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Creation Acts

Thesis submitted to
The Graduate School of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
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English

by

Paul Brian McCoy

Marshall University

Huntington, West Virginia

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as meeting the research requirements for the master's degree.

Advisor [Signature]
Department of English

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Dean of the Graduate School

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You can turn the page now . . .

"With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he too was a mere appearance, dreamt by another."

~ Jorge Luis Borges
"The Circular Ruins"

"Hail Eris!
All hail Discordia!"

~ Slogan of the Discordian Church

"I don't believe that the world is made of quarks or electromagnetic waves, or stars, or planets, or any of these things. I believe the world is made of language."

~ Terence McKenna,
Scholar, theoretician, explorer,
dreamer, pioneer, fanatic, spellbinder,
and ontological tailor

"It's what people know about themselves inside that makes them afraid."

~ The Stranger
High Plains Drifter

Table of Contents

The Cold Return	-----	1
Coffee, Sex & Creation	-----	19
Shadows Like Tears	-----	47
Stuck In The Middle With You	-----	56
Dreaming	-----	82
Awakening: the journal of Gregory Samson	-----	92
Bury Me In Cold Gray	-----	107
Words, Words, Words	-----	117

THE COLD RETURN

Her breath leaves her mouth in a cloud and clings to the mirror, fogging it, hiding her face. Her dark eyes are slowly revealed as the glass clears, then her nose, strong and pronounced, and finally her mouth, the full lips pulling into a frown. She might as well be outside, it's so cold. Glancing toward the window, at the huge flakes of snow making their way to the ground below, she sighs.

She pulls her jacket tighter around her and reaches for the phone, pausing briefly before picking it up. With gloved fingers she punches the buttons, then drops onto the bed. The springs screech in protest and she frowns again. She slips the receiver beneath her heavy black hair and listens to the hollow ringing. Once. Twice. Three times, then the fumbling clatter as her mother picks up. It's never a smooth motion. Graceless. Clumsy. Then the coarse voice.

"Hello?" The cigarettes are almost tangible through the line.

"Mom, I made it."

"Lilly! You got the key all right?"

"Yeah Mom, I'm inside." She wants a cigarette of her own but the pack is on the floor, crumpled and empty, the last one smoked just after she'd arrived. "But the heat's not working."

"No heat? But that was supposed to be fixed already."

"Well, somebody didn't do their job. It's freezing in here. I can see my own breath."

"But the lights and phone work, right?"

Lilith sighs.

"Right. It's just cold."

"I'll send Robbie over with an electric heater for you, how's that?" The last time she'd seen him was the day she left home.

Her bags were already in the car and her boyfriend Matt was waiting with the engine running. A quick getaway, they had called it, planning it out over a bottle of gin and an endless parade of joints. The great escape. She would have jumped a motorcycle over barbed wire to get away from her mother and Ray.

Standing in the upstairs hallway, listening to the house, Lilith closed her eyes and breathed deep. The air was dry and dusty, with the stale smell of cigarette smoke caked on every knick-knack and plastic plant in the house. Her stepbrother Robbie was the only other person home. She could hear him in his room, pacing; every step he took vibrating beneath her feet. Mother was off showing one of the apartments she'd won in her divorce settlement. They brought in good money for her, so she didn't have to rely on Ray, her current husband, for support. With a cringe, Lil realized her hands had been tensed into fists, pressing her fingernails into her palms. Four pale half moons shone from the pink of her skin.

She started down the stairs then heard Robbie's door creak open and instinctively froze, pressing her back to the wall. He lumbered past, glancing only briefly at her with his small, pig eyes. His face, a swollen, ruddy scowl, didn't even register that she was there. And then he disappeared behind the bathroom door. The sharp click and faint echo of a spring snapping filled the hallway as he locked himself in.

Without another moment's hesitation, she continued down the stairs and out into the sunlight.

"Can't you fix the heater that's here?"

"It's the weekend, honey. Besides, nobody's going to work in this weather. It hasn't snowed like this in years."

"Couldn't *you* bring it over?"

"In this snow? You want I should wreck on the way?"

"No, no. Of course not. I just kind of wanted to see you. It's been a while."

"Look, I'll see you when this weather clears. You're sure the apartment's all right?"

"It's fine." Ray's narrow, tanned face appears in her mind. "Um, Mom. If you need to talk about anything, ah, I'm here now. Okay?"

"Listen, sugar. I'm trying not to dwell on Ray. What he did was his own choice. To be honest, Robbie's more upset than I am."

Lilith looks back out the window at the snow. It's the first snow she's seen in two years. Standing, she touches the glass, the cold seeping into her fingertips through the leather of her gloves. Her eyes follow the dancing patterns in the air, and for just an instant, the idea of sliding the pane up, letting the cold in unimpeded, flits across her mind.

"Lilly? Are you there?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. Sorry."

"If you need anything just call me."

"You too. I'll see you later." She pauses. "I love you."

"Love you, too. Bye." Click. Silence. Lilith hangs up the phone and shakes her head slowly.

"Damn, I need a smoke."

The crumpled pack draws her eyes again and again as she begins to pace. Eight paces lengthwise, even fewer across. The burnt, broken filter of her last cigarette sits on the windowsill, its smell still in her nose, her clothes, her hair. The sound of a car creeping by catches her attention and she turns to face the glass. It fishtails slightly as it slowly crawls down the near-empty street. Having to drive at that speed, Robbie will be an hour getting there, and she knows he doesn't smoke. Then she remembers the bus station.

Grumbling to herself, Lilith picks up her scarf and bends over, letting the masses of black curls hang, exposing her neck. She slips the scarf, crimson and long, across her bare skin and straightens up, her hair falling back into place. She wraps the red cloth across her nose and mouth, tucking the ends into her coat. As she pulls her black toboggan down over her hair, she opens her door and starts for the elevator.

Lilith pauses before stepping outside. The bus station is a block away. Looking down the street, she sees that her rental car is already covered with an inch of snow.

She takes a deep breath and, lowering her head, steps out into the storm. Immediately, her scarf dampens and stiffens as she exhales through it. Drops of water form on her lashes, freezing as she turns to face the wind. After trudging halfway down the block, she ducks into the shelter of a doorway stinking of urine. An empty cigarette pack lies half-buried in the snow.

Bracing herself for the piercing chill of the wind, she steps back out onto the sidewalk. Her legs are already tired from fighting her way through the calf-deep snow. She can feel her feet getting wetter and wetter as snow slips into her boots with each step. Shuddering, she cuts between the buildings, making her way to the alley, a shortcut.

The bus station is dark and silent, the snow piled nearly to the windows. There are no busses on the lot and no taxis waiting by the door where Lilith stands. She presses her face and hands to the glass, straining to see through the shadows inside. There, across the huge, empty room, with only five rows of orange plastic chairs and the heavy locked door between them, stands the cigarette machine.

Lilith lays her forehead against the cold glass of the door and, closing her eyes, takes a deep breath. Suddenly she grabs the door handle with both hands and violently yanks it with her full weight again and again. The harsh metal pounding of the door against its frame fills the deserted street.

"Goddammit!" she yells just before a coughing fit takes control of her. She hangs limply on the door, pushing the scarf from her mouth with her free hand and coughing into her gloved fist.

"Just one damn cigarette," she wheezes, grimacing. Leaning against the door, she pulls her scarf back up over her mouth and nose. It wets again as her breath passes through it. She looks up and down the street with the vague hope of seeing lights in any of the small stores. There are none. She is completely alone.

Then her dark eyes focus, through the haze of falling snow, on a tall building about three blocks away. The college. There must be cigarettes there. Steeling herself for the walk and the painful sting of the wind, Lilith heads out for the campus.

"You know, Matt. I've been thinking," she said, exhaling a huge cloud of pot smoke.

"Is that dead?" he cut in.

"Hmmm?" She glanced down at the gray ash in the bowl of the pipe. "Oh, yeah. Anyway," she continued, handing it to him along with the lighter. "I've been thinking. Maybe I should start back to school."

"Like we've got the money for that," Matt laughed, tapping out the ash and pinching another firm green bud to pack in the bowl. The fresh scent of marijuana mingled with the haze of smoke that hovered about the room.

"Well, um. I thought about that too."

She stood and walked to the window. The sun was a blazing orange eye looking back at her through the pink clouds. Little by little it began sinking into the ocean. The pale sliver moon sat patiently off to the side, waiting for her shift to begin. Already a star or two were waking up, staking their spots in the darkening sky.

"I called Mom last night."

Matt snorted a stream of smoke from his nose.

"What the hell'd you do that for?"

"She's my mother, Matt. I can call her if I want to."

"Great. Just fucking great." He sat the bowl on the coffee table, pushing it away.

"So, what did 'Her Majesty' have to say?" He snapped the lighter on, then let the flame die.

Lilith kept her back to him.

"She said she missed me. And that she'd stopped drinking." She paused. "We really scared her, running off like we did."

"Yeah, right. She never gave a shit about anything but herself. She'll be drinking again in a month." The lighter flicked again.

"She said if I wanted money to start classes again, she'd wire it to me."

"You'd take Ray's fucking money?" It was more of an accusation than a question.

"It's not Ray's money. It's Mom's," she said softly. "There's a difference."

"Bullshit!" he shouted, kicking the coffee table over with a crash. Glasses flew across the floor, spilling the little bit of gin still in their bottoms. The pipe slammed against one of them, shattering it.

Lilith spun around, looking down at Matt on the couch. The sky behind her was streaked red and purple. The sun was halfway into the water. Hesitantly, she sat down next to him, laying her hand lightly on his leg.

"Honey, this would be a good thing for us now."

"How do you figure that?" He didn't look at her.

"Well," she started. "I've only got a year and a half to go for my degree. Maybe then I could find a job. A nice job."

"With a bachelor's in art history? What the hell kind of job do you think you'll find?"

"I-I don't know." She pulled her hand away. "Maybe in a gallery...or a museum. I don't know."

"Right. You don't know." He rested his hand against her cheek, raising her face to look directly at him. She could see herself reflected in his bloodshot eyes. They both looked small and pale, desperate.

"Lil, if you'll just wait, I can get the money..."

"We don't have any money, Matt!" she broke in. "We've been living off your cousin's scraps for a year now! Jesus!" She returned to the window.

"It won't be like this much longer." He stared at her silent silhouette. She moved only slightly as she breathed. Pressing his hands to his face, he slid slowly off the couch onto the floor. "I'll talk to Dave about throwing more work my way," he said, his voice faint through his fingers.

"You're his goddamn delivery boy, Matt." She stared at the sun as it slowly disappeared. More stars had lit up in the sky. The ocean was red. "You're going to get arrested one of these days. Is that what you want?" Lilith's shadow lengthened, blending with the darkness of the rest of the room. The smacking of the waves against the sand filtered in to them, the only sound other than their breathing. A gull cried and Lilith watched it dive into the surf. Matt flicked the lighter to life and looked around the dirty little apartment. The faded green carpeting had cigarette burns scattered haphazardly across it. The wooden bones of the couch were exposed through a variety of wounds. The coffee table had lost a leg and had been propped up with a cinderblock, which now stood alone in the floor. In the flickering light of the small flame, the apartment seemed like a cave, with the table overturned and trash lying about. He frowned and let it go out.

"What are you going to do?" he asked softly.

She turned and sat on the floor next to him as the sun vanished for good.

Reaching over, she picked up the pipe and sat it in his lap. They could hardly see each other in the dark. She took his hand.

"I'll wait."

A wave of warm air pours over Lilith as she pushes the door to Hanover Hall open, slipping inside. She yanks the scarf from her face, basking in the heat. Her cheeks tingle and water runs from her eyes as her lashes clear. Warily, she pushes aside the second door and enters the lobby of what had been her dorm a few years earlier, when she had first started school.

She pays no attention to the security guard behind the registry desk, her eyes locked on the cigarette machine sitting in the corner. With long, confident strides, she marches to it, the warmth of the lobby soaking into her entire body, bringing it back to life with each step. As she comes to a halt, looking in through the glass front of the machine, she realizes that she hasn't stopped smiling since she entered the building. She takes a deep breath, drawing in tranquility and calm, then begins plugging coins into the slot one after another. The rusting spring on the handle scrapes loudly then snaps back into place with a metal slam. Into the basket at the bottom slides a beautiful desert scene, a camel and a pyramid, in intricate miniature. Lilith removes her gloves, shoving them into her coat pockets, and carefully picks up the cigarette pack.

"D'you need a light for those?" Turning, she stands before a large man, his cheeks and nose red from the cold, peeking out from a fur-lined hood. In his hand is a silver zippo.

"I haven't even opened them," she says. "Give me a minute, will ya?" Ignoring him, she smacks the pack against her palm ten times, then, flipping it around she rips the cellophane away. She pauses before continuing and glances at the parka'd man watching her. He smiles. She smiles back briefly. Her fingers rip away the silver paper of the pack and with a feeling of satisfaction, remove a cigarette. She holds it before her eyes for a moment.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she says.

"For a cigarette," the stranger replies.

Lilith's eyes squint involuntarily. She places the pack carefully in her pocket with her gloves and holds up her own lighter.

"For a cigarette?" she mocks, as she draws the flame into the end of it. A rush of gray smoke enters her lungs. She closes her eyes, enjoying the burn before exhaling through her nose. "Take a hike pal. You're dressed for it."

The man cocks his head to the side like a puzzled dog, as Lilith turns away and sits down by an ashtray to enjoy her smoke. She stretches her legs out, tapping the remaining snow onto the floor. Leaning her head back as far as she can, she blows a stream of smoke toward the ceiling.

"Crazy bitch," he mutters as he turns and walks toward the elevator. She hears him and sits up quickly. Without any hesitation, she flicks her lit cigarette at him, catching him on the side of his hood. A burst of orange sparks spray around his head as he yelps in fear. "Jesus Christ, you fucking bitch!"

Before another word leaves his mouth, Lilith is standing right next to him with her lighter in hand. Her thumb is poised, ready to light.

"Is that Eskimo outfit flame retardant?" she asks coolly. His eyes widen.

"All right. Break it up." The security guard from the desk places his hand on her shoulder.

She turns her head to look at him and is surprised by a fist to her jaw. The whole room spins and the lights dim. She hears her lighter tapping against the tile floor as it bounces away. The security guard's shoes are in front of her eyes. She feels her arm being pulled as he tries to keep her on her feet.

"I'm writing you up for that one, Parker!"

"C'mon! She was threatening me!"

Lilith spits on the floor. There is a small swirl of red in it.

"Fucker," she mutters weakly, then passes out.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Lilith shouted. Matt didn't acknowledge her and methodically shredded her nightgown. The bedroom was a shambles. Her clothes were lying scattered across the floor, the bed, the dresser. She couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"Matt! Answer me!"

"Piss off," he growled, tossing the ruined silk into the confusion of the room. Without pausing, he reached for the last piece of clothing in the drawer by his side. He glanced up at her and smiled, twirling a pair of panties on his finger.

"What are you doing?" The full effect of walking in on the scene was only beginning to register with her. Her hands were shaking. Everything she owned was there, destroyed in front of her.

"These are nice," he mocked, crumpling the underwear into his fist. "I'll bet Dave just loves these."

"What?"

"You heard me." He looked back down at them, rubbing the silk between his fingertips. Suddenly, he ripped them into two pieces and threw them toward the bed. They hit the side and slid off onto the floor.

"Matt, honey, I think you've gotten something confused." Her voice was trembling. Her tongue darted out, wetting her lips. They were immediately dry again. She knelt down next to him, reaching her hand to his arm.

"Don't you fucking touch me." He jerked away. He was breathing heavily, panting almost. His eyes were dilated and his face gleamed with sweat.

"Honey, are you okay?" she asked softly. He had been using cocaine regularly for the past three or four months. She wasn't sure how long. It had started in secret. The week before this, Dave had called Lilith, worried about his cousin. He'd been missing appointments and didn't look good. She'd agreed.

"You goddamn whore. Get away from me." Cold. Emotionless.

"Honey, you're sick. We've got to get you some help." He spun around toward her, spittle flying from his mouth.

"I should fucking kill you both."

Before she could respond, his fist swung up, backhanding her off her feet. The room exploded around her. She didn't know which way was up. Her head hit the floor in a pile of shredded blouses and bras. Suddenly, his foot was planted in her stomach. She gagged violently, coughing and spitting. She threw up. He kicked her again. She heard

a crack, not realizing it was her ribs. She couldn't stop coughing. She couldn't keep her eyes open. Matt was kneeling down, his face in front of hers. She couldn't make out what he was saying. The room was spinning. She wanted to throw up again, but couldn't. Her body wouldn't respond. The red fabric of her favorite blouse was beneath her head. Matt had left her field of vision.

"I know you've been fucking Dave, whore," she heard him mutter.

Matt jumped onto the bed, then stepped down on the other side, across the room from where Lilith lay, barely conscious. From beneath the mattress he pulled his .45.

"Sending me on shitty runs," he hissed half to himself. "Dealing with niggers and spics. Trying to get me killed!" He looked down at Lilith, clutching her blouse like a pillow, and scowled.

"This must have been how Ray felt, slut," he said. He took a long, deep breath, cringing as if his stomach hurt. With the back of his hand he wiped the sweat from his forehead. He was working just to breathe. He raised the gun, pointing it at Lilith. Sweat ran into his eyes. He wiped them clear and saw that her eyes had focused on him.

"Should kill you both."

She was looking up at him. She didn't even realize he was holding the gun. He smiled and squeezed the trigger.

The explosion of the shot echoed through the apartment. He watched as the bullet smacked into her side, ripping into her with a spurt of blood. She screamed, but he didn't hear it. All he heard was the shot. He didn't see her clutch at her side, her face twisted in pain and panic. All he saw was the blood. Then he ran from the room.

Lilith didn't see him leave. Warm blood was pouring across her hands. She felt a sharp pain in her chest with every intake of air.

"Oh, Jesus," was all she could say. Over and over again. Her eyes were clenched shut and tears streamed down her face.

Then another shot sounded from the hallway.

"Oh no. No! Matt!"

She forced herself to crawl to the doorway. The room was still spinning. Her hands were slippery with blood. She fell against the floor and nearly passed out from the pain. It was all like a dream. Nothing seemed real anymore. There in the hallway sat Matt. His gun was lying by his hand. His eyes were open, looking back at the bedroom doorway where Lilith had crawled. The back of his head had burst open, spraying the wall with blood, brain, and bone. There was a hole in the wall where the bullet had entered. Deep down inside of Lilith, the cry began. It built slowly, starting as a low groan. Before passing her lips it had grown into a moan and as her mouth opened a wail escaped. She screamed as long and as loud as she could. She screamed until the pains in her chest and side overpowered her and the whole world went black.

The security guard's name is Howard. After helping her to her feet he lets her sit behind the counter.

"I really appreciate this, Howard," Lilith says, holding a towel filled with ice to her jaw. Howard blushes.

"Just doing my job, ma'am."

If her jaw weren't aching, she'd laugh.

"You're a real hero," she says, and kisses him on the cheek. His face becomes even redder and he turns away. She smiles to herself. Then she notices the clock above the counter, remembering Robbie is on his way. She reaches for the ends of her scarf and begins to tuck them into her coat.

"Um, y-you're not leaving, are you?" Howard stammers.

"I've got to get home. My brother's coming by with a heater."

"You don't live on campus?"

"No," she laughs. "Not for a very long time." She adjusts her toboggan and stands up, laying the ice on the counter. "Thanks for that, by the way. I appreciate it." She smiles, nodding to Howard as she squeezes by him, and turns toward the doors.

"I-I, um, I could give you a ride, if you want," he offers weakly.

She stops in her tracks.

"What about watching the desk?" she asks.

"If you can wait just a minute, I can get Carl to cover for me. He's one of the maintenance crew. I'll only take a minute."

The sand was warm, and she burrowed her feet down into it, letting the heat soak in to the bones. The surf kept crashing in, splashing up walls of foam each time it hit. It never stopped. She could hardly tell where the ocean ended and the sky began.

She had missed Matt's funeral. Mother had wired her money to pay her hospital bills, and Dave's lawyer had helped clear her with the police. There had been questions, of course, but he'd claimed that she and Matt had been in the process of splitting because

of his excessive drug use. She had tested clean so they had had no real choice but to let her go. That had been three months ago.

On the sand next to her was an envelope with a West Virginia postmark. It was from her mother. She and Ray hadn't been getting along. They had both started drinking again, hoping it would help them recapture the good times. Lilith had laughed reading that. The Good Times had included Ray getting liquored up, waiting until her mother was gone, then threatening and molesting Lilith. Mother never believed that Ray had done it. Or, if he had, it was because of the drinking and wasn't his fault.

A week ago, after a three day binge, she woke up, hung over, as usual, and there he was, swinging from a rope tied to the banister with Robbie curled up in the floor at his feet, bawling. Lilith's mother had no idea why he had done it. He didn't leave a note.

There was an airplane ticket with the letter.

Lilith slowly folded the paper, placing it back in its envelope and held the ticket before her eyes. She looked back out at the ocean, watching a small white triangle of a sail bob on the water in the distance. Standing, breaking her feet free from their burials, Lilith adjusted the red t-shirt she wore to hide her scar, and slowly began to walk up the beach to her apartment. She had to start packing.

She steps out of the elevator on the third floor and shivers as the cold begins to leave her. The clack of her boots against the tile floor echoes in the high-ceilinged hallway. As she approaches the corner, she pauses and frowns, the smell of cologne filling her nose. Taking a deep breath, she steps around the corner to see Robbie sitting in the hallway floor next to an electric heater. He glances up and smiles.

"Hi, Robbie. Thanks for coming," she says.

"No problem," he grunts, getting to his feet. He's lost some weight. His face doesn't hang from his skull the way it used to. "It was good to get out of the house." He picks up the heater as Lilith slips the key into the lock and swings the door open.

"I'm surprised mom didn't give you a key."

"I don't think she really trusts me," he answers dully.

"Have you been waiting long?"

