

3-2006

Waking Life

Dionne Irving
Rhode Island College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/etd>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), and the [Personality and Social Contexts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Irving, Dionne, "Waking Life" (2006). *Master's Theses, Dissertations, Graduate Research and Major Papers Overview*. 6.
<https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/etd/6>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses, Dissertations, Graduate Research and Major Papers at Digital Commons @ RIC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses, Dissertations, Graduate Research and Major Papers Overview by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ RIC. For more information, please contact kayton@ric.edu.

WAKING LIFE

By
Dionne Irving

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Masters of English

in

The Department of Arts and Sciences

School of Graduate Studies

Rhode Island College

2006

Waking Life

This morning when I wake up it's raining. The light that comes in through the warped window is the color of dirty dishwater. I lie in bed and listen to it beat against the glass and I imagine the water washing away the whole continent and leaving no one but me.

Last night I dreamt of floods. I was being swept away by water and I rode the crest of a large wave trying to escape the crushing force of the flow and trying not to get swept away by the tides. For once I have not dreamt of my mother.

In my waking life I am a writer spending six months doing a series of articles for a travel book about Europe for the 20-something single girl. I am not 20-something and instead of traveling I have spent the past four months writing in this Paris loft and researching all the places I am supposed to visit.

I roll over and look at the clock. It is 6 a.m. and my alarm won't go off for another 45 minutes. I think I hear the steady dripping sound of water on wood, the sound of the rain coming in. This building is old, quaint, European. The windows leak, the floorboards squeak, it seems that there are ghosts everywhere. I wonder if there is already a puddle forming on the paint chipped window sill. I hope I won't have to clean it up.

I turn back toward Andreas and nestle my body against his. I inhale his scent, deep and musky, a cologne whose name I don't know. But it reminds me of log cabins and winters spent tucked in by snow. He turns to face me and in his sleep wraps his arm around me and pulls me closer to him. It is a territorial and protective gesture, the kind that usually frightens me in a man. Usually if during the night I wake up to feel its dead weight my instinct is to get nervous. But I don't, because this is my first real love affair.

Andreas mutters something in German, his native tongue, but not the language of his waking life, a mixture of French and English mostly for my benefit. But the German slips out in sleep, in fits and bursts and occasionally nightmares. When he speaks to me during the day his voice is low, tender. In his dreams the words sound brusque and I wonder what he says. I wonder what I utter in my sleep, my desires, what languages slips from the deep recesses of my unconscious.

I know I hear the water dripping inside now. The steady patter against the window has become the distinct tap of rain on wood.

“Wake up,” I murmur, “Wake up and fix the window.”

I tug at the blanket and use my finger to trace the shadow of his ribs against his pale white skin and outline the tips of his eyes and the shape of his mouth. My arm is in stark contrast, the brown of my fingers looking almost startling tracing the fine blond hairs on his stomach. He opens his eyes and looks at me, surprised, and then happy. I love that he always wakes up this way, surprised, and then happy.

“Good morning,” he says.

He kisses the tip of my nose. He hugs me and then gets up and pulls the window shut as best as he can. Enough water has leaked in to create a puddle on the floor. He climbs back into bed and he cuddles up next to me leaving the edges of the bed empty as we both jumble in the middle.

“What time does the train leave?” he asks.

“It leaves at 9:30 from Gare du Nord.”

“Will you be on it?”

A question and a statement all at once. He is both loaded and subtle. The anger lurks in the eyes as he tries to keep his face slack and casual.

“I will,” I say.

He pretends to sob into his hands. He pantomimes the gesture trying to lighten the mood. He looks up to see if I am smiling, and I am.

“You don’t have to go,” he says in a high pitched snuffle and mock wipes the corner of his eyes with edge of the pillow case.

He can say this easily, because the details have been patched together through the stories that I tell, alternating between bliss and rage.

“It’s just work,” I say. But it isn’t and he knows it.

I have never written about London for a guidebook. This will be my first time. I’ve been assigned a silly series of articles about looking for love in Notting Hill. The insipid movie has inspired my editor to include a rather extended section in the next guidebook series, but this isn’t the real work. The real work is seeing the mother who left me when I was three.

“Write from here,” he says. He is serious now and the anger has come to the forefront of his still blue eyes. “Like you have done with the rest.”

