of shoes. She saw a large jean jacket and a tiny one just like it hanging beside it but no tote bag.

He sat back down on the floor. "Why?" He cleared his throat and got back up.

"I don't know, sweetie. They might get sick of spending an hour blow drying it in the morning and then having to curl it with a curling iron. They might get sick of the neck pains and having it get stuck in car doors. They might realize that the only reason they kept their hair long was because the men in their lives liked it that way." She'd said enough. "Listen, you're too young to be worrying about this. Why don't you go wash up?"

He sat down on the couch. "Do...." He cleared his throat. "I have to?"

Beth spotted chocolate milk stains around the corners of his mouth. Caleb often had chocolate milk and apple sauce for a snack after school. She pointed to the bathroom on the second floor.

"Mom?" he said, after going up a few steps.

“Yes?”

“Can we go to Myrtle Beach this summer?”

She stared at her wrinkled hands. She’d love to tell Caleb “Yes” and to take him to the beach where many of his schoolmates were probably going this summer. “I’ll have to talk with your father.”

Philip entered the room. “Talk to me about what?” he said. As he picked up the vase from the dining-room table, the long green necks of the purple, pink, and gold zinnias swayed. He carried the vase into the kitchen, set it on the counter, and returned with the salad bowl. Then he went back into the kitchen and returned with a large casserole of spaghetti and wearing oven mitts. He set the casserole beside the salad bowl.

“Caleb wants to go to the beach.”

“Jesus.” He walked over to the blue recliner. He sat down and took off the oven mitts.

Beth nodded. She knew they couldn’t afford a vacation right now. “He said that Mrs. Donahue wants us to call her. What’s that about?”

“He flunked his multiplication test. Can’t concentrate even with the extra time.” He reached into the pocket of his apron. His hand came back out empty. Propping his elbow on the arm of the chair, he massaged his temples with his thumb and middle finger.

Beth stared at the picture frame on the coffee table and picked it up. Her hair was long, shiny, a gorgeous light-brown. “Philip, where’d you put my stuff?”

“Upstairs in your closet. Isn’t that where you always put it?”

She heard the water running upstairs. “Don’t you know anything about me?” Without looking, she tried to set the frame back on the table, but she missed, and the

corner of the frame fell on her pinky toe. “Son-of-a-bitch!” She rubbed her toe and picked up the frame. She made sure she set it on the table this time.

He stopped massaging his temples. He looked up at her and then down at her toe. “Are you okay?”

“What do you think?” She crossed her arms while her toe throbbed.

“Well, sweetheart, you spent money we don’t have on a haircut that makes you look ridiculous. I’d say somethin’s wrong.”

“Whose fault is it that we don’t have money? Can’t be mine. I work six days a week.” She went into the kitchen and got a can of Bud Light out of the refrigerator. The can fizzed as she opened it with unpainted fingernails. She came back into the TV room and sat down on the couch.

“So it’s my fault the economy is bad and people aren’t spendin’ as much money on house repairs.”

“Oh, don’t feed me that bullshit. This ugly old bitch knows better than that.” Philip had been giving her the “bad economy” excuse for awhile now. “Only twenty-year-old girls would believe that.” She thought of Chloe. Chloe was mean, but she wasn’t stupid. “And only stupid ones at that.” While sipping beer, she felt the ice-cold alcohol burn a little as it glided down her throat. “You could find work, even at McDonald’s if you had to.”

“So that we can afford to put our son on pills that will make him throw himself out the window?”

“They won’t make him throw himself out the window! Don’t you listen? Doctor said low dosages. What’s the alternative? Do nothing and let him fail third grade?” She set her beer down on the coffee table.

“You think I have the answer? I don’t fucking know.” He picked up her beer and took a long drink.

They heard screaming from upstairs.

8

Beth was the first to enter the bathroom. She felt Philip breathing behind her, his heart loud, un-rhythmic, as they watched Caleb lie on the blue-and-white tiles punching himself in the chest. The collar of his white t-shirt was wet, making his skin look pink underneath.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” Caleb said as soap suds dripped from his chin. “Son-of-a-bitch! Son-of-a-bitch!” His little pink fist thudded against his sternum.

Beth sank to the floor beside him, crying before her knees hit the tiles. It wasn’t his fault—what he was saying. It wasn’t his fault—what he was doing. She felt Philip’s hand on her shoulder.

As Philip maneuvered around them, he ripped off his apron and threw it in the bathtub. He stood over Caleb by the toilet and pried Caleb’s hands away from his chest. He restrained Caleb until his head rested on the tiles, and he closed his eyes.

Picking up a fallen hand towel, Beth wiped the soap away from Caleb’s face and sat with a thud against the bathroom door. She watched Philip put down Caleb’s arms. She watched her husband cry.

“Okay.” He looked at Beth with bloodshot eyes. “Let’s try the medication.”

Philip lay on his side facing away from her. A pillow half-covered his head as he coughed and grunted while Beth stared at their bedroom ceiling, which slanted inward on one side. “Philip? You asleep?” she said. Philip’s cat kneaded her stomach through the blue-and-red-patterned quilt that they used during the summer. She petted the cat’s white head that felt as soft as rabbit’s fur while she spoke.

“I’m sorry about what I said. You’re not a son-of-a-bitch. I was mad. And then with what happened today with that girl at work and the goats. I lost it. I didn’t mean it. I love you, and we’re gonna get Caleb straightened out. You’ll see. And this haircut....” She brushed her bangs to the side. “Do you really hate it or were you just mad, too? I like it. I feel so, I don’t know, young? I’ve been thinking about going back to school. Major in business or somethin’ like that. It will be hard at first, but when I graduate, I’ll get promoted at Preston’s or get a manager position somewhere else. Then maybe we can go to the beach. I think it would be good for Caleb—let him run around in the sand and swim and feed the seagulls. Just the three of us.”

She wrapped her arm around him. Pulling down the red patch of the quilt covering his neck, she kissed him. “I missed you today.”

Philip jerked and fell back to sleep. Beth turned over on her back. “Figures.” She lay there for a couple minutes moving her legs around underneath the quilt. Then she slid out of bed in her blue nightgown. She walked over to the bedroom window, only about a foot shorter than she was. The sky was clear, and the moon shined on the shed’s tin roof. She wondered what would happen if she left all this behind, if she jumped in her pickup and found new flowerbeds for Sue and Lemon to ravage.

She jumped when she felt the cat brush up against her leg. Bending down, she rubbed his back and tried to see if there were any scratches or bruises on her pinky toe, but it was too dark. So she extended her leg like a ballerina and rested her foot on the windowsill. She had taken ballet classes when she was in elementary school and was surprised she had maintained her flexibility. Leaning toward her leg, she examined her toe in the moonlight, seeing only a tiny pink scrape. It wasn't nearly as damaged as she had thought it would be.

“Baby, what are you doing?”

She stood up and turned around.

Philip was rubbing his eyes, propped up in the bed on his elbow. “Come back to bed.”

He sat completely up. “Baby? Come back to bed.”

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