"Only a few minutes. Where'd you go?"

She pulls the pack of cigarettes from her coat and shows them to him. He nods, understanding.

"Your mom stocked up on them when she heard about the storm coming." He sets the heater down, plugs it in, and turns it on 'high.' "There you go. It ought to warm up in here in no time." He hesitates by the heater, as Lilith lights a cigarette. "Did you have any trouble getting in?"

"The plane landed in Ohio because of the storm. We couldn't get into West Virginia." She exhales, stepping up to the heater. It hasn't warmed up yet. "I had to drive in from there."

"Your mom had a car waiting for you there, then?"

"Yeah. You know mom. She'll go out of her way to make you comfortable as long as she doesn't have to be around." Pulling off her gloves, she tosses them onto the bed.

"I know what you mean." Robbie starts for the door, then stops. "Do you mind if I warm up a little before I go?" His voice is strained. Lilith looks down at her hands.

"Sure. No problem."

He steps back up to the heater.

"I was sorry to hear about your dad, Robbie."

"Thanks." The heat is beginning to rise and they both hold their hands out to it.

"But I know you don't mean it." Lilith takes another drag, exhaling away from Robbie.

"I want to apologize for him. For what he did." His voice was shaking, soft. He was barely speaking at all. "I know your mom didn't take your side when it happened. That was wrong."

Lilith tries to speak but no sound leaves her mouth. She turns her back on him, walks to the window and wipes a streak clear.

"I wanted to say something, but he wouldn't let me. He threatened me. His own son." He glances up at Lilith, but she's not looking at him. Her eyes are focused on the snow. "I just wanted to apologize. Now that he's gone. I'm sorry."

After a moment of silence, Lilith hears the door open, then close, followed by Robbie's heavy footsteps echoing down the hallway. She inhales smoke and blows it into the air above her head. Outside, the sky is black, and the snow keeps falling. The city is lit up almost like daytime as the moon and the streetlights gleam off of the gray snow. It reminds her of an ancient city being buried in the ash of a volcano. A city dying, its people already dead inside, before the ashes began to fall. And the ash just keeps falling and falling until all the buildings are covered, and someday, an archeologist will dig them up, unable to explain why nobody thought to flee.

COFFEE, SEX, & CREATION

As if in a photograph, she sat motionless on the edge of the bed, the sheets scattered about her in waves. She dipped her toes into one of her discarded shoes; foot arching, calf standing out in a gentle curve. Her hair, a sandy brown tangle in her face, shaded her eyes. What was left of her lipstick, a red smear, stood out sharply against her colorless face. Her pale body glowed in the darkness; a spirit caught between worlds ethereal and sensual. Soft light slipped in from beneath the bathroom door, another world. He was in there, separated from her by the thin wood. By more than the thin wood.

The shoe dropped away from her foot, hitting the floor with a flat slap that echoed inside her head. The shower was running. He had wasted no time in getting clean. She could still feel him inside, his seed slowly running out, soaking into the sheets beneath her. Pushing her hair up out of her eyes, she glanced toward the bathroom door. She wished he were dead. Or gone. It didn't matter which. After a moment she decided dead would be better.

She stood, raised the window shade, and watched the town lie down for the night. Streetlights blinked on and thin lines of smoke rose from the chimneys of houses she couldn't see. A faint snow had fallen during the day and was now thrown across the streets and houses like a threadbare gray quilt, dirty and uncomfortable, unable to cover the corpse beneath. There was nothing clean or healthy about the town. Even the changing colors of the leaves had been dull and dismal. They had simply died, dropping away, almost all at once, leaving the branches bare, skeletal hands clawing toward the

murky sky as if to gouge out the eye of the moon. She imagined they were actually the roots of the trees and the city was some half-lit necropolis existing underground. If she were to dig long enough, she might come up in the real world. She might breathe clean air and hear the birds singing just for her -- the only one ever to escape the city of the dead. She would be Eurydice and leave that bastard Orpheus behind to rot this time. Let him sing his songs in the dark.

She laughed softly to herself, then stopped as the shower shut off. She reached for the chair from her writing table and scowled at the notebook open there, waiting for her. Its field of white mocked her every time she passed by, daring her to sit down and try to write. For days it went untouched as she struggled to find something, anything to say. Forced, her poetry had no weight. No focus. Another empty ritual.

She ignored the mocking pages and, pulling the chair in front of the window, sat to await his entrance. The glass was frosted and the cold soaked into her bare back and shoulders. She turned to ice inside as he stepped out into the bedroom.

He was already dressed and was drying his hair with her favorite towel. Nonchalantly, he flipped the bathroom light out, looked at her and smiled. His eyes were too close together, she thought. And he had more chin than personality. Or finesse, she added.

"It's dark in here," he said. Inane. Witless.

"Yes it is." Cold. She could see her own breath.

"D'you mind if I turn on a light?"

"Why?"

"The better to see you with, my dear," he said in a piss-poor Bela Lugosi voice.

He shifted uncomfortably.

"No. I don't think so."

"Is something wrong?"

"Why do you ask?" She felt regal. In control.

He crossed the room, stepping on her clothes, kicking one of her shoes under the bed. Kneeling before her, he took her hand in his own. She had to admit she was curious. What would this develop into?

"Listen, ah . . ." A pause. He chuckled. "This is kind of embarrassing. Um."

Silence gaped between them and she watched him shrink before her.

"You don't remember my name, do you?" she said, her voice dry. Emotionless.

He smiled and rolled his eyes, as if to play it off.

"I'm not very good with names."

She pulled her hand away from his.

"My name is Eve."

He smiled broadly. Too broadly, she thought. He was nervous.

"Eve. Of course. How could I forget?" He stood, turning his back to her. "How about some light, Eve?"

"Are you afraid of the dark?"

"No," he laughed.

"Then stop asking for light." A whip cracking.

He turned.

"Something *is* wrong," he said.

She could feel disgust rising up like the urge to vomit. He was an insect. A soft-shelled creature, operating only on fear and hunger. There was nothing of Man about him. She wanted him gone and closed her eyes, erasing him from her existence.

"Look, you're upset about something and it's getting late. I'll just go and call you tomorrow."

"I doubt if you're very good with numbers, either," she muttered, low and angry. She sat silently until she heard the door open then slam closed. When she opened her eyes, he no longer existed. The notebook whispered to her, trying to attract her attention.

She ignored it.

The young man stood before the easel. Many colors amassed and converged thickly across the canvas. Deep red played across a field of blue, and a series of green and yellow slashes made their way from left to right. His hands were covered with the hues, as he used no brush. He felt as if the paints were a part of him. With his fingertip he slowly drew a black line down the center of the painting. There was paint in his hair and faint smudges on his glasses.

The room, though well-lit, seemed to absorb the light, and heavy shadows filled the corners. Chaotically scattered stacks of books covered shelves, tables and any other open space. A mattress lay in the corner, its sheets in tangled confusion. Canvases of all sizes leaned against the walls, a paint-splattered audience, watching as he worked. The entire room fell away as his eyes focused intently on the canvas, seeking the images hidden inside there, struggling to make their way to the surface.

As Joe's finger reached the bottom of the painting -- the black trail now dividing the picture in two -- a door slammed across the hall, yanking him out of his canvas and back to the real world. He cocked his head to listen but could only hear unintelligible muttering that quickly faded as the mutterer passed his door. He smiled.

"Another one bites the dust," he said to himself.

* * * * *

The three women sat around the table in the coffee shop, talking and drinking cup after cup of coffee. Eve, tapping softly with her knife, created a rhythm only she could follow. The second woman was sitting back, smiling widely, an amused look in her eyes. Her thick black hair fell freely down to her shoulders, a dark frame around her pale face. She was dressed all in shadows and silver jewelry. The third woman, the smallest of the three, rested her head on her hands, her brow knotted in worry. Her dark brown eyes focused on the swirl of cream in her coffee, a small universe, spinning and spinning and spinning.

"There is no God," the shadow said.

Eve's knife pinged against her cup.

"How can you say that?" The smallest one's eyes widened.

"Watch me. There is no God. Easy as pie."

The knife rang against the cup again.

"You aren't making me feel any better."

"Your happiness is your own concern, Mary. I'm not here to make you happy."

"Some sympathy would be nice, Lil."

Lil took a sip of her coffee, narrowing her eyes at Mary through the steam. Again the ping of Eve's knife.

"Yes, it would. Can I get some more coffee please?" Lilith said to the passing waitress. Mary turned to Eve.

"Eve, what do you think?"

"I'm sorry, what?" She stopped the knife in mid-swing.

"Haven't you heard anything I've said?"

"Um, no. My head's somewhere else today. I can't get going on a new poem."

She paused. "Is something wrong?"

"Oh, God."

"That won't help," said Lilith.

"Shut up," Mary spat. "This was hard enough the first time."

"I guess you'd know," Lil spat back.

Mary glared at her.

"What happened?" Eve asked.

Mary took a long drink of coffee.

"She lost her cherry," Lilith laughed.

"*Lilith!*"

"Didn't you? Or did I misunderstand you the first time?"

"Well . . ."

"Can I get a smoke, Eve?" Lilith asked.

"Sure." She handed her the pack and the lighter.

Mary looked at Eve, as if to read some kind of response from her features, but to no avail.

"Are you even listening to me?"

"Of course," Eve answered. "You are no longer an Innocent. You have joined us in the Land of Nod, where all the Sinners live."

"Oh, God."

"Now don't start that again," Lilith chimed in.

"You're not pregnant are you?" Eve asked, concern showing on her face.

"I-I don't think so. I just don't know if I did the right thing. I mean, he was really nice to me . . . Very polite about it, really."

Eve glanced at Lil, who rolled her eyes.

"But it's been four days and he hasn't called." Mary's voice trembled.

Lilith leaned in and took her hand.

"Are you in love with him, Mary?" Warm. Caring.

"I . . . I . . ." Then softly, "No."

"Then you're definitely going to Hell."

"Lil!" Eve laughed.

Mary pulled her hand away and sat up straight.

"You said there wasn't any God."

"There's not." Lil exhaled a large cloud of smoke. "But there is definitely a Hell."

Mary dropped her head back to her hands, rattling the silverware on the table.

"I feel like dog poop."

"Dog poop?" Lil.

"She means shit," said Eve. "C'mon, hon. You're damned now. You might as well swear."

"You both act like this is a joke," Mary said, her voice muffled by her hands.

"We're not making fun of you, Mary. It's just that, well . . ."

"You're overreacting," Lilith cut in.

Eve glared at her.

"No, that is NOT it. We just all have different attitudes about this sort of thing, that's all." Eve pinged her coffee cup again. Mary sighed from behind her hands. Eve looked to Lilith for help.

"Look, hon, you say he hasn't called you since you did the deed?" She asked.

"Right." Mary's voice was just above a whisper.

"Had you been drinking?"

"Yes." Muffled. Embarrassed.

Lilith put out her cigarette, blowing a last burst of smoke across the table. She looked out the window of the coffeeshop. The glass was fogged but she could see there was still snow on the ground outside. A car passed slowly and large gray flakes began to fall again. She frowned and turned to Eve, who sat with her eyes closed, apparently oblivious to them again. Lil reached for another cigarette and Eve didn't say a word. After lighting it she ducked her head into Mary's line of sight.

"Hey, c'mon. It's not that bad."

"I really liked him." A tiny voice from behind her hands.

"This happens to everybody." She blew a cloud of smoke up into the air above their heads. "It does suck that it was your first time. It should have been something special."

Mary lowered her hands.

"Well, it was special." She took a drink of coffee. "I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't thought it was special."

"You said you didn't love him." Lilith frowned.

"Well, I don't, really. But, I don't know. . ." She stared down into her coffee. "Maybe I could've. Eventually."

"Look, Mary. You are an intelligent, attractive woman. You're just young and haven't really dealt with situations like this before. Believe me, this is normal." She inhaled a lungfull of smoke and exhaled loudly.

"Now, there are three rules that I live by and maybe you should consider them, too." She paused to take a sip of coffee. "One: don't define yourself by other people. Two: stand up for yourself, and three, and this is the most important one of all: don't get involved with someone because you think you could fall in love with them eventually. Nobody's worth that kind of grief."

Mary smiled and took Lilith's hand.

"Thanks. It still hurts though."

"I know. It passes."

Suddenly Eve opened her eyes and looked at them, confused.

"Did I miss something?"

Images were forming on the canvas, fighting their way through the thick layers of colors. Faint faces and figures were locked in frozen motions of dancing, fighting, and fornicating. Joe stood back a few feet from his work. In his hand was a coffee mug with the inscription 'I didn't forget your birthday, I just couldn't remember your name.' His chin was covered with stubble and the bed in the corner still hadn't been straightened. Dishes were piled in the sink.

He set the mug on a stack of books next to him, the bright cover of the top book already scarred with coffee rings, stepped closer to the canvas, and frowned. Something was missing, but he couldn't figure out what it was. For the past four days he had been working on the painting, and as yet had no idea where the work was going. There was no focus; no real reason for the painting to exist.

"Shit."

He wanted a cigarette, but had quit smoking when he had started the painting. This was a ritual for him. When working, he routinely gave up all of his vices, smoking, drinking, women, everything. That way he could channel all of his anxieties into his art. It made the act of creating more primitive; more desperate. He felt that the chaos, the anxiety, the fear of failure, showed in the work. Usually it worked, but this time he had hit a snag. The painting just had no purpose. He felt as though he were painting just to paint, and he needed more motivation than that.

He felt overwhelmed by the whole creation process. He had to take a break. His cigarettes sat unopened on a stack of books in the corner. Picking the pack up, he slid it into his shirt pocket and left the apartment, his coffee in hand.

Eve motioned for the waitress and the sleeve of her sweater fell down to her elbow. Her fingers were long and delicate, birds caught in flight. Lilith, her cigarette hanging from her lip, scowled at Mary.

"I mean, just look at the media as a whole," Mary said. Her lips were thin and pink, her teeth, white and even. "How can you deny that it isn't at least partly responsible for the suppression of women?"

Lilith tapped the ash of her cigarette into the ashtray.

"I'm *not* denying that. But *my* point is that the media is a *reflection* of our culture and not the sole creator of it."

"I've got to agree with that," Eve said as the waitress poured her another cup of coffee.

"You don't think that young girls turn anorexic because their idols are these tiny waif models?" Mary looked first at Lilith and then to Eve. There was a challenge in her voice for the first time that day.

"Look," Lilith said. "Anorexia is a problem of self-image. There are plenty of other people out there to admire and look up to. If some uptight little WASP can only relate to a picture in a magazine, she has problems that run a little deeper than just wanting to be thin. These people have problems distinguishing between images and reality, the map and the territory. Models are two-dimensional images that serve a function. They sell clothes and products. They are not role models.

"Hell, Katharine Hepburn or Amelia Earhart are perfect feminist role models if you ask me. They took no shit, did as they pleased, and didn't care if others didn't think the same way they did."

"How about Gloria Steinem?" asked Mary.

"Fuck Gloria Steinem," Lilith and Eve said together.

"She's so concerned with managing the way people think, she's lost sight of the bigger underlying goals. To suggest that if scientific research is finding differences in male and female brain chemistry, then that research shouldn't be done, borders on fascism."

"When did she say that?" Eve asked.

"On some news show a few months ago." Lilith scowled and took a drink of coffee.

Mary opened her mouth to respond, but no words came out. She quickly slouched down, hiding herself from the rest of the cafe.

"What the hell?" Eve muttered, turning in the direction Mary was looking.

Joe slipped in the door of the coffee shop as fast as he could. He had been so distracted when he left his apartment he had forgotten to grab a coat. His tennis shoes were caked with snow, his lips and fingertips a pale blue. He was blinded momentarily as his glasses fogged up. The heavy flakes of snow in his hair melted almost instantly upon hitting the warm air of the cafe and ran down his face and neck in thin streams.

"C-Coffee, please."

He fumblingly removed his glasses and stumbled up to the counter.

"Ohmigod. That's him," Mary whispered.

"That's the guy you slept with? He doesn't look like much," Lilith said.

"He looks familiar," Eve said.

"Hey you!" Lilith yelled.

"*Lilith, no!*" Mary screeched and covered her head with her hands. Lilith smiled and ground out her cigarette.

Joe glanced over, wiping the water from his face, unable to make any of them out. He squinted and saw Lilith point at him, motioning him over to the table. Shrugging, he took a sip of his coffee and started to approach. As he got closer, he recognized Mary and put his glasses back on.

"Mary? What are you doing here?"

"Suffering, you prick," Lilith answered for her.

Mary grabbed at Lil's arm to silence her.

"What?" he said.

"You heard me. Where the hell have you been? I should kick your spoiled little ass." Lilith began to stand.

"I guess everybody knows about the other night, huh?" Joe said to Mary, who was still trying to cover her head. Her face was bright red.

"I've gotta go to the bathroom," she said quickly, jumping up and disappearing in an instant.

"You need to sit down here and listen to what I have to say," Lilith ordered.

"Lil, please. It's not really your place . . ." Eve started, but Lilith cut her off, yanking Joe down into Mary's vacant chair. His coffee spilled onto the floor.

"Hey!"

"Don't hey me. What kind of an asshole are you? Dropping her like a rock after what you did?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh you don't? You don't recall stealing Mary's virginity away, oh, about four days ago?"

"She was a virgin?"

Lilith threw her hands up in disgust.

"That's your response? I really should kick your ass."

"Lil, calm down," Eve broke in, then turning to Joe, said, "That really is no response. You hurt her. Aren't you even aware of that?"

"Look, I don't know either of you. I don't have to justify my actions."

"Or lack thereof," Lilith chimed in.

Joe glared at her.

"Or lack thereof," he mocked.

"That's it. You're dead." Lilith drew back to punch him, but Eve grabbed her arm. Joe cringed, slipped and fell out of his chair. One hand slid in his spilt coffee, and the mug in his other hand broke against the floor.

Mary stepped out of the bathroom at just that moment and with her eyes widening and her jaw dropping open, ducked back inside.

"Get up, chicken shit!" Lilith demanded. Eve jumped between her and Joe, pushing Lil back into her seat.

"Give him a chance, will you?"

"Yeah, just let me say something." Joe tossed the handle of his mug onto the table and climbed back into his seat. He looked back and forth between the two of them.

Lilith was breathing heavily through her nose, and Eve watched her carefully, ready to jump in again if necessary.

"I, I guess I was a little out of line . . ." Lilith began to respond, but Eve squeezed her wrist and she stopped. "But you see, um . . . well, I paint, you see. And I'm just starting a new project and, ah," he swallowed nervously, knowing how this was going to sound. "I can't have any distractions while I'm working."

Lilith's arm strained against Eve's hand, but she didn't say anything.

"It's kind of a tradition. I just shut myself off and don't see anybody while I'm working. I thought she knew."

"Well apparently she didn't," Eve said. "Maybe the two of you should talk." As she said this, Mary emerged from the bathroom again, walked quickly to the table, and grabbed her coat.

"Mary," Eve said, "Joe was just telling us why he hasn't called."

"Oh," she said flatly. "That's interesting. I've got to be going now." She put on her coat and started toward the door.

"Mary, wait," Lilith called out. She stood and put her coat on too. "I'm going to make sure she gets home okay," she said to Eve.

Without a word to Joe she turned and, tossing a couple of dollars on the counter, put her arm around Mary. A blast of cold air and snow swept into the cafe as they opened the door and left.

Eve motioned for the waitress to bring another coffee as Joe tapped the handle of his mug against the table. She looked closely at him, trying to figure out where she had seen him. The waitress brought a clean cup and filled it quietly.

"So, you paint do you?" she asked.

"And you write."

Eve was caught off guard.

"Do I know you?"

He took a sip of his coffee.

"I live across the hall from you. You probably don't even recognize me. I don't get out much."

"That much is obvious. You *do* own a coat don't you?"

He chuckled.

"I was a little distracted when I left."

Eve leaned back in her chair and scrutinized Joe. He needed a shave and probably a bath. There was paint splattered on every article of clothing he wore, including his glasses. He didn't look up at her. Instead, he stared into his coffee as if deep in thought.

"How did you know I write?"

He glanced up shyly and shrugged.

"You've been in the campus magazine for the past couple of years. You won first prize for poetry last year. It was a good piece. I really liked it."

She smiled.

"You remember that?"

He nodded.

"I was in your Lit class last spring, too. You probably don't remember."

"Oh yeah, Dr. Burkwald's class," she lied.

"No. Dr. Smythe's. American Lit."

Eve looked away quickly.

"I sat behind you," he added.

Eve took a sip of her coffee and lit a cigarette. Joe looked at it longingly. She offered him one but he waved it away.

"I have my own," he said, patting his chest pocket.

"Aren't you going to smoke one?" Eve asked.

"Um, no. I quit smoking while I'm painting too. It seems to help." He took a long drink of his coffee. "Usually."

Eve watched his eyes move all around the room before finally coming back to her own. He had a hard time holding her stare. He shifted in his seat and took another drink.

"So, what are you going to do about Mary?"

"What do you mean?" He looked away.

"I mean are you going to call her, at least?" She watched the end of her cigarette glow. The orange was embedded in a sheath of gray ash, brightening almost to yellow then fading back to orange. She blew lightly on it, flaring it up again, then tapped the ashes in the floor. Traces of her lipstick were around the base of the filter. Faint red, branding half the remains in the ashtray. She hadn't realized she'd been smoking that much. Breathing in deeply, she felt the smoke roll down into her lungs; a warm feeling; an alive feeling. She closed her eyes and exhaled.

"I don't really think I should," Joe mumbled, half to himself. "She didn't seem too pleased with me."

Eve opened her eyes.

"Well, why the hell should she be?" She ground out her cigarette. "Don't you even know what it feels like to lose your virginity? Or was that just the first of your 'conquests'?" She paused. She was beginning to sound like Lil.

"I'm not in love with her. We were fooling around one night, and it just sort of happened. Jesus." He took another drink of coffee. "Are all of Mary's friends so militant?"