I break his gaze and stare at the ceiling. We are on the top floor and I wonder how much insulation there is between us and the water pushing through the rafters and soaking us entirely on the limp platform bed. He has only known me for six months and already he knows how much I want to run. The idea that he knows this scares the hell out of me. Even as the idea that this is love crosses my mind, I am glad, almost in the same

breath, that I will be leaving the Paris loft. Love is difficult, and painful. My leaving is a mercy killing. Loving and frightening all at once.

“You want to get me fired?” I say trying to lighten the mood again.

He squeezes my arm and I know he wants me to look him in the eye, because that’s the kind of person he is, direct and without apologies. He would never have allowed his mother to leave him. But I continue to stare up at the ceiling.

“I want you to tell me you’re going to stay with me,” he says.

I look back at him. He grips my arm, lovingly, threateningly and looks at me, trying to look past what I am saying. His normally light colored eyes are dark and I want to avoid the question.

“I’m still thinking about it,” I say. “Give me some time to think.”

I do my best engaging smile. I rub his arm gently and hug him round the neck.

“*Je pense,*” I repeat in French, whispering the words to him in a French accent that makes him cringe and then laugh.

He wants an answer, he’ll wait. He will have to because I will not give him the one he is hoping for.

“*Avez-vous faim ?*”

He is trying to teach me French. My job is to respond in the few phrases I have cobbled together. I understand what is said to me better than I can repeat it back.

“Yes,” I say “I would love some breakfast.”

“You cheat,” he says with a smile.

He reaches around strokes the small of my back.

“Okay,” he says. “Go take a shower. I will make the breakfast.”

The warm water feels so good on my skin. In Andreas' Paris apartment the water trickles, unlike the pounding hot jets of North American shower heads. The water skims my body lightly and it feels as though I am bathing in a warm rain.

We'd had a fight the night before. I'd put most of my clothing and my laptop into one of my smaller suitcases while Andreas watched me smoking cigarette after cigarette stubbing each one out in the ashtray before he had reached the filter.

"I don't know why you need to do this," he said. He sipped the leftover wine from the dinner he'd made for us. "At least let me go with you."

He just knew I might not come back.

I rolled t-shirts the same way I had in college when I'd backpacked across for Europe for the first time. I tucked them tightly into shoes and underneath trousers.

"No," I said. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why?" he asked.

"Look," I said, an angry edge creeping into my voice. "Don't ask me so many questions."

"Can I not ask or comment on any aspect of your life?"

I tucked underwear into the small spaces that were left.

"No," I said. "You just can't. My life is mine, and you have yours."

He looked pained, as though my words had been an open handed slap across the face. He looked away from me and took another drag off the cigarette.

"This isn't what you mean," he said quietly. "I don't understand."

"Okay," I'd replied. I was finished with the conversation. I left what happened next up to the gods, to serenity, to prayer, Buddha and a penny thrown into a fountain.

I emptied the top dresser drawer Andreas had cleared for me. I pulled out socks and scarves and stuffed them into the suitcase wherever they would fit. I laid the Ziploc bag containing my grandmother's ashes on top of the neat pile of clothing. I smoothed them so they would lie flat. The bag was already emptied of air and had traveled far.

"Look at what you're doing," Andreas said. "You are not even packing with sense, you are clearly upset."

I sat on the bulging suitcase and zipped it up.

"I'm not upset, but I don't like being badgered."

"I am not badgering," he said. He held up his hands in his defense, the cigarette dangled comically from his lips. "I just want to be there to support you."

"I don't need support." I smiled tightly. A smile for school pictures and meeting the mentally disabled. "I'll be fine."

I looked around the loft for anything I'd left behind.

"So will you be coming back then?" he said.

I wasn't sure, so instead I gave him the answer I thought he would be happy to hear.

"I have to," I said, gesturing to the things I was leaving behind, a suitcase, a volume of Pablo Neruda poetry, two back issues of *Vogue* and my hair dryer.

I climbed into his lap. I would make up before we left. I didn't want to leave with him being angry at me.

"When you come back you will stay, yes?" he stroked my hair and I didn't answer.

To me, a love affair is something romantic and fleeting. He wants me to live with him in Paris forever. I am leaving things in the apartment although I am not sure I'm going to come back for them.

Andreas has run to the bakery while I am in the shower. He has *pain au chocolat* and hot tea waiting for me. We eat together and at 9 o'clock he walks me downstairs. He carries my overly packed suitcase to the bottom of the stairs and we stand there for a moment in the early morning rain. The wind whips in at an angle and he looks so earnest. I want to remember him this way if I don't see him again. His hair is gray and peeks out in early morning messiness from the hood of his jacket.