"Only the ones who care about her."

"And you really care about her."

"Of course." She pulled another cigarette out of the pack. They were nearly all gone. "What a stupid question."

"Then why didn't you go with them when they left?" His eyes stopped dancing around the room and focused on hers. She lit her cigarette and drew in a lung-full of smoke, breathing it out through her nose. She smiled.

"I hadn't finished my coffee."

He nodded slowly, looking back down into his mug.

"Well, I should be getting back to work. If I leave my canvas alone too long, she starts worrying about me."

"Sounds like you treat it better than your women."

He smiled.

"She's better for me than my women." He walked to the counter and paid for his coffee. When he turned around, Eve was standing beside him.

"I might as well walk you home."

Lilith and Mary walked quickly and quietly down the street toward Mary's apartment building. They both had their hands shoved deep down into their pockets and kept their heads lowered against the wind and snow. Mary sniffled every once in a while, but Lil couldn't tell if she was crying, or if it was the cold. The street was nearly deserted. Even beneath the dull pallor of snow, garbage could be seen lining the gutters. Most of the buildings they passed were boarded up and vacant. The windows of some were broken and figures shuffled through their shadows, finding vague protection from the weather. Lilith tried not to notice them. If it weren't for the college, this town would have faded away years ago, she thought.

"Do you have any orange juice at your apartment?" Lilith asked as they passed a liquor store, one of the few businesses to thrive in the area. Mary nodded, sniffing.

"Wait right here, then."

Lil entered the store and emerged in a matter of minutes, smiling, with a bottle of gin in a paper bag.

"Let's get out of the cold, eh?"

Mary half-smiled and they continued walking, the gray flakes streaming around them, swirling on the icy wind, forcing them to keep their eyes to the ground. Lilith sighed in relief as they stepped through the doorway of Mary's building. A bare bulb hung overhead. Small battered mailboxes lined the wall, the names on them nearly unreadable. Lilith touched her tongue to a snowflake melting at the corner of her mouth and tasted dirt. Mary stomped the snow off of her boots. Misleadingly colorful advertising inserts were scattered across the dirty, wet tile.

"I hate this town," she said. "It's never warm or cheerful."

"That's because there's no life here," Lil answered with a shiver. "No life or hope."

They walked up the stairs to the apartment.

* * * * *

Eve sat on the floor at the foot of her bed. The room was dark except for a candle burning on her writing table. Tiny flames reflected in her eyes. Her clothes were scattered across the floor around her, where they had fallen when discarded. Joe, buttoning his shirt, sat on the edge of the bed. The blankets were on the floor.

This has to stop, Eve told herself as she watched Joe calmly slip the last button of his shirt into place. He slid down into the floor next to her, and she knew it was happening again.

"I've gotta get going," he said softly, cradling her head in his hand.

"Is that what you said to Mary when you finished?" She could feel the resentment building up again, like it did every time. It was always the same.

He pulled his hand away.

"That was different."

"How was it different?" A challenge.

The glare from the candlelight reflected in his glasses, shielding his eyes from her. She didn't like that.

"Mary's a little girl, really. She's more like a kid sister to me than a girlfriend."

"So you fucked your kid sister?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Do you have any idea what you *do* mean?"

He cocked his head, puzzled.

"What the hell's wrong with you?"

"What?"

"You heard me. Is this what you do every time you have a man in here? Is this why I hear the door slamming all the time?"

She scowled.

"What the fuck do you know about me, huh? What?" She stood and climbed onto the bed, looking down at him. "Nothing, that's what. I'm just some wet dream you've been having for a year or two who isn't what you'd hoped she'd be. Admit it."

Joe stood.

"That's not what this is about."

"How the hell would you even know?"

"You feel guilty, don't you? Like you've betrayed Mary or something? You don't have to feel that way."

"Shut up! You don't know what I feel. I want you out of here, now."

"It doesn't have to be like this. If you'd just calm down . . ."

"Don't tell me to calm down, you little shit." Her voice was blue flame. "You just get the fuck out of here before I call the cops."

Joe's mouth dropped open.

"What?"

"I'm going to count to ten. You'd better be gone by then. One."

"This is insane."

"Two." She walked out into the living room with Joe following hesitantly.

"You can't be serious."

"Nine," she said, picking up the receiver.

"Jesus Christ. All right, all right, I'm going." He started for the door, but paused as he turned to knob. "You need help, Eve. Seriously. This is *not* normal."

"I'll decide what's normal for me. Shut the door on your way out."

She hung up the phone as he left. Distractedly, she pulled the comforter off of the back of the couch and wrapped herself in it, then slipped down onto the floor. The apartment was cold again. There was practically no insulation and the carpeting was worn nearly away. She could hear his footsteps as he crossed the hall, opened his door, and slammed it behind him.

The half-empty gin bottle sat like a monolith in the center of the coffee table. Mary was lying on the floor by the gas heater, clutching a pillow to her chest, a glass sitting next to her head. There was a trace of orange juice still in the bottom. Lil sat on the couch, her feet up on the table, watching the ceiling fan slowly spin, circulating the heat. Her own glass was lying on its side on the floor by the empty orange juice container.

"Watching this fan is gonna make me puke," she mumbled.

"Issnot that bad," Mary replied. "Jes watch the center."

"I should have gotten smokes. I need a cigarette." Lilith shifted her position, sliding over onto her stomach. As her arm dropped limply over the edge of the couch,

the ring on her finger tapped against her glass. The sound rang out softly, riding waves of warmth throughout the room. Mary slowly sat up.

"I don't think it's a good idea to leave Eve with him."

"With who?" Lil asked, fighting off unconsciousness.

"Whadaya mean, with who? With Joe."

Lil raised her head to meet Mary's eyes.

"Don't worry about it."

"But you know what Eve's like. Whenever she gets blocked with her poetry, she starts . . . um, you know."

Lilith grinned.

"She can be a little harlot, can't she?" she laughed, rolling over on her back. "Oh my. I need to find a position and stay in it."

Mary sat quietly, staring at the floor. She rocked back and forth as tears began to well up in her eyes.

"Is there any more orange juice?" she asked.

Lilith limply rolled her head to one side, looking down at the empty container.

"Nope."

"Damn." Softly. "What else mixes with gin?"

"At this point, anything." Lilith chuckled to herself.

"Anything, then," Mary said, awkwardly forcing herself to her feet. Sniffing loudly, she stumbled down the hallway to the kitchen. The room was immaculate. Everything was clean and neatly tucked into place. It was almost as if no one actually

lived there. Mary made a mental note to be messier from now on. She grunted as she pulled the refrigerator door open and leaned heavily on it, looking inside.

"What about diet pop?" she yelled to Lilith.

"What about it?" Lilith yelled back.

"For the gin?"

"Sure."

Quickly, Mary glided back into the living room with the two-liter bottle and thudded it onto the coffee table. Lilith sat up and looked bleary-eyed at her.

"D'you really want to do this?"

"You want a cigarette, I want a drink." She began to pour.

"Are you upset about leaving Eve there?"

"Why should I be?" She didn't look up.

"Well," Lil started. "You sounded, um, I don't know. Sad."

"Well I'm not."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about." Mary took a drink and cringed. "Needs more pop." She poured again, splashing some onto the table.

"D'you want me to get a paper towel?" Lil asked.

"Leave it. It doesn't matter."

Lilith leaned back, stretching her arms out along the top of the couch.

"You're upset. I can tell."

Mary took a long drink of her gin and pop, then set the glass down, shivering.

"It really doesn't matter. Eve's probably," she paused, "*fucking* him right now and it really doesn't matter what I think about it."

It's probably over by now, Lil thought, glancing down at her watch.

"Look, if you want me to, I'll talk to Eve about this."

"About what? There's nothing to say." She took another drink. "I chickened out and she stepped in."

"Maybe she did. We don't know that."

Mary set her glass down and looked at Lil.

"All right," Lil said. "We probably do know that. But even if they do go to bed, he won't mean anything to her. She just wants to get to her writing."

"But what's he going to think of her? And me?" She finished off her glass and began to pour another. "He's not going to want anything to do with me after . . . after . . ." Tears began to run down her cheeks. She sniffled.

Lilith reached out and stopped her from pouring her drink.

"You need to take a break. You're getting a little out of control."

"Fuck you, Lil."

"*Mary!*" Lilith was amazed. "Now I know you've had enough." They both laughed, and Mary stopped crying.

"He was so nice to me, Lil."

"Yeah, and he got you drunk, fucked you, and didn't call you for days. You do remember all that, right?"

She sniffled and nodded.

"Okay then." Lilith paused, took a deep breath and looked around the room. After a moment or two, she focused on the VCR. "Do you wanna watch a movie or something?"

"Not really."

"Hey, I just thought of something." She smiled.

"What?" Mary asked hesitantly.

"If that dog does sleep with Eve . . ."

"Yeah?"

"She's gonna screw his whole world up." She laughed. "You know how she is."

Mary smiled.

"He deserves that."

"At least." Lilith leaned forward and took Mary's hand. "C'mon, let's go rent a movie, or I'm gonna pass out." With an effort, Lil got to her feet. "I can get some cigarettes while we're out too."

Shrugging half-heartedly, Mary stood, looking around for her coat. She had no idea where she had left it.

Joe clicked on the light in his room and stood staring at his painting. It was an ugly thing, really. He exhaled loudly, and sat down on the bed. When he closed his eyes, he could see nothing but the painting, filling his head with simplistic shapes and basic colors. There was no subtlety in it. There was no real craft.

He stood up and approached the canvas. Wasted time and energy. That's what it amounted to, he thought. Pointless. He cursed under his breath and picked up a tube of

paint. Without looking to see what color it was, he squeezed it out into the palm of his hand. With a hollow thud, he slapped his hand against the canvas and smeared it back and forth quickly. White. It blended in with the other still wet colors, obliterating the tiny forms Joe had spent the past few days creating.

"Its all shit," he mumbled. "All of it."

The paint was too thick to simply start over. All of the excess needed to be scraped off to begin something new. His hand was covered with a thick coat of white, blue, and red. The green and yellow were virtually non-existent, overpowered by the sheer volume of other colors. But when he wiped his hand on his pants, blending them all together, they turned the purplish mixture a faint gray.

Joe pulled the pack of cigarettes from his pocket and tore it open, scattering them across the floor. He paid no attention, shoving one that had stayed in the pack into his mouth. He lit it, ignoring the paint covering part of it, and picked the canvas up from the easel. Blowing smoke through his nose, he raised the painting over his head and brought it down hard across his knee. There was a sharp crack as the wooden frame snapped. Joe smiled and slammed the canvas against the wall, breaking the frame again. With a grunt and a curse he ripped the canvas in half, ignoring the splinters of wood and staples that flew from it.

Throwing it in the corner, he dropped back onto his bed. Smoke billowed up from his mouth as he ground the cigarette out against the wall, then tossed it aside.

"Everything is shit," he said to himself again.

After dozing in the floor for a while, Eve awoke with a sigh. Her neck was stiff, and as she sat up, she rolled her head around to loosen it. She felt as though she might be catching a cold. Rubbing her hands together, she stood and stumbled back into her bedroom. Her notebook, still open to the first blank page, sat waiting for her. A weight seemed to rise from her sore shoulders. An idea began to take shape. This was the way it always went, as if there was some sort of a creation drive inside of her that had to exercise its will. It drove her to write, and when she couldn't write, she had to find another outlet. Sex, for her, was the easiest way of breaking through that wall. It was all about the creative act.

He'd been very polite about the whole thing, she thought. Almost hesitant. But when she offered, he accepted.

"They all do," she muttered.

She pushed her hair up out of her eyes. Images began to solidify inside of her head, then entire lines. She reached for a pen, and picking the notebook up, stepped lightly onto her bed. The words began to flow onto the page.

SHADOWS LIKE TEARS

She could hear his heavy steps as he made his way up the stairs to her door even though she was on the far side of the apartment. He had never been light on his feet. It was almost as if he was constantly trying to prove that he was real by making as much noise as possible. He probably felt lost in the silence.

She never felt lost as long as things were quiet. It was the noise and chaos that seemed to hover about him that made her nervous. Nervous and tense. But he never noticed.

If he did, he never mentioned it.

As the door opened she realized that she was seated in the same spot she had been in when he'd left that morning. She had moved around during the day, of course, but to him she wouldn't have budged from the couch. It didn't matter that the dishes were finally done and the laundry was ready to go in the wash.

"Hi home, I'm honey!" he called out, as usual, closing the door behind him. Every day the same pathetic joke. She simply looked up at him and smiled. "Haven't you moved all day?"

She cringed as the words left his mouth like stones. He followed his normal path through the middle of the room to the front window.

"Christ, you could use some light in here." He pulled on the cord and the curtains screeched open. She would grease the track someday. "Looks like I just beat the rain."

"It's supposed to storm tonight," she offered up.

"Yeah, it looks like it. Check out those clouds."

She didn't move, but nodded in agreement, hoping he would continue to stand there, staring out the window for the rest of her life. She liked him better this way. A silent silhouette, more like a cardboard cut-out than a real man. She wondered if he would be hurt if she pushed him from the window, or if he would simply float to the ground. The thought left her as he turned and dropped heavily into a chair.

He ceased to exist as a cloud of dust sprang up to dance in the sunlight. Thousands of tiny flecks circled around and around catching the light; some falling, some rising, all of them forced into motion against their collective will. There was a pattern to their flight that she could almost follow. All she had to do was concentrate. She tried to focus her entire being on the dust, to become a part of it. She began to swirl on the tiny currents of air along with the others. His breathing created a massive updraft and she rode it up and up until she was touching the ceiling, then back down in a slow spiral. The soft current from under the door sent her spinning back toward the couch and for the first time that day, she felt as if she were alive.

"Sarah! Could you throw me that ashtray?" He was glaring at her. "Jesus. Where's your head?" She slowly picked up the ceramic ashtray and tossed it to him. The feeling was gone. She was back on the couch.

The sound of his tobacco catching fire roared in her ears and the stink of his cheap cigarettes forced its way into her nose. Everything about him was offensive and intrusive to her. She looked into his eyes as he drew the first breath of smoke. His whole body relaxed and he slid down a little in his chair. She watched the cloud of smoke leave his mouth and thought she could smell his lunch. She suddenly caught a whiff of her

own breath and felt ill. It was like something down inside her was dying. It was a dark green smell. A cancer smell. Like her soul was decaying a bit at a time.

"Sarah, honey, are you all right? You don't look very good."

"Thanks." She shifted on the couch so she could stare at the ceiling.

"I'm serious. Aren't you feeling better yet?"

There was a cobweb hanging from the corner of the ceiling. It stood out darkly against the white. She would have to pull a chair over there to get to it sometime. Maybe tomorrow. When he wasn't there. When he was gone to work and she could enjoy the quiet. It was so nice when he wasn't there.

"Are you ignoring me?"

"I'm not ignoring you, Eric."

He took another drag from his cigarette and exhaled loudly.

"Well then say something."

Slowly she lowered her eyes to meet his.

"Something."

Suddenly he stood up and crossed over to the couch. She stiffened as he got closer. He laid his hand on her forehead. It felt hot against her skin and she held her breath.

"Well, you don't have a fever."

"I know."

"So what's wrong?"

Outside, the rain began to fall. It tapped out a rhythm on the glass that captured Sarah's attention. She slipped by Eric and went over to the window, leaving him behind

on the couch. Without a sound, she knelt down and rested her chin on the edge of the windowsill. The drops of rain ran down the glass in random paths, turning this way and that for no apparent reason. Suddenly one drop would alter its course and plunge to the right, then cut back to the left and merge with another droplet diving straight down the glass. It was like a huge dance, insanely choreographed for her alone. There was no sense of order or pattern. And yet, it felt right. She was entranced.

Eric placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Your mother loved the rain, didn't she?" he whispered.

"She wrote about it all the time. It was her favorite subject." She turned slowly and looked up into Eric's eyes.

"It's been three months," he said.

She turned back to the window.

"Sarah. I want to talk about this."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"There is. Look at me!" He pulled her around to face him. "She's dead, Sarah. You can't change that." She cocked her head to the side as if puzzled.

"I don't want to change it, Eric. She wanted to be dead and now she is. It was her decision."

"Well, then what's wrong? Why won't you talk to me?"

Her eyes narrowed.

"Do you know that you snore? All night, every night. From the moment you close your eyes until the instant you wake up."

"I don't snore."

"You do. And it's the most godawful thing I've ever heard. I used to worry you were going to drown in your own snot, but you never did." She paused, drawing herself up as if to receive a slap. "Sometimes I'd wish you would, just so there would be some peace. It's maddening, Eric, it really is."

"So you're pissed off at me because I snore. That's just great!" Eric turned away and began to pace. Then he paused, turned back to her and laughed. "What do you want me to do about it?"

She looked at him coldly for a minute.

"There's nothing you can do, Eric. It's not just the snoring. There're a million other little things that I'm only just beginning to notice about you. It's the way you eat. The hair in your nose. Your feet. It's everything. The snoring is just the clincher."

He stared down at her, his eyes wide, his mouth hanging open, as if he'd just been punched in the stomach. His cigarette had burnt down almost to his fingers but he didn't notice. Sarah did, and picked up the ashtray. She carried it over to him and he ground it out without paying attention.

"You're crazy," he muttered.

She flinched visibly and lightly placed the ashtray on the coffee table.

"You know, I keep wondering why my mother would kill herself. I keep thinking maybe she was sick or crazy. Something. Maybe nobody really knew what was going on inside her. The more I think about it the more I get worried about myself. Like maybe I inherited some of that insanity. Sometimes I feel the way she must have. Just before the end."

Eric lightly took her hand and began to lead her back to the couch. She continued speaking as if he wasn't really there at all.

"That's when I remember that daddy always snored. Just as bad as you do. Or maybe worse." Pulling her hand free, Sarah walked back over to the window and stood staring out at the rain. "When I was little I would be playing downstairs on Saturday mornings and could actually hear him up on the second floor, snoring away. Oblivious." She rested her head on the cool glass, the droplets casting shadow tears down her face.

"You don't know how many times I've laid there in bed beside you, just in these past few weeks, and wondered why she didn't kill him too. She could have easily pressed a pillow over his face and put her whole weight on him. He wouldn't have woken up. It was nearly impossible to wake him." She paused. "Just like it's impossible to wake you."

She turned to face him again, drawing herself up straight and looking him in the eye. She felt as though his slightest word would send her tumbling backward like a leaf on the wind.

"I want you out of my life," she said.

Eric said nothing.

Slowly, he lowered himself onto the couch. She watched a tear build up in his eye and then break free to run down his cheek. He looked confused. Lost. For an instant she felt sorry for him. A fleeting moment that passed almost before she could even acknowledge its existence.

"I don't understand," he muttered. "This doesn't make any sense."

"I makes perfect sense."

"To you, maybe. Not to me. I don't think like you. Jesus! I doubt if anybody thinks the way you do." His voice trembled as he pulled out his cigarettes and lit another. She cringed and backed away from him. "I think we need to talk about this."

She turned to the window again.

"There isn't anything left to say. I'm not happy anymore."

"I'll do whatever you want me to, Sarah. Whatever it takes to make you happy."

"Then go."

The sky lit up as a bolt of lightning split the clouds. Sarah closed her eyes and counted to herself until the thunder roared. The glass in the window vibrated from its force and she felt like a child again; small and frightened as the storm grew closer. If only there was someplace she could hide until it passed. Someplace dark and quiet and safe. Most of all, someplace safe. She opened her eyes and saw the clouds rolling and swelling, churning up another blast of lightning to hurl at her. If it could find her it would kill her. It would cook her alive in a blast of fire. She had to find a hiding place. She had to get away.

"Sarah? Are you all right?" Eric said softly, placing a hand on her shoulder and she spun around screaming, pounding at him, trying to drive him away.

"Get away from me! Leave me alone!"

He threw his arms up to protect himself, and she batted the cigarette out of his hand, singeing her wrist. She screamed in pain and fell back against the glass, busting the lower pane out. As she stumbled forward another flash of lightning lit the sky and was caught in the scattering pieces of glass that rained to the floor. A hundred bolts of lightning were there in the room as she hit the floor terrified.

The curtains flapped violently in the wind and a stream of rain poured in, drenching her as she lay there, eyes wide and jaw working as though there were no more screams left in her.

Eric ran to the bathroom and grabbed a towel. He wrapped it around her shoulders and pulled her away from the window.

"It's okay, Sarah. Everything's gonna be all right. Don't worry. Don't worry." She sat trembling in his arms as he gently dried her hair and face. He noticed his cigarette on the floor beginning to singe the carpet and ground it out with his foot. Sarah curled up against him and began to cry. It was the first time she had cried since she'd heard the news about her mother, and even then there had only been a tear or two.

"That's it, Sarah. Let it out. I'm right here."

They sat there on the floor until the storm had passed over and the sun began to set. Sarah would doze off for a few minutes every half-hour or so and then start awake. Eric didn't try to move her, he simply sat there, holding her tightly, not letting her feel she was alone.

After a couple of hours, Sarah opened her eyes and looked up at Eric, asleep and snoring. In a soft, hoarse voice she began to speak.

"The rain was always there for me
When I cried
Myself to sleep,
When I felt
Out of my head,
When there was nothing
I could do.

There was always
That fresh wet smell
And a promise in the sky
Of good things on the way.

The only one
Who never gave up on me
Was the rain."

Eric looked down at her sleepily, and she sniffed, rubbing her nose with the towel.

"Did your mother write that?"

"It wasn't one of her better ones," she said, nodding.

He hugged her tighter to him.

"You still snore," she whispered.

"Shhh," he mumbled, already almost asleep again. "You need your rest."

The sky slowly faded to black and one by one the stars came out. The clouds obscured most of them, but she thought she could see most of Orion. Moving slowly, she reached out for a piece of the glass lying all around them. She gently pressed its cold edge into her fingertip until a droplet of blood surfaced. Her eyes fixed on it as it delicately broke free and ran down her finger and across her palm. She pressed her wounded finger to Eric's sleeping mouth, stifling the beginnings of his snore, and smearing his lips red. He shifted, his tongue slipping out, tasting the salt, but not waking.

She thought about moving, about climbing back up onto the couch, and then thought better of it. Let him sleep, she decided. Tomorrow they would fix the window. Then she would have to figure out a way to get him to leave.

STUCK IN THE MIDDLE WITH YOU

The two women sat at the coffee shop table in silence. The gentle shuffle of the waitresses walking, the rubber soles of their shoes lightly making contact with the dull tile; the silver tappings of spoons in coffee cups; the occasional heavy gurgles of automobile stomachs, belching and farting then fading away as cars passed the shop; all of these were in the background, but the women didn't acknowledge them. They sat as if neither one knew what to say to the other.

The younger woman scowled behind sunglasses. The older woman watched her reflection in the lenses and shifted nervously. She didn't like seeing herself. Especially at times like this. With an effort, she tried to start the conversation.

"Do you want some coffee, Lil?"

Ignoring the question, Lilith pulled a pack of Camel filters from her jacket pocket, turned her head slightly, her tongue slipping out for an instant to wet her lips, then placed a cigarette in her mouth. Stella, Lilith's aunt, shifted again, glancing around briefly. Seeing her niece for the first time in years made her feel old.

"Are you allowed to smoke in here?" she asked.

Lilith lit the cigarette.

"Why the hell are you here?" she finally responded.

Stella frowned, deepening the lines around her mouth.

"Smoking kills, you know. Not just you; you've never cared about your health.

But it's bad for me."

"Well get used to it."

"Why do you have to be this way? I'm blood. You don't have to be so mean."

Lilith took a long drag, then blew a stream of smoke into the air above Stella's head. It swirled around as if alive; faint forms struggling to escape. Stella ducked down a little.

"That stink will be in my hair for days."

Lilith turned away, focusing her attention on the window. Outside, two bald men wearing sunglasses and sucking on lollipops walked by. One saw her looking and smiled widely, pointing his finger at her. Lilith flipped him off.

"Who are they?" Stella asked.

"There's a damn Telly Savalas lookalike convention in town. They're all in mourning for the passing of Kojak." She took another drag from her cigarette. "They're fucking everywhere."

"I've always been attracted to bald men."

Lilith lowered her sunglasses and stared at Stella.

"Where's Uncle Roger? Didn't he come with you?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about." She paused, motioning to a waitress. "Can I get a cup of coffee, please? Thanks." She looked back at Lilith. "I really wish you wouldn't smoke around me. You should show some respect."

Lilith laughed.

"Why the hell should I?"

Stella shifted nervously in her seat again. Her reflection in Lilith's glasses looked paler than she thought she really was.

"It wasn't my fault."

"Well you were a big part of it."

They paused as the waitress set a cup of coffee in front of Stella, then slipped away.

"Look, Lil. I've made some mistakes, I admit it. But your father was a grown man and made his own decisions."

"Your stripper pal kind of helped him make that last decision."

"That was a long time ago."

Lilith turned away, her eyes focusing on the line of smoke charging upwards from the tip of her cigarette. It raced toward the ceiling, spreading slightly, then twisted and turned until it disappeared into the air between them.

Stella took a drink of her coffee and winced as she swallowed.

"It's hot," she said.

"It's coffee," Lilith breathed, listlessly.

"Roger left me, Lil."

Lilith said nothing, but ground her cigarette out. It lay in the ashtray on its side, a last thin wisp of smoke rising hesitantly from the broken remains.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Lilith said flatly. "What'd he do? Meet a stripper?"

"Jesus. This is embarrassing. He, um, he . . . Well, he left me to go to clown school." Stella turned away.

"Clown school?"

Stella nodded.

"Then why are you here?"

"There's a clown convention meeting at the Holiday Inn tomorrow. I was hoping I could stay with you until I find him."

"He left you to be a clown?"

"So, can I?"

Lilith sat staring out the window for a minute. Across the street another Kojak passed.

"Sure. Why not?" She smiled. "This could be fun."

Stella frowned.

"Don't tell your mother I'm in town, okay? We, um, don't get along too well."

"Join the club."

Stella pulled the covers back on Lilith's bed and dropped onto it accompanied by the screeching of the springs.

"I really appreciate this, Lil. My back just kills me if I don't sleep in a bed."

Lilith nodded without a word as she tried to make herself comfortable in the recliner. It was barely tolerable to sit in, much less to try to sleep in, but Stella hadn't wasted any time claiming the bed.

Every move she made was broadcast by the springs and exaggerated by the smallness of the apartment, which was only one room with a kitchenette taking up the far wall. Lilith tried to make it seem bigger by keeping all the furniture against the walls, leaving the center of the room open.

"You'd think your mother would give you a bigger place," Stella said, pushing the blanket down toward the foot of the bed and pulling the sheet up to her chest. "She has, what, two other buildings she rents out?"

"She wouldn't throw money away like that." Lilith lit her final cigarette for the day. "If she hadn't given birth to me herself, I wouldn't get any charity."

"I never understood what your father saw in her."

"Apparently he didn't either."

Stella squinted at the lamp next to Lilith.

"Could you turn that out?"

"When I'm through."

"You couldn't open a window, could you? I'd hate to get cancer after one night with you."

Lilith scowled, throwing her blanket off and leaned the chair upright. With a grunt she stood and crossed to the window next to the bed.

"You look comfy," she said, looking down at Stella.

"This bed is cozy." The springs groaned as she shifted onto her side. "I've really missed seeing you, Lil."

"Yeah. Whatever," she said coldly, sliding the window open.

"No. I'm serious. There's nobody to talk to back home."

"What about Roger?"

Stella frowned.

"He never listened. All he ever did was roll his eyes and go find something to juggle."

"So," Lilith said, lowering herself back into the recliner. "He's serious about this clown thing?"

"That's what I kept asking him. He lost his job at the gas station last month, and instead of looking for more work, he just started practicing falling down and doing magic tricks." She shook her head despondently. "There was no living with him, so I told him he had a choice to make."

"You mean you threw him out? He didn't leave you?"

Stella swallowed and turned her face away.

"You don't understand, Lil. My paycheck wasn't enough for the both of us. He had to find a job. There just weren't two ways about it." She began to sniffle. "So he packed up his rubber balls and phony flowers and magic scarves and left." Tears leaked from her eyes, dripping onto Lilith's pillow.

"So you gave him an ultimatum and he took it." She ground out her cigarette. "What're you doing tracking him down?"

"I want him back, Lil. You're too young to understand what it's like, having your man walk out on you. It does things to your self confidence." Her crying began to slow.

Lilith exhaled loudly and turned out the light.

The sign outside the Holiday Inn said "Welcome Clowns" in large white letters. Lilith and Stella were standing in the lobby when the first bus arrived. They watched carefully as the crowd of men milled around the front desk waiting for their room assignments, but Roger wasn't among them.

"I wonder how many buses are coming?" Stella asked.

"I would've guessed they'd have all shown up in one little car." Lilith dropped heavily into an overly padded chair. Her back ached from sleeping in the recliner. "Go figure."

"I don't think you're taking this too seriously," Stella barked at her. A large man with a soft red face stepped up, placing his arm around Stella with a laugh.

"Did I hear somebody say they were being too serious?" he asked in an overly-happy voice. Before the women could respond, he began drawing an endless, multi-colored scarf from his jacket pocket. At the sight of it Stella began crying.

"Thanks Clarabell. If we need any more help I'll give you a call," Lilith said hopelessly. "C'mon, Stella. Sit down. Everything's gonna be all right."

"Geez, I'm sorry," said the clown. He stood there sheepishly, watching Stella cry and tears began to well up in his eyes. "I'm so sorry. Here." He fumbled a piece of paper from his jacket pocket and thrust it out to Lilith, who took it hesitantly. "You c-can get y-your faces painted f-for free tomorrow." He sniffed loudly. "If you wanna."

Lilith looked at him coldly.

"Would you excuse us please?"

"Oh, oh, yeah, sure." He walked off sniffing, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Clowns," Lilith said, then turned back to Stella. "Calm down," she said soothingly, a tone Lilith didn't use very often. "Roger'll show up anytime now. Everything'll be all right." She wondered how sincere she sounded.

Wiping her eyes on her sleeve, Stella looked out the window as another bus pulled onto the lot.

"May-maybe this one?" she stammered.

"Sure, sure. He'll be on this one, definitely." She hoped she was right. She wasn't sure how much more of this she could put up with. It was already nearly noon, and her back was throbbing.

Then Roger walked through the doors into the lobby, laughing with a group of men.

"Roger!" Stella cried out, seeing him.

His mouth dropped open and he took a step back. Lilith thought he looked like a cornered rat with his pointed nose and beady eyes.

"How'd you know I was coming here?" he asked without saying hello.

"I talked to Frank," Stella answered, all remnants of tears gone from her face.

"He knew you couldn't resist this. A chance to learn some new tricks."

"Frank," he muttered to himself. "I am never buying him drinks again." He then saw Lilith. "Well I'll be. Is that Lilly?"

"Don't try and change the subject, Roger," Stella continued.

"Hi, Uncle Roger." Lilith smiled.

"Good lord, you've grown up!"

"Roger. Listen to me," Stella broke in. "You and I are going home now. Do you understand?"

Roger looked at her impatiently and held his two suitcases up in the air.

"I paid to come to this conference, Stella. I've got two days in a room of my own here and I plan on using them." He turned to Lilith. "I'm an official clown now Lilly."

"That's what Stella's been telling me."

"You know," he leaned close to Lilith. "These guys aren't very happy people." He then looked at Stella with a frown. "I really feel like I belong."

"Roger?" Stella whined. "You're not listening to me. You see?" She turned to Lilith. "What did I tell you? I can't talk to him!"

"You had your moment of fame, Stella. Can't you just let me do this?"

"Hey," Lilith laughed. "If you love something, set it free. Right Uncle Roger?"

"That's what I've always said."

Stella glared at both of them.

"So this is how it is, huh? You're both against me?" Tears began to build up and her voice began to tremble. "I trusted you, Lil. And you stab me in the back like this." She spun on Roger. "I expected this from you, you sonofabitch, but not from my own flesh and blood." With that, she dropped back into the chair and began bawling. A number of clowns stopped what they were doing to watch.

"S'that your wife, Roger?" one of them asked.

"Yeah," he drawled.

"Come on, pal. Let's get your room." The two of them walked to the reception desk and received their keys. Without a look back they walked to the elevator. As the doors opened, Roger turned around.

"It was good seeing you, Lilly. Stop by tomorrow. You can see me in my full splendor." Then the doors slid closed and he was gone.

Lilith looked down at Stella, not knowing what to do.

"Aunt Stella?" she said hesitantly. Pausing, she looked around the lobby to see if anyone was close enough to hear her. Convinced that she was safe, Lilith kneeled down next to Stella's chair. Sharp pain shot through her back and she groaned, "I'm sorry."

"No you're not," Stella snapped back.

"Really, I am," she lied. "Come on. Lets go back to my place and think this over."

Sniffing, with her mascara smeared beneath her eyes, Stella glanced up, and with a flicker of a smile, nodded.

"I knew you wouldn't turn on me, Lil. Not you."

Lilith smiled back weakly and helped her out of the chair.

Stella claimed the bed again as soon as they got back and didn't move from it for the rest of the day. Around three, after hours of crying and nose blowing, she sent Lilith out for bottles of gin and vermouth, telling her that only martinis would make her feel better. Seeing the wisdom in that, Lilith had left in an instant and proceeded to spend an hour taking a leisurely stroll to the liquor store and back.

The number of clowns and Kojaks that were in town was amazing. Everywhere she went, Lilith heard squeaky voices and honking horns, or "Who loves you, babe?" and suckling sounds as grown men nursed lollipops. She was almost glad to make it back to the apartment, a sentiment that faded as soon as she walked through the door. By the time the sun set, Stella was completely drunk and Lilith was beginning to regret it.

She stood by the window, watching the tiny city's lights start to come on. The moon was a pale sliver and only a few stars had begun to shine. She wished it would

rain. Only after a good rain did the city feel clean to her. Glancing back at Stella made her feel all the more trapped.

"My moment of fame," Stella mocked. "Ha! That was twenty five years ago." She poured herself another drink, spilling vermouth on Lilith's bed. "Can you believe he brought that up? Huh?" Lilith kept looking out the window trying to ignore her. She'd been saying the same thing over and over for the past hour, and Lilith didn't really want to hear about it. "Are you listening to me?" She paused. "Lilith!"

"What?" She felt like a fish being reeled in.

"Can you believe he brought that up?"

"No, I can't." She tried to go back to watching the city, but Stella started in again.

"You don't even know what he was talking about do you?"

Lilith sighed.

"No. Tell me." She tried to sound as uninterested as she could.

"Oh you don't want to hear about it," Stella said despondently.

"No, really," Lilith said flatly. "Tell me." Emotionless.

"It was nineteen sixty nine," Stella began. "You hadn't even been born yet. I was eleven years old and was on TV every week." She paused to take a drink. "I was a dancer."

Lilith turned, interested.

"You danced on TV?"

"Almost every week," Stella nodded, spilling more of her martini. "Do you remember the Banana Splits Show?"

"You mean those four guys in the animal suits?"

Stella smiled widely.

"Fleegle, Bingo, Drooper, and Snork," she sang.

"Yeah, I remember seeing re-runs of that. It was like Laugh-In for kids."

"Right!" Stella sat up sloppily, making the springs sound out in protest. "I was one of the Sour Grapes Bunch. We were the arch-rivals of the Banana Splits."

"I remember them, vaguely," Lilith said, setting herself in the window.

"Oh I wish you could have been there, Lil. You would have loved it. We had the most adorable little purple go-go outfits, and danced on national TV nearly every week."

She downed the last of her drink.

"And I was the best," she continued. "None of those little tramps could dance like me." She stifled a burp. "'Scuse me. I tell you I could move. They picked me to be 'Charlie, the Sour Grapes Bunch messenger girl' three times in three months. Oh lordy it was a scandal." She reached for the gin bottle. "The other girls were so jealous. But then it happened." She paused to fix another drink, opening the second bottle of gin.

"What happened?" Lilith couldn't believe it, but she was actually interested.

"I got my boobs."

"At eleven?"

"Yeah. They just kept getting bigger and bigger. I mean, you know, a little bit wouldn't have been too bad, but they just wouldn't stop growing." She took a drink of gin from the bottle. "Little girls go-go dancing is cute, you know? But if the little girl has a chest that bounces around, it's just kind of dirty, you know what I mean?"

"I could see that."

"Apparently I was distracting Fleegle Beagle. He was the boss of the Banana Splits, see? And the producers just couldn't have that." Stella leaned forward and whispered, "I think he drank a little, too." She burped. "'Scuze me."

"So they cut you loose?"

"So they cut me loose."

"Do you bring this up a lot at home?" Lilith asked.

Stella looked offended.

"I don't brag about it if that's what you mean." She took another swig of gin. "But I *was* on national TV nearly *every* week."

Lilith laughed.

"Did you put that on your resume when you started stripping?" She couldn't stop herself from asking.

Stella sat up straight and proud.

"I most certainly did. I wanted them to know I had experience. None of those women could dance like me. That's what attracted Roger to me. He used to come in and see me dance every weekend." She smiled. "He would put twenties in my g-string every night, until he finally worked up the nerve to write his name and phone number on one of them."

Lilith laughed again.

"How'd you know it was him?"

"Well, no one else gave me twenties. The rest were really cheap bastards, touching me like that and then later I'd find out they'd just stuck a dollar in there. It was

annoying. Anyway, Roger had the cutest little goatee back then, so he drew a little beard on Andrew Jackson."

"Clever."

Suddenly tears began pouring down Stella's face.

"And now he's gone."

Lilith rolled her eyes.

"Aunt Stella, please. You've gotta stop crying. This is probably for the best."

"Oh what the hell do you know about it?" The tears stopped just as suddenly as they'd started. She was angry now. "Have you ever had your man leave you? Have you?"

Lilith was quiet and turned back to the window. Clouds were forming along the horizon, making it hard to see the stars. When she finally looked back into the room, Stella had passed out, hugging the gin bottle to her chest. Gently, so as not to wake her, Lilith took the bottle and threw it out the window violently. It shattered on the concrete, sending pieces of glass flying all across the sidewalk and into the street. She hoped somebody would get a flat.

When Lilith woke up the next morning, Stella was already up and about. The bed was made, and she was singing to herself in the bathroom. Lilith frowned, squinting to keep the sun out of her eyes. She cursed silently to herself for leaving the chair directly across from the window. Stella danced out of the bathroom in a short-short skirt and low-cut blouse. Her hair was teased out and she wore her make-up heavily. Lilith wiped her eyes and looked at her again.

"Oh, you're up," Stella sang.

"Um, yeah. What's going on Stella?"

"What do you mean?"

"That outfit."

"It's nice isn't it? I feel ten years younger."

"Is that how you feel?"

"What do you think? I value your opinion Lil, really."

"Um."

Without waiting for an answer, Stella danced back in front of the mirror.

"You know, I think I could still make money dancing. What do you think?"

"Naked?"

Stella's head popped around the corner of the bathroom door.

"That's where the money is hon. You might try it sometime. You've got a nice figure. A little skinny, but that's probably because of the cigarettes." Her head disappeared into the bathroom again. "Yep. You quit smoking, let me show you some moves and you could make a lot of money."

"I don't think I'm the stripper type."

"Exotic dancer, honey. Remember, treat yourself with respect and others will too."

Lilith pulled the blanket up over her head.

"Well, I'm off," Stella said, coming out of the bathroom for the last time.

"You can say that again," Lilith said to herself, then, pulling the blanket from her head said, "Um, Aunt Stella? Where are you going dressed like that?"

Stella smiled.

"If Roger really wants it over, then it's over. I'm going down to the Ramada Inn."

"Not for the Telly Savalas lookalike convention?"

"I am in my prime, and there is no reason not to enjoy myself."

"Normally I would agree with you on that, Stella, but have you really thought this through?"

With a smile, she turned and swished out of the apartment. Lilith could have sworn she saw lacy black underwear peeking out from under Stella's skirt.

"Oh shit."

The lobby of the Holiday Inn was packed with children and clowns. Outside, a group of parents stood smoking, enjoying the silence as their responsibilities were taken over by men with painted-on smiles. Lilith hardly glanced at them as she threw her cigarette down on the parking lot and strode into the lobby. She was immediately overwhelmed. There must have been thirty clowns in just the lobby, and more in the meeting rooms holding seminars and entertaining hundreds of children. A sense of hopelessness washed over her. Then a fat clown with bushy orange hair and a green plaid suit walked up to her.

"I recognize you," he said, his voice high pitched and squeaky.

"Uncle Roger?" she asked.

"Nope. I took him up to his room yesterday. Are you looking for him?"

"Yeah, it's kind of an emergency."

"It's his wife isn't it?" His voice was suddenly normal.

"Yeah. You could say that."

"Room 744. He should still be there."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Here." He handed her a balloon with the words 'Get Happy' written on it.

Lilith stepped into the elevator and pushed the number seven button. The silence was startling. She hadn't even realized how noisy the lobby had been. She let the balloon float up to the ceiling.

The elevator stopped on the third floor and the doors slid open allowing two clowns to step in.

"Is this elevator going up or down?" asked the first clown.

"Up," Lilith said.

"Damn. We're going to be late, do you realize that?" said the other clown, the larger of the two.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about it." He paused and smiled at Lilith, then turned back to the other clown. "It's all your fault anyway."

"My fault? How do you get that?" He pushed the lobby button and stepped back against the wall. Lilith sank to the back of the elevator, her eyes darting back and forth as they spoke.

"Well, it's your damn nose that wouldn't stay on."

"Take that back."

"Why should I? I'm right. It's your fault."

"I said take that back. I deserve an apology."

"You don't deserve anything. You're a shitty clown."

Lilith's eyes widened. The number five lit up above the door.

"What did you say?" said the larger clown.

"You heard me. You're a shitty excuse for a clown."

The larger clown put up his fists and Lilith frowned.

"Okay, Sal," he said. "I've had about all the crap off of you that I'm gonna take.

You're just pissed off because Linda left you."

That apparently struck a nerve with the smaller clown.

"She didn't leave me! I left her!"

"Bullshit! You wanna know why she left you, Sal?" His voice began to raise.

"Do you wanna know why?"

The elevator reached the seventh floor with a ding and Lilith slipped forward as the doors opened.

"Don't you say it."

"Because I fucked her. That's why! And it was so good she left you!"

"That's it you fucker!" the smaller clown yelled, leaping onto the larger one. They began punching each other violently as the elevator doors slid closed, leaving Lilith standing in the hallway.

Shaking her head, she started down the hall and knocked on door 744. After a minute, Roger answered, his face almost completely made up and wearing a pair of red pants that stood out from his waist about a foot. Black suspenders held them up.

"Lilly! You made it. I didn't think you'd come, what with Stella hanging around your neck."

"Can I come in, Uncle Roger?"

"Sure, sure, sorry. I'm running a little late." He ushered her in, closing the door behind her. "The parade starts in fifteen minutes, and I'm a little nervous."

Lilith sat down on the bed as Roger sat in front of the mirror. The waist of his pants shifted upwards. She didn't know how to tell him about Stella. To be honest, she wasn't sure if he would care.

"I like your make-up," she started. "It's, um, very friendly looking."

"Do you really think so?" He paused to admire it himself. "I gotta admit, I like it too."

"Uncle Roger? I've got something to tell you, ah, about Stella."

He closed his eyes and frowned. His make-up smiled.

"What now?"

"Well, maybe it's for the best, really. Um, she went over to the Ramada Inn a little while ago."

Roger clenched his fists.

"The Kojak convention," he muttered.

"You know about it?"

He nodded.

"We were going to meet there, but our planners decided it would be best to keep us separated." He leveled his eyes at Lilith's in the mirror. "We've got a history, the clowns and the Kojaks."

"But you just became a clown."

"Lilly, honey. A clown isn't just make-up and funny clothes."

"It's not?"

"No," he said solemnly. "A clown has a responsibility to all the other clowns that came before him. We look out for each other. Kind of like Masons."

"Of course."

Roger swung around to face her. Beneath his clown make-up he was deadly serious.

"You're sure she went to them?"

Lilith nodded.

"She always had a thing for bald men," he said to himself bitterly. Suddenly he stood and pulled on his blue jacket, the bottom edge of which flared out to meet his pants. With a sharp movement, he snapped an oversized yellow bow tie on and grabbed a small red hat.

"What are you going to do?" Lilith asked.

"She's still my wife, dammit. I won't have her cavorting with the Kojaks. The parade route goes right by the Ramada Inn." He stopped at the door and turned to her. "I need you to do me a favor, Lilly."

"All right."

"Run over there and try to get her out. If she's in there with," he paused as if disgusted, "THEM, when the parade passes by, well, there may be trouble."

The two of them stepped out into the hallway. Lilith started for the elevator, but Roger turned the other direction.

"Aren't you coming downstairs, Uncle Roger?"

"I've got some clowns to talk to. You just hurry over there and do what you can. Good luck." With that he turned and stalked down the hall. Lilith turned and got in the elevator.

Lilith burst through the doors of the Ramada Inn out of breath and immediately had a coughing fit. Her body was wracked so violently that the clerk stepped out from behind the front desk to see if she was all right. Unable to answer, Lilith could only mentally curse cigarettes while motioning to the chairs, and the clerk helped her sit down. He looked worried, and Lilith tried to tell him she would be okay, but only succeeded in coughing even harder.

"I'll get you a glass of water," the clerk finally said, then disappeared through the doorway behind the front desk.

Lilith looked around the lobby and noted with some surprise that there were no Kojaks milling about. Maybe the convention was over and Stella had gone back to the apartment. Before the thought had even finished forming, she heard a loud male voice from the conference room shout "Who loves you, babe!" and she knew where they were. And where Stella was.

She stumbled over to the double doors of the conference room and peeked through the small windows. Inside, there were at least a hundred bald men jumping up and down, yelling, and each of them had lollipops either in their hands or in their mouths. At the front of the room, on a table, danced Stella. In her hand was a martini which sloshed out, splattering on the shiny head of the main Kojak. He laughed, wiping it off with his hand, then licking his palm. Lilith cringed. She'd never been a big fan of Kojak.

Outside, she suddenly heard the music of a marching band and realized she had very little time. As she was about to enter the conference room, the clerk laid his hand on her shoulder, stopping her.

"Here's your water. Are you all right?" He looked concerned.

"I am, but this place won't be for long." With that she shrugged his hand aside and pushed through the double doors. A couple of bald men turned, leering at her as she entered. Eyebrows wiggled and gold teeth shined. A handful of Players Club membership cards were thrust out to her as room numbers were whispered.

"Have a drink sweetie, on me," said a slimy voice from the sea of bald heads.

Saying nothing, Lilith pushed her way through the crowd and felt herself grow dizzy from the rush of cheap cologne. Taking a deep breath, she slipped by a large knot of men and finally reached the front of the room. Exhaling sharply, she reached up, tapping Stella on the leg, and paused, shocked. The black lacy panties were gone. Then she saw them. On the head of an unconscious Kojak in the corner. Lilith's face twisted into a disturbed grimace as she patted Stella on the leg again.

"Lil! Come on up here!" She was completely drunk, drinking in the cheers of the bald men along with her martini.

"No thanks, Aunt Stella. We've gotta be going."

"You go, honey. I'm having fun. They think I'm beautiful," she turned to the crowd. "Don't you, boys?" she yelled.

There was a general roar of approval, and she did a quick spin, which pulled her skirt up another inch.

"Aunt Stella, your panties are gone," Lilith said hopelessly.

"I know that. I gave them away." With a grin to the crowd she pulled her skirt up for a second, flashing them, then yanked it back down. The Kojaks went wild, cheering.

Suddenly above the roar of the crowd a voice was heard.

"Steeellllaaaa!"

"Oh no," Stella said softly as the room snapped into silence.

"Oh yes," said Lilith.

Roger stood in the doorway, scowling beneath his smiling clown face. With his white-gloved hands he pushed two Kojaks aside and marched up the center of the room, bald men parting involuntarily to let him pass. When he reached the front table, he stopped and looked up at Stella coldly.

"Where are your panties?" he said flatly.

"O-over there," she answered timidly, pointing to the corner.

He looked at Lilith.

"I'll get them," she said, and quickly ran to the unconscious bald man, snatching them from his head.

Roger pulled Stella down from the table, catching her in his arms when she started to fall. With a harsh look at the leader of the Kojaks, he turned and started for the door, carrying Stella before him.

"Now just a minute, clown," said the main Kojak. "The lady's with us." The crowd murmured its approval of their leader's assessment and moved together, blocking Roger's path to the door. Lilith groaned, but Roger stayed calm. Stella was in a daze, unsure of what was happening. Roger turned to face the head Kojak.

"You don't want to do this," he said harshly.

"Listen, baby. You're just a lone clown on our turf now, and I think the lady wants to stay here where everybody knows how to treat her. Right, baby?"

Stella looked first at him, then back to Roger. Before she could answer, the doors swung open again revealing a lobby full of clowns.

"Is everything copacetic, Roger?" said the largest clown from the doorway.

"Maybe. Maybe not, Phil. That's up to this cut-rate Kojak here."

The crowd of bald men murmured. Then the leader of the Kojaks raised his hand, silencing them. Roger looked calmly at his opponent's nametag, then smirked.

"What's it gonna be," he paused dramatically, "Eugene?"

"Let's take this outside, clown," he growled.

"My pleasure," Roger replied.

Stella smiled.

"Do you think I'm old and ugly?" she asked him.

Roger looked her in the eye and winked.

"You're as sexy as when I stuffed twenties in your g-string, sweetie." She threw her arms around his neck and started to kiss him, but he stopped her. "Don't mess up the make-up honey. I've got some business to take care of first." He turned with Stella still in his arms and pushed his way through the crowd. The Kojaks followed. Stella burped.

Outside, the clowns were waiting, the parade forgotten. Lilith stepped out of the crowd in the lobby and approached the clerk, who was sweating profusely.

"D'you still have that glass of water handy?" she asked.

Without a word, he sat the glass on the desk, his eyes fixed on the mass of clowns and bald men moving out into the street.

"I think I should call the police," he muttered, reaching for the phone. Lilith put out her hand, stopping him.

"This is beyond police, friend. They have a history."

"What?"

"Forget it. If you have to, then do it. But could you wait just a few minutes, for me?" She smiled and winked at him. He blushed, unsure. "Please?" With a mischievous grin Lilith slipped Stella's panties across the desk to the clerk. Blushing even redder, he picked them up and with a nervous swallow, slipped them into his pocket.

"I'll give 'em five minutes," he said.

"Thanks. You're a sweetheart."

As Lilith sat in a comfortable chair in the lobby of the Ramada Inn and watched, nearly three hundred clowns and Telly Savalas impersonators had at it in the streets. Scattered all across the concrete, among the masses of bodies viciously beating each other, were hundreds of lollipops in a multitude of flavors, and the skies filled with a plethora of multi-colored balloons released from the hands of the clowns. Stella sat on the sidewalk clapping with glee as her husband, Roger, proved his love for her in the most brutal fashion. Their marriage was saved, of this Lilith had no doubt. The look of sheer adulation in Stella's eyes made her certain. If Roger wasn't hospitalized or arrested, her aunt would be on her way home and out of Lilith's tiny apartment in a matter of hours.

As the combat waged on ceaselessly, stopping traffic and frightening children all up and down Fourth Avenue, Stella glanced in and caught Lilith's eye. She beamed proudly for her man, and feeling as if they were blood relations after all, Lilith gave her a thumbs up. She'd buy Stella some new panties before she left.

DREAMING

She had never seen the ocean.

Oh, sure, she had seen pictures. Clear blue water, sandy beaches, half-naked people milling about. But she couldn't be sure that it was real. You never know what you can believe in nowadays, what with all the special effects people in Hollywood. She had seen alien worlds and living dinosaurs, none of which were real, so maybe the ocean was like that. Some fantasy place lovers escaped to in the movies.

Anything was possible.

She closed her eyes, imagining she felt the warmth of the sun soaking into her, and smiled, resting her head on the edge of the tub. It had been so long since she had been truly warm. Naturally warm. Her blood was thin and watered down and didn't circulate the way it was supposed to. She couldn't remember the last time her fingers and toes hadn't been cold. Sometimes she couldn't even feel them. It was as if her arms and legs were flippers, like those of some Thalidomide baby, struggling just to stay alive. To stay afloat.

Every day there was something wrong. Something that shouldn't happen, but did. She had never done anybody any harm, she was sure of that. But still she suffered. She had always been small. A thin, wisp of a little girl, huddled in the corner with a book, afraid to raise her voice, afraid to be heard. Her imaginary friends had more substance to them. They had adventures, leaving her in her dark room, drowning in silence.

In the early days, Father had tried to be her friend and take care of her. There was only so much he could do, though. She always knew her father was weak. Even before she resented him for it, she knew.

Her mother had died in childbirth, and her father had never recovered from the loss. One of her earliest memories was of him crying softly in his room, cradling her mother's photo like a child. She had peeked in through the doorway.

She didn't blame him for his weakness. In a way, she felt responsible, taking his wife away from him, being so small that she required special attention, never really sharing anything with him. He had never been a father before, and having this tiny, delicate life completely his responsibility had terrified him. She accepted his drinking as she accepted everything in her life. Silently.

He never meant the things he would say. His hot breath, stinking of cheap wine, buffeting her face as she covered her ears and rocked back and forth, waiting for the storms to pass. And they always did. He would break down crying, hugging her tightly, his apology gasped out between sobs. She would wrap her boney arms around him, kiss him lightly on the forehead, and forgive him.

She even forgave him for his reaction when she had her first period. She had been in the bathtub and her screaming brought him running. He was drunk again and the sight of her, shrieking in the tub as the soapy water swirled with blood, had been too much for him. He lunged for the toilet, puked, and crawled out, yelling at her to stay in the tub. She had thought she was dying, that God was paying her back for killing Momma, any number of things. Her stomach knotted and she could smell the remains of

her father's wine. Everything grew dark, and slowly she slipped beneath the red streaked water.

She woke up, coughing and wheezing, sprawled out on the bathroom floor. She raised her head and moaned as sharp pain dug into her chest. She tasted wine on her mouth and gagged weakly. Her father was there on the floor next to her, trembling, curled up beneath the sink. He had broken two of her ribs, drunkenly performing CPR. It was a miracle he had been able to do anything, the doctor had said.

Sometimes she would tell herself that she remembers dying. That a feeling of contentment had washed over her as everything faded away. Sometimes she could remember seeing her mother, her long red hair flowing past pale shoulders, her brilliant green eyes, warm and welcoming. It was all very vague though. Maybe it was real. Maybe not. The more she thought about it, the more real it became.

She had never dreamed about her mother before that. Afterwards, she was always there. Sometimes in the background, washing dishes or dancing with strangers. Sometimes speaking to her, telling her important things she could never remember when awake. Once, she had passed her mother on a street and when she turned and called out, her face was as smooth as glass, featureless.

She opened her eyes suddenly, recalling that image. Shifting down lower into the soapy water, she shuddered and hugged her thin arms to her stomach. She wanted to cry, but held back, telling herself it was pointless. Crying wouldn't solve anything. It never had.

After the incident she wound up in foster care as her father sank further down. At first he had come to see her every few days, but his visits became more and more infrequent, until finally, he just didn't show up any more. Crying couldn't change that then. It wouldn't change anything now.

Only one foster family had ever considered taking her in, and that had been in the beginning. She must have been twelve or thirteen. She wasn't sure. The days all ran into weeks, into months, into years, becoming all the same day. She tells herself again and again that they were a good family at heart, trying to draw her out, to get her involved. But there wasn't anything they could do.

After staying with them for a week or so, the family took her camping, but she got sick. Everyone was swimming in the river by the campsight while she sat on the bank, drawing designs in the sand with a stick. She remembers dropping it with a start as a black snake slithered out of the brush. The long, shiny body slipped by her bare foot, into the water, and swam down along the shore. She began shaking and couldn't catch her breath. Her eyes watered, blinding her. She stumbled across the grass to the tent and crawled inside, burying herself inside the sleeping bags.

It took a while for the family to realize she wasn't on the bank anymore, and she heard them come splashing into camp calling her name. They shouted and shouted but she couldn't answer. Or wouldn't. She didn't remember which. When they finally looked inside the tent and found her, wide eyed and curled up, they yelled at her, telling her she shouldn't have scared them like that. She was silent. They wouldn't have understood. She didn't even understand.

On their first night back home, she went to bed early, right after dinner. Through the floor vent she could hear them discussing her. She couldn't make out the words, but she knew they were talking about her.

At around two in the morning she heard the door to her room creak open. She pretended not to hear it, peeking through half-closed eyes at the doorway. Her foster father was there, looking down at her. He was naked and hairy. An ogre in the half-light of the moon. His penis was hard, pointing at the ceiling. She didn't move. He stood there for what seemed an eternity, not moving, just watching her. She felt as if she were under water, looking up at the sun, not knowing what it was or why it was there. The room was a vacuum. No sound escaped. There was only the pressure of the water crushing in on her from all sides. Then she realized that he was gone.

At breakfast the next morning, she said nothing about it. She wasn't even sure it had really happened. Everyone ate in silence and then she was told that they were taking her back to the shelter. She nodded, expecting it.

She wondered now, how many times he had done that. Stood there watching her sleep, imagining all the filthy things he wanted to do but wouldn't. Sometimes she still woke up and expected to see him there, his fish eyes, staring unblinking. His belly covered in hair. His erection, raising and lowering as he breathed. No other family took her in until she was old enough to leave on her own.

She couldn't hold a job, her health was so bad, so she had to live on welfare. It was barely enough to survive, but she made due. She found a small one-room apartment and rarely left. Curled up on the shabby bed, she would watch as the roaches grew more and more brazen. Whether the lights were on or not, they would stream up and down the

walls, across the bare floor and sometimes across her own body. When she put her stale bread into the dented toaster four or five of the shiny brown bugs would scurry out, fleeing the heat. The water from the faucets was yellow and stank of rot. She would wake up with her face wet from crying in her sleep, a luxury she tried to avoid while awake.

It's no wonder she didn't sleep very well. Her dreams were filled with dirty memories that even her mother's soothing words couldn't wash away. The boys at school, groping her as she drifted through the halls; stumbling and falling in the aisle of the bus, blood pouring out of her nose; hiding in a restroom stall at the library after an old man, stinking of cigars, had rubbed up against her in one of the stackrooms. Every night she waded through these memories and more, just trying to stay afloat until dawn.

She raised her skinny leg, resting her foot on the slippery silver of the faucet. The scar was still there, across her knee. She had been walking back to her dingy little apartment from the grocery store over three months ago. It was late. The moon was looking down on her, lighting her way up the garbage-strewn sidewalk. Sometimes she would sit up until dawn, just staring at the moon, wishing she could trade places.

A man stepped out of the shadows. She couldn't see his face. They were all the same man anyway. Bigger than her. Stronger than her. This man held a knife. She dropped her groceries as the moonlight shimmered on the blade. She tried to scream but couldn't catch her breath. He stepped in close to her, punching her in the mouth. She was on the concrete, her hand resting in a pool of milk she had just purchased, her knee scraped and bloody. Then he was on her, forcing her down on her back. He was so

heavy. She couldn't move. She was tired and weak, as she always was. The knife blade pressed into her neck and she felt her dress being torn. His fingernails scratched her as he ripped her panties away.

The moon looked down impassively. Tears flowed down her face as she prayed to trade places, but the moon didn't move. As he thrust inside of her, she screamed. She finally screamed. The knife drew blood. She felt it trickle down her throat and closed her eyes.

Then she heard a voice. A woman's voice. She couldn't make out what was said. She was under water, away from everything. Sound could barely reach where she was. Then she felt the weight disappear. She heard a hissing sound and groans. She opened her eyes and saw a shadowy angel blocking her sight of the moon. The angel sang something comforting to her and then turned away. She looked and saw the man lying on the ground, grinding his hands into his eyes. The groans were coming from him. The angel then kicked him hard again and again. The points of her boots dug into his groin and he squealed. The angel spit on him and returned to her side, helping her up. She half carried her up the steps of an apartment building and into a room.

"You're gonna be okay."

She looked around to see if the angel had said that but she was gone. Weakly she put her hand to her crotch and looked at her fingers. They were red. She fainted.

A cool, damp cloth was touching her neck. Her eyes fluttered open and saw the angel taking care of her. She smiled. The angel raised her dark eyes to hers.

"My name is Di. Don't talk. Everything's all right."

She felt the cloth on her fingers and weakly gripped Di's hand.

"R-Rachel."

She bobbed in and out of consciousness for the rest of the night.

The sun, warm on her cold face, brought her around sometime during the morning. Di was asleep in an overstuffed chair by the window. Her hair and her eyes were deep shades of brown; her skin glowed golden. She was dressed in black and wore a turquoise necklace, her only jewelry. On the coffee table in front of her was a photograph of the man. He was lying on the sidewalk, grimacing in pain, but his features were very distinct. Di later said it was for identification purposes, if she wanted to report him to the police.

Rachel thought about it and shook her head. She had already started making it all unreal in her mind. She didn't want to acknowledge it any more. Di had tried to talk her into it but she wasn't to be budged. A few weeks later Rachel found a photocopied poster on a telephone pole a block away with the picture on it, declaring the man a rapist and warning the neighborhood. When she pointed it out, Di only shrugged and kept walking.

Di wouldn't let her go home for a couple of days, insisting that she stay there and rest. She collected the mail from the place Rachel had been staying and returned disturbed. She said that a human being shouldn't live alone in a disgusting little rat trap like that. The toilet had stopped working and roaches had infested the bed. She had been afraid to look in the refrigerator. Rachel shrugged. It was all she could afford. Di let it drop and they spent the rest of the day talking.

Rachel couldn't remember the last time that she had actually told anyone about herself. There was something about Di that drew the words out. She tried to ignore to

look on Di's face as the words came pouring out. It was a mixture of concern and fear. It reminded Rachel of her mother's face in her dreams.

Di fixed them a big dinner later that first week, lighting candles, and laughing nervously. She fidgeted around the whole evening, but Rachel didn't say anything about it. Instead she complimented her on the meal. It was the best food she had eaten in months. Di joked about fattening her up and Rachel looked down. She didn't like people to look at her. She never had. She was suddenly gone from there. Alone in her head, cursing her health, cursing her life, cursing everything.

She snapped back when Di touched her hand softly, asking if she were okay. Rachel nodded slightly, squeezing her hand, not meeting her eyes. Then Di asked her to move in. She knew it would be cramped but maybe sometime later they could move into a bigger place. Rachel began to cry. Just a little at first. A single tear, breaking free, escaping down her face, followed quickly by more. She hugged Di tightly and, sobbing, buried her face into her hair. She breathed in the clean scent and felt comfort. Safe for the first time she could remember. They held each other there forever and Rachel felt Di's lips on her neck. It was a soft kiss, almost nothing at all. She returned it hesitantly, not sure what to do. What would come next.

Remembering that moment brought new tears.

There was a knock at the bathroom door, then it swung open. Di slipped her head into the room and winked.

"Is everybody decent?"

She frowned, seeing Rachel still in the tub.

"You're gonna make us late, hon. The plane leaves in an hour. Get moving." She started to close the door, then paused. "Are you crying?"

Rachel looked away, but Di entered the bathroom and knelt down by the tub. She pushed Rachel's hair, as red as her mother's had ever been, away from her face, and pulled her close. She kissed the tears and looked her in the eye.

"Is everything all right?"

Rachel nodded.

"Good. Now, come on. We need to get going."

She had never seen the ocean.

AWAKENING
the journal of Gregory Samson

I cannot stop my hands from shaking as I begin to write this journal, but I must document all of this before it is too late. There is no simple way to comprehend my state that does not call into question everything I have ever known or thought to know. My entire life has become a movie set, and I have only just begun to realize there are boards propping up my house. I pray that whomever finds this log will understand what I am saying.

I pray. What an absurd phrase. If I have learned but one thing over these past few days (has it only been days?), it is that we are alone in this world, in this universe. God is for the weak children afraid of the dark. Those who cannot take responsibility for their lives. They make me sick. They think that their simple frailties, a little blindness, lameness, cancer, AIDS; they think these are sufferings. These are the sufferings of the hog to the slaughter. To the hog, the farmer is God, with his slop, his fences, his truck ride to the Knife. If they could but think, they would know there was no God. Only man, just barely above them in the food chain.

The hogs do not dream.

The first day was the worst. The normalcy of that morning mocks me. There was no difference between that and every other dawn. I woke up from uneasy dreams only half-remembered. After lying in my rickety bed for what seemed like hours, all I could recall was that I had been climbing stairs. My room was cold, even though spring was nearly upon the tiny gray city where I live. It is always cold here in Flannery.

When I got out of bed, my legs ached, as if I had truly been on those dream stairs. It was no different from the previous weeks. Each morning I had the same dream, but could never remember where the stairs led. I turned the heater on and crossed the room to the kitchenette, the cold of the hardwood floors stabbing into my feet. Mornings were always the worst part of my days. No matter how much sleep I got the night before, it was never enough. I invariably felt sore and wasted until well past noon. Now I have chosen not to sleep and am intimately aware of the passing of time. Now I can feel the seconds flake away like dead skin. There was no food in my refrigerator, only a battered carton of orange juice and two heels of bread. I had forgotten to go to the store again.

My entire evening had been spent working on a letter to a young lady. I will not lie and say that I loved her. I didn't even know her name, but she was magnificent, with flowing black hair, a mischievous smile, and those eyes. There was wisdom in her dark eyes. A knowledge beyond my world and me. She was a student at the college here. That's all I knew about her, but every Tuesday and Thursday, she and two friends spent their afternoons in the coffee shop by my apartment building. Once, I dared to go there and stand behind her in line to buy a drink. She smelled clean and sharp, dangerous. Her voice was music as she excused herself and slipped past, lightly brushing against me on her way to her table and friends. I fumbled with my money, spilling it out on the counter, unable to focus, then left quickly, forgetting my change. I didn't miss it.

My letter would introduce me in an honest, safe way. To have her lay it aside would be easier to accept than to see those full lips form the words, to hear that angelic voice say "Leave me alone." I would rather die. Thus the letter. In it I explained my

feelings for her in a way she would have to take notice of. I know that if she only knew me she would love me as I love her.

I had no breakfast that morning. Instead, I entered my bathroom and, after taking care of certain necessities, prepared my shower. I pulled the curtain closed and turned the water on. The pipes groaned and shook as though they would burst out of the wall. Allowing the bathroom to fill with steam before I bathed was a habit I had gotten into as the weather had grown colder. It was one of my few luxuries. As I passed the mirror I was startled by my reflection. This other me, with its dead, bloodless pallor, its lids drooping over washed-out eyes, its greasy brown hair sticking up in all directions, was not me. I am even surer of that now. I had always been uneasy around mirrors, with their oh, so perfect illusions. They are liars. Everything you see is backward, the opposite of what truly is. What I saw in the mirror was not me. I would smash all mirrors if I could. If there were any point. But I know there isn't. It was absurd to even think it, but I want to record everything I felt and thought up until this day.

I stood by the window for an eternity, looking out at the street below, the icy rain tapping against the window in a frantic, desperate rhythm. I took a deep breath and sighed. I didn't want to go out. I wanted to crawl back into my little bed and dream my dream again. To reach the top and remember. But that would come later. This was only the first day.

When I opened the bathroom door, a cloud of steam bloomed out, enveloping me. The tiny droplets of water fell against my face like hundreds of feather-light fingertips. It was the most comforting feeling I knew. After showering beneath the nearly-scalding water, I returned to the mirror and prepared to shave. The lather on my face was cool,

refreshing. With a smooth, polished motion I opened the straight razor. It had belonged to my grandfather and my father before me. Light glinted off the blade as it opened. With my free hand I wiped a space clear on the glass, allowing that face to peek through at me. Slowly I began to shave.

It was the man in the mirror who caused my accident. He flinched, startling me, forcing the razor's edge into the flesh of my neck with a cool, clean slice. The blade split the skin and pain shot through my throat like fire as the lather entered the wound. Immediately, I dropped the razor and began splashing water on my face to get the burning lather out and off. I was weak then. I was one of Those-I-Despise. The pain brought tears to my eyes. That was why it took a few moments to realize there was no blood. The razor was clean. There was no swirl of crimson, streaming into the water of the sink.

Frightened (another weakness of the past), I washed my face clean of the lather and leaned closer to the mirror. The wound was larger than I had anticipated, being almost a second mouth across my throat, just below my adam's apple. It was ugly. Vaguely sexual. I couldn't keep my eyes from lingering on it. My fingers, independent from my body, rose up to touch the gash. I cringed as they felt along the smooth edge of the cut, but the pain had ceased. There was no feeling at all. It felt like the edge of a rubber mask.

As my fingers slipped inside, I could feel the skin pull away from my neck. A soft, tearing sound filled my ears and I began to gag. My breath was foul. Like something decayed and long dead. My reflection smirked, mocking me as I turned away, diving for the toilet to throw up. There was still no blood from the wound. The loose

flesh flapped lightly as I emptied my stomach, and I felt as though I would pass out. In truth, I don't know how long I sat in the cold floor with just my towel around me. My thoughts were hectic and muddled. I can't say what went through my mind at the beginning. I have no idea.

The mirror was no longer fogged when I found the strength to stand again. My legs were weak. My blood felt thin. Again my eyes were drawn to the slash across my throat. I leaned my head back, pulling the opening apart without touching it, and felt cool air enter. My hands rose again with a will of their own, touching the edges tenderly. Inside, instead of pink muscle or tendon, there was a leathery black layer, like a second skin. My stomach knotted again and I tried to hold back a scream as I stumbled away from the mirror, slamming my back against the towel rack before falling to the floor. I scrambled out into the bedroom, bruising my knee against the doorframe.

Trembling and alone in my bedroom floor, I reached for the telephone. I was rather proud of myself at that point for having the clarity of mind to call my employer and fabricate a lie. He wasn't pleased with my absence and let me know it, but there was nothing that he could say to change my mind. I told him I was very sick. Vomiting, diarrhea, that sort of thing, and wasn't sure when I'd be back to work. Not that they'd miss me. A chimp could've done my job, strolling up and down the aisles of the store, straightening the stock on the shelves. My true talents were never appreciated.

I was an artist. A poet, specifically. My co-workers, sheep that they were, amused themselves by saying I thought too much. They joked about the distant look in my eyes at store meetings, about the indifference I showed to the customers, especially the women, bra-less and stinking of perfumes. They disgusted me as much as the people

I worked with. More sometimes. It was wonderful to get those feelings out on paper; to write a poem exposing their disgusting ways and immoral lifestyles. I haven't been published but that does not invalidate my work. I now know why my insights were so vivid and shocking: so outside the norm. Now I know.

It was noon before I realized that the pain in my stomach was hunger. The entire morning had been a haze that I could barely see through. I am not so proud that I will not admit I was frightened. I was still one of you, then. Opening my throat was the first step toward opening my eyes. From the pantry, I scavenged a bag of stale potato chips, the first swallow being the worst. I could feel rings of muscle contracting downward as the chips made their way past the wound, but there was no pain.

Once I had eaten, I began to pace. My legs, which had only recently stopped aching, soon began to hurt again. To keep from thinking about my throat, I returned my attentions to my dream. The stairs seemed to go on forever, but I knew there were only four floors in the building. I don't know where I was. I climbed and climbed, losing track of the floors I had passed. Suddenly a door loomed before me, a large number five scrawled across it in what could have been blood. I'm not sure. My hand reached out for the handle and as my fingers wrapped around it, it changed to dry, brittle bone. From behind the door I could hear noises. Eerie scraping sounds, like rats gnawing concrete.

Then the sun went down and shadows spread out along my floor, snaking over me, covering my nakedness. I had forgotten about dressing that morning. As I watched the sky turn from blue to pink to purple to black, my fingers drifted to my wound again. I was barely aware of them at all. They slipped up beneath my skin, exploring the cut, pulling it away from my neck. It didn't hurt. It felt more like having a throat full of

mucus suddenly clearing away. My breathing was freer, more natural. As my fingers slid to the corners of the gash, they happened upon what felt like a seam, on the inside, invisible from the outside. I quickly pulled my hand away, trying to ignore the discovery and focus on the sun as it disappeared.

The room grew dark, and without realizing it, I fell asleep on the floor.

I awoke from my dream of the stairs, on the second day, not to the alarm clock I was used to, but to the faint scratchings of two roaches creeping across my skin. My eyes snapped open, but I didn't move. I could feel their tiny dry feet pushing them onward, up my leg, across my belly, then down and off me, onto the floor. They crept along the boards, their antennae swaying back and forth, until they vanished beneath my bed. Glancing up, out the window, I noticed the sign of the gas station on the corner. It was still lit up in the semi-darkness of dawn, but the first letter was burnt out. Huge red letters glowed against yellow backgrounds: "HELL." I crept to the window and pulled the blinds closed.

It was only when I could no longer put off going to the bathroom that I again approached the mirror. The edges of the cut had turned purple and stiff. As I touched them, the corners split a little more along the hidden seam. I couldn't stifle a groan. I want to make it clear that I didn't mean to do what I did next. It just seemed to happen on its own, before I could stop it. My traitorous hands slipped into the wound and split the seam, parting the skin all the way around my neck. It was like peeling an orange and exposing the meat. But instead of muscle and blood, there was only the tough, black layer beneath.

Try as I might, I couldn't stop my hands from their actions as they forced their way up under the skin, working it loose from whatever was underneath. Drool ran from my mouth, dripping down into the sink, and my wide rabbit eyes witnessed unblinking what happened next. My hands began to pull the outer skin up slowly, like removing a Halloween mask. The gentle tearing away of my flesh was too much to bear. I screamed and spun away from the mirror, bursting out into the bedroom once more. My sanctuary.

I climbed onto the bed, drawing my knees up to my chest and rocked back and forth there for eons. My eyes were wide and hard to close, even just to blink. I could feel the loose skin of my neck hanging against what lay beneath.

I had to stop this. I needed help. Someone to tell me what was happening. The phone was on the floor at the foot of the bed, but I couldn't move toward it. What would I say to a doctor? For an hour I sat trying to describe this predicament in my mind before finally giving up. My stomach was knotted with hunger again. Eating was more essential to me at that point than going out for help. I was only frightened, not in pain or sick. Besides, I am not a medical oddity, to be written up in books to make some doctor famous. I am me. Not a sideshow freak. Not the elephant man. Not the dog-faced boy. I am me. There was nothing left in the pantry to eat, so I wolfed down the heels of bread and finished off the orange juice.

At two I went to the window and raised the blinds. She would be showing up for coffee with her friends any minute. I couldn't wait to see her; for her presence to somehow make all of this unreality disappear. Then I saw them, coming up the street from the school. My Lady was in front, as usual. She was forceful that way. In command. She would love me if she knew me. She would help me. Her friends were

typical of the sluts that litter this city as they get their "educations." One wore tight clothes and had short brown hair. The other, blonde, tied in a pony tail. My Lady was dressed all in black. She was a vision of perfection. As they approached, my traitorous hand moved to my genitals without my knowledge. Before I realized it, my hand was fondling myself erect. That was when My Lady looked up at the building. She laughed and pointed. The others looked away, laughing and embarrassed. I could hear their laughter through the glass, but was unable to stop my hand. It would not obey. It had a mind of its own. Quickly I closed the blinds with my free hand and fell to the floor as I reached orgasm.

I used my letter to her to clean up the mess, then threw it away. I know now that we were not meant to be together. I cursed my hand for its treachery and considered removing it as punishment, but stopped short. That was the moment I began to understand how alone I was. This room, with its cold floors and roaches, was my world, my universe. I was God here. What need did I have for any other god? Thinking that, I returned to the bathroom and my place in front of the mirror.

It took twenty minutes to work up the courage to thrust my hands up under my skin again. It was a horrible, unnerving sensation as the skin separated from what was beneath. My lips pulled loose and I began to gag as my teeth and tongue tore away. Then my nose came free, and with soft, wet pops, my eyes left my head. Everything was dark as I slid my hands around beneath my skin, loosening my ears and hair. With a deep breath I pushed my face, my scalp, my Self, up off of my true head. I heard the dry slap as my face fell to the sink, but didn't look at it. No longer was the sickly face of Gregory Samson staring at me with his hateful glare. Something new had taken its place. The lie

had been revealed. But on that day all I could do was stare and try not lose my mind. I could feel insanity clawing its fingers into me as I had done my mask, and I struggled to keep it at bay.

The thing in the mirror that was me was shiny and black. The head was soft-shelled, with short antennae rising from the scalp, free to move, finally, after all these years. The mouth was a simple, lipless opening. A thick black tongue moved inside like a worm covered with short stiff hairs. The eyes were smooth black orbs. There was nothing human about them at all. The reflection from the mirror was repeated on their surface again and again and again, like a hall of mirrors trick. Tiny mandibles on the corners of the mouth moved as if alive and the slow tongue brushed against them. I was suddenly aware of my breathing. I could feel the air rushing over the tiny hairs on my tongue, down into my lungs and then back out. My antennae moved on their own and I could feel their bases tugging gently, guiding them back and forth.

It took only an instant to see all of this, to take in the details of the reflection. I tried to scream but only clicks and screeches left my mouth. Frantically, I snatched my face from the sink and tried to pull it back on over my head. The neck ripped as I forced it on, and try as I might, I could not get it to fit properly. My nose was shifted off to the side and turned at an angle. One ear hung up toward the top of my head while the other was too low. My eyes would not sit level. It was as if I had destroyed their fasteners on the inside and they simply wouldn't go back the way they were before. I could feel the antennae pressed down against my head, still moving beneath my scalp. My mouth fit back into place but my lips hung loose and my tongue would not follow my commands. I pushed and pulled at my face, trying desperately to shift my features around into a

semblance of normalcy. Somewhere in the room, an annoying whining began. After nearly an hour I realized the whimpering sounds were coming from me.

When I finally left the bathroom, I looked as much like I had before as was possible. Still, my eyes, nose and ears kept gradually sliding down my face as my hairline moved forward. As I sat in the corner of my room, the phone began to ring. The sound was piercing, drilling into my head like burrowing insects, but I wouldn't answer it. I refused to speak, for fear of hearing those inhuman noises that had escaped me earlier. The phone kept ringing, reverberating against the bare walls of my little world, until I thought I would lose my mind. When it stopped, tears began to pour down my face, from eyes much lower than they should have been.

By the time my crying had slowed to a halt, the sun had set. I don't know where the day went. My hunger had become an annoying irritation, the pain sharp and nagging. I needed food, but was overcome by panic whenever I approached the front door. There was a convenience store only a block away. If I could just make it there and back without being seen, everything would be all right. I was sure of that. As I sat, trying to convince myself that it was safe to leave my world, I nodded off to sleep.

Again the stairs. I climbed and climbed, all the time feeling as if on some sort of pilgrimage, that there was something holy at the top, behind the door. The stairs seemed to go on as far up as I could see. My legs began to tire. My joints ached. My lungs burned. My shoes were leaden, so I paused just long enough to kick them off, then continued on my journey. The stairwell gradually became hotter and hotter. I began sweating profusely. I felt as if I were going to melt. I paused once more, this time removing my clothing, and the heat lessened. Naked, I started back up the stairs. I had

lost track of the floors as they passed by, but I knew there were only four. One for each season, maybe? I don't know. Suddenly the heavy, fifth floor door appeared before me with its handle of bone and its bloody number five. Something was different this time. I was no longer afraid.

As my fingers slipped around the bone handle, the door began to swing open. I could barely contain my curiosity. I had to see what was behind it. There was no light, so I entered slowly, the dry, scratching sounds filling the air around me like dust motes, swirling and alighting on my skin. When I had crossed the threshold, the door swung shut and darkness blanketed me. I could sense movement all around, but could see nothing. Something leaf-like crept across my bare feet. With a whir, another thing flew past my ear, its brittle wings thrashing against my hair. The noises grew louder: an intense buzzing, innumerable clicks and tiny screeches, and always, always the sound of movement.

Then, with a flash, a row of lights snapped on above my head and I could see my surroundings. Thousands of insects: beetles, roaches, crickets, wasps. Creatures I had never seen before, swarmed all around. I was in a long, narrow hallway with barely room to move. I had to go forward. The insects covered every inch of the walls, the ceiling, the floor. They were in my hair, creeping back and forth, forming nests. They were all up and down my bare arms and legs, burrowing into my ears, my mouth, my anus. But still I walked on, crunching them beneath my feet, feeling them ooze between my toes.

And then I was there. The hall ended, opening onto a large room. The throne room. My eyes widened and a scream caught in my throat. My legs gave out and I dropped to my knees among the bugs. Before me were two man-sized preying mantises,

their pale green bodies glowing in the half-light from the hallway. They were copulating like mad, the male mounting the female, its genitals thrusting in and out violently. As I watched, unable to look away, she turned her massive head around and with her jaws clicking, began to gnaw into her lover's head. I could see myself reflected in her smooth eyes. And still he continued to thrust. She chewed and chewed. His blood, red and man-like, sprayed into the air, splattering across my belly. And still he continued to thrust. She ate part of his eye with wet, slurping noises. One of his antennae smacked to the floor. It was close enough to reach out and touch. He was dead. And still he continued to thrust. It was purely reflex action now. His body would finish what he had begun, but he would never know it.

Then the insects swarmed over me, covering me in their scratching embrace, chewing on my skin, eating it away until I was one of them, and they were a part of me.

I slept straight through the third day and night, not waking until the following dawn.

When my eyes fluttered open, they were down around my cheeks. I was very calm then. I remembered everything from the dream and understood. The sun was just coming up. I knew I could not go out in the daylight. I would be discovered. I do not want to die. Though that may be my only salvation. You and your kind will be sure and kill me. I despise you for that power. I have slept enough of my life away. I decided to sleep no more.

My day was spent thinking over events from my life. Memories I could no longer trust. I have always been what I am. Otherwise my entire life has been the progression of madness. And I am not insane. My parents died in an automobile accident when I

was in my teens. I had no other relatives. They died before having a chance to tell me the truth. I am alone. I was ravenous, but whole hours passed as I focused on the pain. I could feel my stomach spasm and writhe, but I had to wait. To go out during the day and be discovered would prove my sanity to the world. But they will kill me. The pain was a tight red ball in my gut. It expanded, consuming my entire body. I floated on the pain. And then the sun set again.

Pushing my face back up into place, I stood and re-entered the bathroom, to confront the mirror.

I had to have food. There was no more denying it. I had to go out. I am not one of you. I never have been. I don't know what I am, but I know I am me. My parents must have known. Were they like me? Why was I here? My stomach was a rock. Burning pain shot down through my legs and up through my chest. I needed a hat. Something to hold my face, to keep it from sliding.

My reflection repulsed me. That was me. I understood now. That was the me that I was. But now . . . now I am me. And I must eat. The sun has been down for hours. I have been waiting for the streets to empty completely. An old, oil-stained ball cap had been in my closet for years, and I rarely wore it. I wear it now. It is cold enough outside for my scarf not to attract attention. I wish I could wear sunglasses, but my nose and ears won't support them. If I am caught, they will kill me. I know that. I am not insane. I am me. I am alone. I can never hope to find another like me. I can never let anyone find out. They will kill me. My hat says "Keep on Truckin'." If I die, this journal is the record of my sanity. Until they find me and kill me, I must always assure myself, I am not insane. I am me. I am alone. I am starving. I have bundled up in many layers of

clothing, and wear my coat collar up. I must not speak. I must not make a sound. They will kill me for sure. My reflection looks almost normal. I pray that I will pass for one of you. I am not mad. You will see. When you kill me you will see. You will read this and know that I know what I am.

If I return from this quest, I will have been lucky. I must not doubt my sanity. If I believe I am insane, my guard will drop and they will kill me.

You will kill me.

I pray that I die tonight, and don't return to this journal. Then I can be sure.

I am sane.

BURY ME IN COLD GRAY

Dream Number One:

The ten people I despise the most are gathered before me. I wear an obviously false mustache and a Mrs. Peel leather jumpsuit and no one thinks twice about it. They are like sheep. They cry and weep and gnash their teeth pull their hair and tell me their fears fears fears. Can I help them? Please? I grin and my mustache slips. Welcome to Annie's House of Phobias; open twentyfourseven. One at a time I lead them away and condition them against their worries. . . or so they think. I condition them to freeze to become immobile when afraid. My mother stands trembling eyeswide slackjawed as I circle her. Darkness everywhere. One light above us. "I'm a lesbian." She chokes. "I'm a whore." She tries to run but can't. "I fuck niggers and spics on the sidewalk while shouting your name and address." Her eyes roll up in her head and she pisses herself. She knows who I am now but it's too late. She's frozen, trapped in her own gnarled body. In passing I wonder if I could convince everyone I hate to take the treatment, but quickly realize that I'd never have the time to treat them individually (therein lies the fun) nor the place to stack all their paralyzed bodies. Instead, I take the ones I have, mother father teachers bosses boyfriends and load them onto a flatbed truck and drive them off without telling them where we're going. They wail and moan and piss and shit as the interstate winds push them near the edges of the truck. The road flashes by and one falls like unsecured furniture, breaking into pieces for the birds to feed on. Sky burial. The only way to go. As I drive into the sunset I realize that I'm whistling a song from my

childhood. I think it's the theme to H. R. Pufnstuf, but I'm not sure. Whatever it is it makes me happy. So happy.

Late In The Bar:

We are all maggots, writhing eating living on the corpse of a dog long dead. Time lapse destruction on a cosmic scale. He's looking at me again. Hungry . . . alone . . . a hint of desperation. I smell fear and cringe, drink my gin, pine needle taste, burn. He sees me glance his way (cut -- reset -- action) and as I return the empty glass to the bar a full one appears.

From the gentleman at the end of the bar, says a dislocated voice in a jumble of noise. Music is playing. Something with a twang. Whining men singing of loves lost or blue jean brides or something as inane as red bandannas tied around auburn hair. I'm not smoking but I breathe the air of this cave this toilet this cell and get my nicotine fix. Gin and tonic in my hand. I drink it quickly and slam the glass to the bar with a harsh crash. If it had burst I'd scramble the pieces into my fist, and, warm with cuts and blood, plunge them into the heart of this room. See who all I could kill before going home alone.

Do you have any Irish in you? My savior drink-buyer is standing beside me. He stinks of sweat of hopelessness of sex of fear. I look at the mirror behind the bar rather than at him. His face, sagging on the skull, needs shaving washing removing and starting again. There is nothing appealing about this man this thing. I shake my head, No.

Do you want some? He laughs like bones rattling. I don't want to be here. I don't want to do this but I feel the pull of the current. I am lost at sea starving sunburnt, in need of dry land and drinkable water. I spin around to face him and he jumps a little.

Timid. Perfect. With my fingertip I touch his stomach. It is soft and hangs over his belt. He could be forty. I'm twenty-two. I stand next to him, looking at our reflection. My eyes are red from drinking; my face glows beneath a thin layer of sweat. My cheeks are flushed my eyes are blue. *Pale, pale blue of northern skies warmed with the hint of a shy smile.* I smile and my savior smiles back.

"Let's go somewhere," I mutter.

On The Outside:

FADE IN:

"whatever was she thinking?"

EXT. MAD DOG BAR AND GRILL, FLANNERY WEST VIRGINIA -- AFTER MIDNIGHT

The street is empty except for parked cars and garbage. The moon is full and stars are plainly visible. There are a few clouds on the horizon. It may rain later.

The door of the MAD DOG BAR AND GRILL opens and two figures emerge. We HEAR loud COUNTRY MUSIC and VOICES from inside. The first person out the door is a heavysettmiddleaged man wearing a ball cap with a large-mouth bass leaping across its front. The light from the NEON SIGN above him throws his shadow across the sidewalk. His name is IRRELEVANT. Behind him walks ANNIE. She is twenty-two, lean, with short red hair and pale pale eyes. She is not smiling and clutches her purse to her side as though something of great importance were inside. Both people seem intoxicated.

CLOSE ON ANNIE'S EYES

Bloodshot eyes watch IRRELEVANT closely. Nervously.

WIDE ANGLE

ANNIE takes IRRELEVANT'S hand and pulls him into the shadow of the bar.

ANNIE

C'mon. Lets slip back here.

IRRELEVANT

Where no one can see.

ANNIE

Right.

ANGLE ON THE ALLEYWAY

ANNIE pulls IRRELEVANT back into the alley and pushes him against the wall. A rat SCAMPERS away. IRRELEVANT pulls ANNIE to him and presses his mouth to hers. He forces his tongue past her teeth and she GAGS, pulling away. She can feel his erection through his pants as he rubs his body against hers. We HEAR the sound of a CAR passing and the RUSTLING of garbage beneath their feet. ANNIE breaks from his grip.

CLOSE ON ANNIE

ANNIE

Take it out.

CLOSE ON IRRELEVANT

IRRELEVANT

Oh yeah.

MOVE OUT TO INCLUDE BOTH OF THEM

IRRELEVANT unbuckles his belt and opens his pants. ANNIE kneels on the ground in front of him. She pulls his jeans down all the way around his ankles. His white underwear is piss-stained and there is a tear along the edge of the elastic. His DICK is hard and sticking out against the thin cloth. He CHUCKLES and GASPS as she pulls the underwear down to his ankles as well. He STINKS. His DICK is short and fat. ANNIE frowns and glances up at him.

ANNIE (breathily)

Close your eyes.

IRRELEVANT closes his eyes. MOVE IN to ANNIE and the lower half of IRRELEVANT. ANNIE slips one hand into her purse and takes the DICK in the other. IRRELEVANT GROANS.

ANNIE'S POV

There is a single drop of ejaculate perched on the tip of the DICK.

CLOSE ON IRRELEVANT'S FACE

His eyes start open as ANNIE presses a knife to his throat. She looks him in the eye.

ANNIE

I'm going to take your wallet now. Don't make any noise.
Do you understand me? I *will* cut you.

IRRELEVANT GROANS and climaxes. ANNIE jerks back a little, nicking his neck with the knife.

ANNIE

You sick fuck. What the . . .

IRRELEVANT (hoarsely)

Take the money.

FADE OUT:

Sanctuary, Sanctuary:

She's been knocking for what seems like forever. The building smells old and the hallway is lit by a series of hanging ceiling lamps. She stops knocking and nervously glances toward the elevator. She knocks again.

"Who is it?" From inside, a woman's voice, tired and hesitant.

"Lil! It's Annie. Let me in."

"Annie?" The locks click and rattle and the door swings open. Lilith stands in the doorway, her hair in her face, wearing a t-shirt and sweatpants. Her eyelids droop and she yawns. "Whatayou want?"

"I gotta come in for a minute." Annie glances left then right then back at Lilith.

"Please?"

Lilith steps aside and lets her in. The aura of gin hovering around her enters as well. Lilith leans out the door, looks around, shrugs, and closes the door, locking it back.

"I owe you for this, Lil. Really. You don't know."

"What's going on? It's after one."

"Is it? Shit. Can I crash here?"

"Why can't you go to your place?"

"C'mon, please? I'm already here."

"You're not answering any of my questions." Lilith stands by the refrigerator.

Anne drops into the recliner next to the bathroom door. With a small grunt, Lilith pulls the refrigerator door open and retrieves a half-empty bottle of red wine. She looks at Annie, doesn't offer her anything to drink, and walks to the bed in the corner.

"Can I bum a smoke?" Annie asks.

Without answering, Lilith tosses her a pack, the lighter tucked inside.

"Are you going to answer my questions?"

Annie inhales the cigarette smoke deeply, holds it, and then breathes it out slowly.

"Jesus, I needed that." She kicks the footrest of the chair up and settles in.

"Somebody's following me."

"What?"

"He's been following me for almost an hour now." She takes another drag from the cigarette. "That's why I can't go home."

"So you came here?"

"Yeah. T'seemed safe. He's after me, not you." She glances toward the door.

"Hell, he's not even really 'after' me. He's just a lovesick puppy. Hopefully he'll get tired

and go home soon. He never got closer than a block or so behind me, but still, better safe than whatever, right?" She looks Lilith in the eye. "So, can I stay?"

"Sure, sure," Lilith says, shaking her head. She takes a drink of the wine. A little bit runs down her chin, dripping onto her t-shirt. "Why don't you call the police?"

"Oh no, can't do that." She taps her ash in the ashtray next to the chair. "I robbed him."

"You did what?"

"I took his wallet. I don't know what I was thinking. It just seemed like the thing to do."

"Jesus." Lilith shakes her head. "So why doesn't *he* call the cops?"

"I was a bit concerned about that myself." She leans forward, conspiratorially.

Lilith smells gin from across the room. "I think he likes me."

"He likes you?"

"Yeah. Can't I pick 'em?" She glances down. "Shit. He came all over me. Can I borrow your bathroom?" Without waiting for an answer, Annie stands up, sways a little, then leaves the living area.

She slips out of her pants and lets the warm water start running in the sink. In the mirror, she sees Lilith appear, standing in the doorway, looking concerned.

"Are you going to tell me what happened?"

"I don't really want to talk about it." She begins soaping the stains and rubbing them beneath the stream of water. "I got a letter from Frank today."

"Are you serious?"

"I wouldn't joke about that."

Lilith steps closer, putting her hand on Annie's shoulder. She tenses and pulls away.

"He wrote me a poem. Wanna read it?" She doesn't look up from the sink. Steam rises and her hands are turning red. "It's there on the toilet seat."

Lilith picks up the folded piece of paper and leans against the wall.

Words fly from me
on wisps of breath;
inane,
meaningless.
Never what i want to say.
Shadows of what i really mean.

i cannot forget your eyes,
pale, pale blue
of northern sky
warmed with the hint
of a shy smile.
You are everywhere i am not.

Here, the sun is gone.
There is no moon.
Flakes of snow,
like stars descending,
bury me
in cold gray,

and i cannot forget your eyes.

"Jesus."

"Nope. Frank." Annie turns the water off and leans on the sink. "D'you ever think you're losing your mind? I mean really. Like everything's just slipping away? Like you could just drop into a coma and never come back?"

"He's not out is he?"

"No, no." Annie's eyes are red rimmed, and she sees herself five years younger duct tape across her mouth around her hands bruises blood pain fear. "He's still locked up." She saw Frank tall pale wraithlike in a prom tux standing over her cutting her burning her fucking her beating her. "He won't be out for a while." She was trembling afraid. "It's not right is it? That he could write me like that? Aren't there rules?" Tears well up in the corners of her pale eyes.

"Come on. Get some sleep."

"Do you think that guy's still out there?"

"No." Lilith pauses, glances at the door. "He's probably long gone."

Dream Number Two:

My room is dark and cluttered with books and papers. Nothing looks familiar. My hands don't appear to be mine and maybe I'm not me but there are no mirrors that I can check. I think I'm taller than I am. I stand on the bed to see if maybe there's something important on top of one of the bookshelves and see a small folded piece of paper. I thought the letter was in my pocket. Before I can reach for it there's a scratching at the door. It's the rats. Leap from the bed brace against the door can't let them in. They'll kill me consume me tear me into little pieces. The door lurches pushing me back dig in find the strength force it closed. Hundreds of tiny claws scratching teeth gnawing bodies bodies bodies thudding at the door, screams building in my head my head, CANNOT LET THEM IN CANNOT LET THEM IN CANNOT LET THEM IN. And suddenly they are gone. Silence. Hesitantly I open the door and step out into the kitchen. There is dirt and shit and filth everywhere. Don't touch anything. My door is

splintered and caked with blood and fur. They tore at each other in their lust for me but there are no bodies lying around. They consumed everything. Even the bones.

Comes The Morning:

I wake up frightened alone in a strange bed tucked up fetal staring at the wall. A single crack runs up to the stucco ceiling and I slip through it and away. The sun is almost ready to appear. Clouds hang above the horizon unable to decide where to go. It never did rain. The streets are empty and dirty and innocent in the pink pre-dawn light. I feel my blood pounding in my temples and my muscles are tense knotting aching.

Are you awake? Lilith's voice draws me back into the room, her room, her bed. I roll over. She is sitting up in the recliner under a blanket clutching a pillow. *Sometimes I do feel like everything's slipping away.*

"Hangovers don't help," I groan stretching blood circulating warming my arms my legs hands feet fingers toes. A single beam of sunlight, maybe the first of the morning, slips through a hole in the curtain into the shadows of the apartment. Lilith shifts beneath her blanket and dust rises swirling dancing through the spotlight never slowing rising falling and I am there one of them floating weightless on a wisp of air. The pain in my head anchors me to the bed, but rather than get up to search for aspirin I think I'll just sleep awhile. Maybe the hangover will be gone when I wake up again. Maybe it won't. I close my pale pale eyes and hope.

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

1

"There are only three kinds of women," Caleb said, his grin spreading wider as he watched the remark register across Lilith's face. She had been afraid of this. From the way he started squirming in his seat, she knew this was going nowhere hopeful. She glanced around the coffeeshop, trying to catch the eye of the waitress.

"What?" she said, turning her head away.

"Three kinds. That's it." He paused to take a drink of his coffee.

"Tell me I'm not hearing you right." Her voice was lower now, on the defensive. Slowly, she settled back in her chair, facing him. Cravings thrashed around inside her. She slid a cigarette from her half-empty pack and thumbed the lighter in her other hand.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not being sexist. There are only three types of men too. Well, one type really and then a couple of sub-types."

Lilith sat back and lit her cigarette.

"Okay. Go on, get it over with."

"You want the men or the women first?"

"Does it matter?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On any number of intangibles."

"Men first." She blew a stream of smoke across the table toward him as he took another sip of coffee. Human DNA is 97 percent identical to chimpanzee DNA, she

remembered, smiling. Most people refuse to accept this scientific fact. How the hell can people not see it?

"Okay," he started, holding up his first finger. There was a scratch, thin and scabbed, running down across both of the joints. "Men come in one basic type. There's the asshole."

"That's a given."

"One A: The asshole who gets all the good women." He held up another finger. The separated skin of a hangnail hung open above a tiny triangle of deep red, almost purple. He probably chewed on it when he was nervous.

"All right." She nodded.

"And then there's *my* category. The basically decent guy who's been shit on for so long he becomes an asshole." Third finger. Puny and weak. It trembled, barely able to stand straight with the other fingers. People think the pinkie is useless, she thought. The third finger, we could do without.

"Well, you seem to be on the money so far." Catching the waitress' attention, Lilith motioned for another cup of coffee. "Now, " she drew deeply on her cigarette. "What about the women?"

"I thought you'd never ask." He pulled a cigarette from his own pack and lit it, breathing the smoke in and holding it there for a few seconds before continuing. The words left his mouth clouded in smoke. He rubbed his hands together anxiously, grinning.

"With women there's a little more variety. There are the crazies, the bitches, and the crazy-bitches."

He tapped some ash in the ashtray.

"That's patently offensive."

"Well, I'm an asshole."

"I won't argue."

"So," he said smiling. "Which are you?"

She scowled and turned toward the window. This was not going the way she had hoped it would. Outside, the rain had nearly stopped and the clouds were thinning. It was as if they were making way for the coming night. The sun was slowly disappearing behind the mountains.

"Guess," she said flatly.

"Well, I haven't known you long enough to know if you're a crazy-bitch yet, so I'll just leave that one off the list."

"Thank you."

"For now," he added, chuckling. "And you've been rather civil through the airing of my theories, so I'd say you're not a bitch."

"Again, my thanks."

"So you must be nuts."

"Oh?"

"Insane. Like all the rest."

"Fuck you." The stars began appearing, and a thick fog materialized between the mountains around the city.

"Now, now." He grinned wider. "You don't want to slip into another category on me now, do you?"

"You *are* an asshole." She had been back in Flannery for over a year now, but still missed the wide open spaces she'd gotten used to out west. The mountains of West Virginia were too confining. There was no horizon.

"I have no pretensions," he said proudly.

Lilith closed her eyes as the waitress sat her coffee on the table, taking away the empty cup.

"You know, insanity isn't all that bad," he went on.

She glared at him.

"No, really. Insanity could be mild, like being a clean freak, or you could go the other direction and be suicidal." He paused and leaned forward dramatically. "Or homicidal even. There *are* extremes."

"I appreciate your understanding," she growled coldly.

"Hey, like I said, I used to be a decent guy. I'm in the transformation stage of my assholishness."

"Well, you're taking to it extremely well." The mountains closed in thoughts and ambitions, as well as the little city. She missed the grand goals she had set for herself while on the way to California. Now that she was home, she only wanted to make it through each day and sleep. Such noble goals.

"Thank you very much." He tapped an awkward rhythm on the sides of his mug and smiled.

"Nothing in extremes is healthy." She dropped her cigarette into her coffee, and,

pulling her coat on, walked out of the coffeehouse. It was his first time there. She was a regular. They would make sure he paid her tab.

2

As she reached the third floor and started down the hallway to her apartment, she heard movement behind her neighbor's door. It opened with a creak, and as Lilith pulled the keys from her pocket, a small figure entered the hallway.

"Where you heading, Sal?" she asked.

"Jesus!" Sal yelped, nearly dropping the cigar from between his teeth. "You tryin' to give me a heart attack?"

Lilith smiled and apologized. Sal was one of the few people she'd met and liked since returning to Flannery. He was nearly seventy years old and had been born with no lower body. He just tapered away at the waist. Everywhere he went, he walked on his hands. It had only taken a few minutes for Lilith to get used to Sal's condition: something Sal had noticed, and appreciated, right off. They were comfortable around each other. They'd sat up all night early on, drinking whiskey and telling stories about their respective pasts. Sal had hundreds of stories about growing up in traveling circuses during the early forties, when the freak shows had been a major draw. He'd been a star in those days. Lilith had shared stories that Sal didn't really want to believe were true.

"It started raining again on my way home," she said, then paused. How did she get home? She had no memory of the walk. It was as if she had just appeared on the stairs. Then the thought was gone.

"I won't melt," he laughed. "Besides, that cute little thing down at The Donut Hut

only works the evening shift," he said with a wink. "I don't want to miss her." He wore a raincoat, buttoned all the way up, tied off at the bottom, and heavy waterproof gloves on his large hands.

"Could you help me with the hood, sugar?" he asked.

"Anything for a man in love," Lilith laughed.

"Love, shmlove. Good conversation's more important than nearly anything, these days. 'Sides, you know nobody's ever gonna take the place of my Bernice." Bernice was a trapeze artist Sal married when they were both in their twenties. She'd died long ago. It was one of the only things Sal didn't talk much about. Lilith wondered sometimes if he'd told anyone else about her.

"I didn't mean anything by it."

"I know, I know," he said as he started down the hallway to the stairs. "Sweet dreams!" he called out as he gracefully lowered himself down the stairs one hand at a time, trailing cigar smoke as he went.

"You too, Sal," Lilith answered, stepping into her darkened apartment. "You too."

3

She flipped on the dim light and cast sudden shadows into the corners. The apartment was one large room with a bathroom off to the left, across from the single window. Her clothes were where she'd left them: Black pants thrown across the back of the loveseat; her crumpled gray t-shirt stuck down between the cushions. Her bed was unmade, the sheets tangled and half in the floor. An easel stood in the corner by the window, a large piece of white paper covered with charcoal scrawlings perched upon it.

The streetlight shone in through a quarter-sized hole in the curtain. Oversized books of art prints lay open in piles across the floor. Their masses of reds, greens, yellows, and blues caught the faint light, contrasting bleakly with the heavy shadows that cloistered the rest of the room. The pale dot of the lightbulb was reflected in each of the empty beer bottles that lined the floorboards. The ones in the corner were half filled with cigarette butts. Two vacant green glass wine bottles sat next to the trash can in the kitchen-area. In black paint, one had been marked Didi, the other, Gogo.

Sighing, she tossed her coat onto the recliner in the corner and dropped face-up onto the bed. What a long fucking day, she thought, rubbing her eyes. Every day was one long fucking day anymore. She stared at the plaster ceiling for nearly an hour, repeatedly cultivating a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach that slowly spread outward, slipping up around her chest and down into her crotch. From there, her arms and legs grew light and almost floated upward away from her. Darkness crept along the edges of her vision until, moving painstakingly forward, all light was shut out. Then, with a start, she would open her eyes and be back in her room.

It would be so nice to slip into a coma, leave everything behind, and never worry about all the bullshit again. Nothing seemed to matter anymore. Everything was meaningless. What did art history have to do with living? Hell, what did any of the crap she had to deal with have to do with living? She tried to make a list of things that made life worthwhile, but after twenty minutes of thinking, had nothing but cigarettes and the music of P J Harvey listed. That was definitely not enough.

What about family? she tried. Her mother lived across town and owned a couple of apartment buildings. Lilith didn't pay rent while she was in school, and if she quit

again, her mother had made it clear that she would be just another tenant. Mother dear. A voice on the phone; a number on a bank account. There was the step-brother who wouldn't look her in the eye and hardly spoke; the step-father dead by his own hand. Her own father was long gone. She had only heard of his death in passing months later, and wasn't even sure how it had happened. Mother wouldn't talk about it. He'd left her for a stripper and she'd taken to drinking. She was sober now, but not happy. Lilith didn't know anyone who was happy. Content, maybe. Happy, no. Not even Sal. Not since Bernice had died.

The only philosophical question is whether or not to commit suicide. She couldn't remember who'd said that, but it was on her mind more and more lately. Everything seemed like habit. Like she wasn't really living. Like she simply existed.

If that.

She had no motivation anymore. It was only because her closest friend, Mary, had urged her to go out, that she'd accepted Caleb's invitation to coffee. He wasn't that bad, she thought. Surely no worse than the rest. She just wasn't in the mood to hear some rehearsed crap designed to provoke a response. Sal was right. Conversation was as good as love around here. If she could just quit everything and leave, then maybe, just maybe, things would be better. Of course, she'd thought that before.

She stood and crossed the room to the refrigerator. A full bottle of red wine was waiting for her. Instinctively, she pulled the corkscrew from the sink and twisted the silver point down into the pale cork. She smiled and pushed the handles down, freeing the wine with a deep pop. A glass? she thought. Fuck it. Straight from the bottle. Fewer

dishes to wash.

4

The bottle lay empty in the floor by the bed. Lilith could barely keep her eyes open. Her face felt heavy, like it would slide off her skull if she moved too much. That was no problem, she thought. She had no intention of moving, until the weight in her bladder attracted her attention.

"Dammit."

She sat up on the edge of the bed, and the room tilted around her for an instant before coming to rest where it should. She stood and cringed as she accidentally kicked the empty bottle, sending it clattering loudly across the hardwood floor. Her steps were awkward and she stumbled against the bathroom doorway.

"Shit."

She almost passed out sitting on the toilet.

Her reflection in the mirror caught her eye as she started back out into the main room.

"I look like hammered fuck," she chuckled to herself. Her dark eyes were bloodshot and sunken, as though she hadn't slept in days. Her face was pale, but her lips were dark red. My nose is too goddamn big, she thought. She leaned her head back to get a good look at it. Yep. Too goddamn big. She lowered her head, letting her thick black hair fall forward, covering her face. That's better. Her friends told her she was too hard on herself.

"Well, fuck them," she laughed.

She moved her hair out of her face and with a swift movement that nearly sent her

toppling to the floor, she pulled her shirt off, over her head. She stepped back to see herself better in the mirror. Too skinny, she thought. Little tits, boney ribs, the beginnings of a beer gut.

"Disgusting," she frowned.

Her eyes settled on the puckered scar just above the lowest ribs on her right side. She inhaled deeply, watching it rise, then settle back as her lungs emptied. Her hands, of their own accord, moved to the scar, covering it, feeling the smoothness of it against her fingers. Before she knew it, tears were running down her face and she could see Matt again, his head thrown back, front teeth chipped on the gun barrel, the back of his head opened, brains, blood and bone splattered across the wall, and she could hear her own cries again, over and over, until the wound in her side had dragged her unconscious. Her whole body shook as she sobbed, curled up on the bathroom floor.

5

Steam rose from the water as it filled the tub. Lilith slipped her finger in and grimaced. She turned the cold water on as well. Her clothes were folded neatly and stacked on the hamper. Still drunk, she staggered into the main room and, after a moment of fumbling through her bag, found the knife she always carried. The draft from the cheap wooden window frame blew across her and she shivered without realizing it.

The mirror was fogged over and steam filled the bathroom. Lilith began sweating after just a few seconds with the door closed. The tub was nearly full when she shut off the water. Slowly, she lowered first one foot, then the other into burning water. She whimpered softly as her skin reddened halfway up her calves. The room began to spin

and she half-sat, half-fell down. She cried out from the heat, wrapping her arms around herself and sliding down until the water touched her chin. Her hair floated around her head, sticking to her face and neck. Her forehead was covered in sweat and she tasted salt on her lips. She raised her arm from the water, splashing across the floor as she reached for the knife.

Underwater, she opened her right wrist. There was no pain at first, just the unnerving feeling of flesh separating. It reminded her of peeling an orange. Lilith was entranced by the blood surging from the cut in a bright red swirl, and the patterns that formed when she moved, sending currents through the crimson mingling with the bathwater. Then she opened the other wrist and tossed the knife out onto the floor. The heat of the water helped coax the life from her, and in a matter of minutes she could barely see herself through the red haze. Her eyes grew heavy and her head nodded forward. The bloody water washed up across her lips and she frowned, tasting her own blood. Her face stained red where the water touched it. She closed her eyes.

6

Lilith opened her eyes slowly and the bathroom shimmered into focus. There was someone in the room with her.

"Matt?" she muttered weakly. He shook his head.

Try as she might, she couldn't make out his face as he lifted her from the tub. The crimson water poured from her and as her head lolled back she saw the drops falling one after the other, splashing heavy and red against the dingy white tile. Then she was gently lowered onto her bed. She didn't notice the movement from one room to the other. It

was as if he just lifted her up, turned, and then laid her down.

"You're going to be okay," he said softly.

"No," she whispered. "Leave me alone."

"I can't do that."

She groaned and began to cry. She couldn't raise her arms, and breathing was difficult. The cold draft from the windowframe blew across her and she suddenly noticed that her body was warm. She was fully clothed: light sweater, jeans, boots, even bra and panties.

The stranger stood by the window. He pulled the curtain aside and was transfixed by the view of Flannery. The streetlamp lit his face directly but she still couldn't make out any specific details other than his hair needed to be cut and he had a thin beard.

"Who are you?" she mumbled, nervously. "You didn't call an ambulance did you?"

"No. No ambulance," he said smiling. "I don't think that'll be necessary. You're feeling better already."

She looked puzzled and realized he was right. With only a slight effort she rose to her feet. Her hands and arms were still pale and stained, but she couldn't feel the incisions anymore. Unreality swept over her.

"Am I, um," she paused, feeling stupid and melodramatic. "Am I dead?"

"No," the stranger said, glancing over to her. "I couldn't let you die. Do you know how hard it was for me just to let you go that far?" Lilith frowned, confused.

"Took me two damn days to write." He turned back to the window. "This is amazing, really. Out there," he motioned vaguely, "it's just words on a page, but inside here," he

pounded on the wall, rattling the glass, "it's all solid. I can feel pain in my knuckles after doing that. Amazing."

"What are you talking about? Who are you?" The stranger smiled as though enjoying her confusion.

"My name's Brian." He glanced back out the window and frowned. "This is all my creation. Flannery's my own little world."

Lilith began to edge slowly toward the door. Maybe while he's distracted, she thought, I can get out.

"I'm not really that distracted, Lil." He turned toward her. "And nobody gets out until I decide they get out. How're your wrists, by the way?"

She looked down and gasped. There was no blood. No cuts. No scars, even. The skin was pale and smooth, untouched. She could almost see the veins pulsing.

"What the fuck is going on here?" she muttered, trembling.

"I told you. I don't want you to die."

Sudden rage boiled up inside of her and she leapt on him, pounding his face with her fists. She kicked him in the groin, doubling him over, groaning. As he smacked his head against the wooden floor, she drove the toe of her boot into his stomach again and again. Blood ran from his mouth and his eyes were rapidly swelling shut. When he stopped making noise, she stopped kicking and took a step back.

"Do you feel better now?" Brian asked, leaning against the doorframe behind her.

The body on the floor disappeared.

She spun around, her eyes wide, her mouth dropping open.

"You haven't said anything for nearly an hour," he said.

"I don't want to be here," she mumbled.

"Where else would you be if not in Flannery?"

"Anywhere."

"It could be arranged."

She looked directly at him for the first time in an hour.

"What do you mean?"

"What do you think I mean?"

"I don't know," she whispered, pulling her knees up to her chin. "Who are you?

Really?"

"That's what I've been trying to explain. I'm writing this story as we speak.

Actually, I guess it should be 'I wrote this story' since people will be reading it later."

"You're crazy."

"That may very well be, but it doesn't change anything."

Lilith whimpered.

"C'mon," he said, leaning forward. "It's not that bad. I promise you won't remember any of this later." He moved his head into her line of sight. His eyes were brown. "I promise. Just talk to me a little bit, will you?"

"Then you'll go?"

"Yes."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Say whatever you want."

"I thought you were writing this."

"I am."

"Then write me something witty to say."

"It doesn't work that way. You see, you're almost fully realized in my head. You have a distinct personality. Hell, most of my stories start out with me just putting two characters together and letting them talk to each other. Then I go back and edit later. Like you and Caleb earlier. That was entirely spontaneous, and I was surprised by your reaction. It's a little scary sometimes."

"Of course." She suddenly realized she was sober again. "Write me a drink, then."

"That's much easier."

A bottle of wine, chilled and already opened sat on the nightstand.

"How's that?"

Lilith said nothing, but took a long swig from the bottle, then clutched it to her chest.

"You said people were reading this? What people?"

"Classmates, a professor. Maybe some others."

"Prove it."

"The wine wasn't enough?" She stared at him. "Alright. Come over here."

She didn't move.

"I'm not going to bite. Come on. Sit on the floor in front of me." Slowly, she moved from the bed to the floor, sitting with her back to him. "Good. Now relax." She

felt his hands on her shoulders. His hands were small. He began to knead her shoulders firmly. "Close your eyes," he whispered. "Imagine an empty field of white. Concentrate. Imagine letters forming. Thin black print in neat double-spaced lines, becoming words, then sentences, then paragraphs, filling the page, one after the other. Imagine a page number in the corner. Page 132. Imagine yourself sitting here, my hands on you, my words quietly being printed across that field.

"Now open your eyes."

"Oh sweet Jesus," she muttered. "I can see them. All of them. Jesus." Her eyes rolled up into her head and she fell limply against the chair he sat in.

"I was afraid that would happen. Okay, lets try something different."

8

It was four in the morning and had already been a long night. Though she could remember dreaming, the content of her dreams had vanished as her eyes flickered open. Her entire body was stiff and sore, as if she'd run a marathon in her sleep, and the six-pack she'd nursed all evening didn't help.

"Don't touch me," Lilith growled. "You know how much that pisses me off."

"But you look tense. Wouldn't a massage feel good?" Caleb sat in the bed with a confused look on his face.

"If you put one finger on me I'll kick your sorry little ass."

He leaned away, resting his head on his hands. He frowned when she pulled a pack of cigarettes from her purse, by the bed.

"Are you smoking again?" he asked.

"Fuck off."

She was smoking again. That meant she was over the edge angry and he was to just stay out of her way.

"I want a beer. Do you want one?" he offered, getting up out of bed. Lilith's look softened for a second as she nodded, then returned to her previous scowl. Beer in the dead of night was just the sort of thing she needed to keep her mood foul. Besides, it was good to get Caleb up and away from her. He hadn't even asked what was wrong, and she knew he knew there was something wrong.

For the past hour she'd been sitting in bed watching him toss and turn, wondering just why she was still there. God knows *he* isn't keeping me here, she thought, and thinking it, became more angry. There wasn't any sense in it. She lit and then took a drag from her cigarette, blowing the smoke across Caleb's side of the bed. He hated the stink of her cigarettes, but had learned early on not to cross her when she wanted one. It was the only thing that calmed her down when she started to get pissed off about something, or anything. For about a month and a half, last summer, she had tried meditation as a way of controlling her temper, but after hours and hours of failed attempts, she gave it up in favor of the more immediate nicotine fix.

"Those things will kill you," Caleb said as he stepped back into the cluttered room, a beer in each hand.

"Then I'll die." She took the beer (already opened) and sipped at it hesitantly, spilling some down her chin when he stepped onto the bed, causing her to lurch over towards him. As he sat down, cross-legged, he rolled his head back and around, sighing as he heard the popping and cracking of the bones scraping together. Lilith cringed.

"Oh yeah," he breathed. "Much better." He took a long chug of beer, then leaned back against the headboard. He was going to do it now, she knew. There was no way to get around it. In the six months since she had moved in with him, there had been at least twelve of these confrontations. When she was angry she held it in, allowing it to fester, until finally it began seeping out in cigarette smoke and bitter remarks.

"Are you all right?" He asked hesitantly.

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"I know how I feel."

"I'm sure you do, but . . ."

"What?"

"Um, if you want to talk about something, you just have to say the word. I'm right here."

"No shit."

He paused. Frowning, he took another drink, then began to tap his finger on the can. Tap tap tap pause, tap tap tap pause, tap tap tap ta-tap ta-tap tap. Then again. Lilith closed her eyes against the noise but could still see the shadow of his finger against the silver of the can. Light then dark, over and over, like some nonsensical signal light, trying to flash her a message. Images began forming in swirls behind her eyelids, some red, some white, none of them coming into complete focus before shifting away into other shapes. Her mouth dropped open and as she breathed, she felt tiny puffs of light swarm into her, expanding her body until, balloon-like, she teetered backward.

Suddenly she began to drift like a leaf, carried downward on the mild summer air, landing gently on soft grasses. But there was no grass. Only dark empty space, supporting her as though she were sprawled across a parachute. A faint, golden hum began, and she smiled as crystal notes of sound, pitched so high they were felt rather than heard, began dancing in the space around her. They came closer and closer, swimming past her, trailing long snake-like bodies of reverberations, and she began to laugh. Their embrace was a caress of warm feathers and they assured her that they loved her.

"You are wanted here. Loved and needed." The words weren't English, or even spoken. They rose, passing through her body, physical shapes, like some pre-language pictograph, mercurial, always moving, always breathing. And the message was relayed.

She opened her eyes and immediately knew something was wrong. Her beer was lying on the bed, spilling out, soaking into the blankets. Her cigarette was still between her fingers, but it had burnt down nearly an inch, the ash hanging on precariously, then falling away as she focused on it. She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue and tasted salt. Touching her mouth, her fingertips came away bloody. As she saw the red she felt the pain of her tongue, bitten deeply and bleeding freely.

"Caleb?" she said softly, the words hurting.

He was away from the bed, against the wall, his eyes wide and black. He was sweating and his breathing was shallow.

"Ohmigod," he muttered. "Are-are you alright?"

"I don't know." She felt lost. Confused.

"You're b-b-bleeding." He stayed against the wall, not moving any closer to the

bed.

"Is it bad?"

He shook his head in a way which could have meant yes or no, so she tried to stand, but her legs wouldn't respond. She looked down and for a moment didn't know what she was looking at. There was a semblance to legs, she had to admit, but only after looking at them for some time. Puzzled, she turned to Caleb, who slid down the wall into a crouch. A warm tickle drew her attention back to what had been her legs, what were now more like masses of undulating worms, thick and slow moving. She was fascinated by their motion. They waved like sea plants against a casual current.

"Okay, okay. Cut!" Brian was standing by the bed. "What the hell is this?"

Lilith smiled blankly.

"Is it me? Is this something from my head?" He paced back and forth for a minute, muttering to himself. Lilith drooled. Caleb lay limp in the floor, a puppet with its strings loose. "I'm trying to help you here. You do see that don't you?" Brian took her face in his hand, turning her head toward him. Her eyes were unfocused. "Shit.

"Alright. Enough of this. Let's try again."

They were back in Lilith's apartment. She sat in the corner of the bed, propped up against the wall. She was aware of everything again, but wouldn't speak or move. He sat in the floor next to the bathroom door, his eyes never leaving her. Neither blinked. As she watched, one by one, the things that passed for legs melted away, pooling and reforming, becoming human once again. It was done in an instant with not much more

than a slight cramping.

She ran her hands down them, feeling the muscles pull and flex as she moved her feet and toes. They were her legs, but then again, they weren't her legs. There should have been a scar on her left knee from a bike wreck when she was eleven. She'd been riding down the hill when her feet slipped off the pedals. Before she knew what had happened, the bike was out of control and she hit the concrete rolling. She walked the two blocks back to her house crying like a baby, limping, her pants torn away at the knee, and blood pouring down her leg. The scar was gone.

"Very good," Brian whispered. Then, as if reminded of it, the skin of her knee twisted into a faint, crooked scar.

"You should have known about the scar," she said softly.

"You'd think that, wouldn't you?" He rubbed his face with the palms of his hands, as if tired. "Just between you and me," he whispered conspiratorially, "I make most of this shit up as I go along." Lilith's eyes widened. "Not the big stuff. Don't worry. But, its like I have signposts of plot that I know I want to hit. Then I just kind of wander my way from point to point."

"That doesn't sound very bright." She reached for the pack of cigarettes that appeared on the small table by the bed. Her lighter was with them. "Not very bright at all." She lit one and exhaled a cloud of smoke in Brian's direction.

"It's probably not. But I enjoy it. It's more fun that way."

"More fun?"

"Yeah. The creative act." He had a lit cigarette in his hand and took a long drag off of it. "You know, out there, I can't inhale from a cigarette unless I French inhale. It's

kind of nice here."

"For you maybe," she said, standing. She was wearing only a t-shirt and panties. Her legs were long and lightly muscled. As she walked, her calves stood out, drawing his eyes. From his place on the floor he could see a brief hint of black lace beneath the edge of the shirt. She opened a drawer and pulled out a pair of sweat pants. With a hostile stare in his direction, she put them on. "Why did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"If you make all this up, then I could have had pants on. Right?"

Brian fidgeted and took another drag from his cigarette.

"I thought so," she said, shaking her head. "Great. Just great."

"I'm sorry. That was rude of me. It's just that you're beautiful. An ideal. A dream I had once and had to write about."

"I am not an object for you to manipulate, you son of a bitch," she said coldly.

"What about Caleb?" he asked.

"What about him?"

"You saw him, didn't you. Lying there on the ground? What makes you think you're any more real than him?"

"I have memories. A family. I . . ."

"What's your last name?" he asked suddenly.

Lilith paused. Her eyes darted first left then right. Her lips pulled tight into a snarl.

"You fucker."

"Again, I apologize. A last name never seemed important. You were always

Lilith to me and that name seemed to sum everything up."

"My mother?"

"I have no idea what she looks like. She hasn't appeared in any of the stories I've written about you."

"Stories?" She sighed, and seemed to accept it all finally. "You made everything up. The separation. My father leaving when I was little."

"Running away with a stripper, yeah, I remember. I should write that story someday. It would be interesting to see you when you were little."

"I can't remember what he looked like."

"Because I haven't written it yet."

"You haven't written it."

"You're getting it."

"I need a drink."

"You drink a lot."

"Then make me stop."

"You wouldn't be you if you stopped."

"I don't understand."

"It is a little confusing sometimes. To be honest, I'm not really sure how this all works. I should be able to make you do whatever I want, but you keep twisting everything around and making the story change from what I intend. That shit with your legs, for example."

"What do you mean?"

"I tried to put you in a situation where you might be happy. You were loved and

comfortable, but before the scene could even get started you had twisted it around. You were unhappy and smoking again. I even made Caleb a non-smoker to help you along. You're far too negative for your own good."

"Why didn't you let me kill myself?"

He inhaled and exhaled and looked at the floor.

"I like writing about you." He sounded nervous, hesitant. "You're my favorite character. There's a lot of me in you."

"Fucking great," she chuckled. "The chosen of the gods." She ground out her cigarette. "Just my fucking luck."

"Let me get something straight here," she started again. "All the shit I remember, all the horrible things, the boyfriends, the molestations, the violence, the loneliness, the deaths, all of it. You made it all up?"

He nodded.

"Why?"

"What?"

"You heard me. Why? Why put me through all of that if I'm your favorite?"

"Um. Well." He refused to meet her eyes. "They, ah, made good stories," he said so softly she could barely hear it.

"Good stories," she repeated.

"What just happened?" Lilith asked.

"Nothing really. We just changed chapters. Time has passed. We're talking

about something else now."

"I don't think so."

"What?"

"I don't think so. I want to continue this discussion."

"I'd rather not."

"Why?"

"Because."

"That's no answer."

"Who the hell are you to question me? You're just a reflection of my attitudes and beliefs. You all are."

"Even my stepfather?"

"No!"

"Why did you make him touch me?"

"I didn't."

"It happened."

"I made it up."

"I remember it."

"It added something to your character."

"What?"

"I don't know. . . It gave you a motivation to get out of the house. It helped give your character a different level for me to work with."

"Motivation. Levels. What about Matt?"

"What about him?"

"Why did you let him kill himself?"

"He'd done his job."

"His job?"

"Look, I'd really rather not discuss this."

"Fuck what you want. This isn't about you. Not really. What do you mean?"

"His breakdown was necessary to send you back here to Flannery. Everything takes place here."

"You made him a drug addict. Had him shoot me and then himself. All just to motivate me to come back to this shithole town you made up? Pathetic. Pathetic and melodramatic."

"I'll admit it had flaws."

"I never thought he was quite believable as a cokehead. That's one reason I was taken by surprise by him. It just seemed to happen."

"I didn't say I was very good at this."

"No you didn't. Did it get kind of vague in here?"

"What?"

"I feel a little funny. Empty, sort-of."

"You're distracting me," he said. He didn't know where he was in the room. It was as if the apartment had ceased to exist while they talked. He glanced around, taking in the layout of the room again. Bed in the corner, easel across from it, kitchen area, front door, bathroom door, loveseat, recliner, nightstand, back to the bed, where Lilith sat watching him.

"Is that better?" he asked.

"I guess. I'm not really sure what just happened."

"Don't worry about it." He took a drag off of his cigarette.

"Where did you get that?" She pointed at the cigarette.

"Just drop it, okay?"

"You can't just make things happen for no reason. It destroys the continuity of the story."

"How the hell do you know? You're just in it. You aren't aware of the narrative flow, or any of that crap. You just live here."

"A minute ago you didn't have a cigarette. Now you do. Am I supposed to ignore something like that?"

"Yes."

"I can't." Her eyes widened. "I noticed it earlier too. Just before I ran into Sal. I couldn't remember walking home. It was like I walked out the door of the coffeeshop and suddenly I was in my hallway."

"It was a transition."

"I noticed it. That proves I'm more than just a character."

"I let you notice it."

"You let me? I don't think so."

"This isn't going like I'd hoped. The story's running a little long. We need to wrap it up."

"I thought you wanted to talk to me?"

"Well, maybe that was a mistake."

"How so?"

"I'm not enjoying this."

"Oh no. Don't you like me anymore?"

"I don't know."

"Then stop fucking writing about me and let me die."

"Why do you want to die? I don't get that at all."

"Maybe it's you who wants to die."

"That's not funny."

"It wasn't supposed to be."

Brian stood and crossed to the window. Outside, the sun was beginning to rise in a faint red haze. The entire town was dark and empty. It was probably going to rain again.

"That's it, isn't it?"

"No."

"What? Is your life so shitty and meaningless that you've got to express yourself through me? Through Flannery?"

"There's nothing wrong with my life."

"Tell me about it."

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because other people are reading this, and I didn't intend for this conversation to go on this long. I've got to wrap up the story."

"What story? The one where I kill myself?"

"You're not going to kill yourself."

"How are you going to stop me?"

"I did it once."

"The story's gotta end sometime."

"It doesn't have to end *your* way. Something else could happen."

"Like what? Alien abductions? Suddenly I find Jesus, or some bullshit like that?"

"Not necessarily."

"What then?" Brian felt incredibly tired. It was late on the outside and he'd been working on the story for a long time without a break. Lilith stared at him, waiting for an answer.

11

"Her breath leaves her mouth in a cloud and clings to the mirror, fogging it, hiding her face. Her dark eyes are slowly revealed as the glass clears, then her nose, strong and pronounced, and finally her mouth, the full lips pulling into a frown. She might as well be outside, it's so cold. Glancing toward the window, at the huge flakes of snow making their way to the ground below, she sighs.

"She pulls her jacket tighter around her and reaches for the phone, pausing briefly before picking it up. With gloved fingers she punches the buttons, then drops onto the bed. The springs screech in protest and she frowns again. She slips the receiver beneath her heavy black hair and listens to the hollow ringing. Once. Twice. Three times, then the fumbling clatter as her mother picks up. It's never a smooth motion. Graceless. Clumsy. Then the coarse voice.

"Hello?" The cigarettes are almost tangible through the line.

"Mom, I made it."

"Becky! You got the key all right?"

"Yeah Mom, I'm inside.' She wants a cigarette of her own but the pack is on the floor, crumpled and empty, the last one smoked just after she'd arrived. 'But the heat's not working.'

"No heat? But that was supposed to be fixed already.'

"Well, somebody didn't do their job. It's freezing in here. I can see my own breath.'

"But the lights and phone work, right?"

"Rebecca sighs.

"Right. It's just cold.'

"I'll send Frankie over with an electric heater for you, how's that?' The last time she'd seen him was the day she left home."

Lilith stopped reading and took a drag from her cigarette. Mary sat across from her, sipping from a cup of tea. She tilted her head slightly.

"That's an interesting start."

"Do you think so?"

"Yeah. Is it autobiographical?"

"More or less." Lilith fidgeted. "Gimme a break. It's my first try at writing a story. It's not as easy as it sounds."

"I don't imagine it is." Mary smiled. It had been a long time since she'd seen Lil actually excited about something. To be honest, she'd been worried about her. It was

good to see her trying something new. "So, do you have more written, or is that it so far?"

"Well," she started, "I think I know where its going, but I've only got another couple of pages actually down on paper. It's strange, really."

"What?"

"These characters. Okay, they're based on Mom and me, but they almost seem to have their own motivations and agendas."

"That sounds a little crazy."

"Well, maybe it is. I don't know. I've never done this before. All I know is, as I kept writing, they started saying things I hadn't intended for them to, and the conversation began veering off in other directions."

"That *is* crazy."

"I guess. But maybe everybody's crazy and this is just *my* manifestation."

"Seems harmless enough."

"I hope so," Lilith said. Her coffee was cold, so she motioned to the waitress for a fresh cup. She ground out her cigarette, and, feeling remarkably at ease, decided to wait awhile before lighting another. I need to cut down anyway, she thought.