"Your suitcase is awfully heavy," he says, placing it next to me at the base of the stairs. His tone is suspicious. "Are you sure you won't need assistance with it?"

He wants to come. He wants to protect me. My granny would have loved him. She always said this was the job of the person who loved you. My own grandfather had been a shield for her until he'd died. Then she was left, unable to drive a car or even balance a checkbook. But me, I've done too much on my own to require protecting. It would seem silly now.

"I'll be fine on my own. I'll telephone soon."

I reach over and squeeze his arm. He isn't sure I am ever coming back, so he is not going to say he loves me. He breaks my gaze so I don't see how hurt he really is. It is not only that I do not invite him to come, but that I do not want him there. This is the Po that pushes men away fiercely. I can't imagine giving up my life in New York for this moment in the rain. It is nice, but it is not what I see for myself.

He leans in and kisses me gently; I keep my eyes open and squeeze him tightly for only a half second. I walk away and when I reach the end of the block I turn around and see that he is still standing there watching me go.

I've remembered to take my umbrella. The rain comes down harder and harder. It is the kind of rain that will sting your skin if you don't protect yourself. Sharp and hard, the rain drops have the feel of hot daggers piercing your skin. I step in a puddle and now my shoes and socks are wet. I will squeeze them out in the train bathroom, but they won't really be dry.

I have never gotten soaking wet. My grandmother had never been one for letting a child frolic in the rain. Vanity, which I have in abundance, has not let my meticulously blow-dried hair get wet and has kept me married to an umbrella. I feel comfort in knowing some part of my grandmother is with me now. I have brought her ashes across the ocean with me and keep them tucked tightly against my clothing in my suitcase. I cannot let go of this woman who was my life.

My granny did her best to shield me. Just like Andreas, she always wanted to protect me, shy, frightened and motherless from whatever she could. I was so afraid of the night as a child. Granny rubbed my back each night to help me fall asleep. Her hand would make smooth circles until I fell into the dreams with the rhythms of her voice.

*Pretty painted butterfly,
What do you do all day,
Fly around the sunny sky,
Nothing to do but play,
Nothing to do by play,
All the live long day,
Fly butterfly, fly butterfly,
Don't waste your time away.*

I can still hear the notes of the song, soft and musical. Her voice was lilting and took me easily into lush and colorful dreams. Some nights I was that butterfly, soaring, playing, carefree. Other times I couldn't get off the ground. Instead of soaring carefree through the sunny skies, I stayed mired in the image of the woman who had left us both. It was a fuzzy picture. I only remembered the way she smelled softly and sweetly of the vanilla perfume she must have touched behind her knees before going out.

Soaring like the butterfly is one of the lessons from Granny I didn't pay attention to, but one that comes back to me at night in my dreams. Sometimes I wonder if she really sang it to me or if I just imagined it.

The umbrella gives out on me a block from the train station. It is blown up by the wind, so I drop it into the nearest trash can and run the rest of the way pulling up my hood up and ducking the rain drops. Having traveled, I know to expect cold springtime showers in Paris. I leave out this detail when I write pieces about Springtime in Paris for travel magazines. Those pieces are about having coffee on the Champs Elysee with a beautiful light spring breeze blowing your hair about. It is the kind of moment that puts a bounce in a girl's step and a song in her heart. Unfortunately, this is the kind of travel writing I do for a living. It has rained a lot in Paris lately a cloudy March has turned into a rainy April and the rain has become increasingly cold, damp and uninviting.

I call my mother from the railway station. Our meeting was arranged a year earlier, after a condolence card came, my name on the front in slanting backwards script. "*Warmest regards on the death of your mother*" and her signature dashed hastily inside. But there was no phone call. I'd waited for days to hear her voice crackle long distance over the telephone line. But it never came. I had Granny cremated and was humbled

when they handed me the tiny box at the funeral home. She was a small woman, but I still expected there to be something more substantial in her ashes. There is no heft to ashes. It was sad to think that this was all that Granny was made up of.

So I'd called her and got a rushed invitation to "pop round if I was in London." I had hidden from her for months in France before a deadline had forced the issue.

The trains rumble in the background and efficient textbook French calls out the train platforms.

"Londre, Voie B. Londre, Voie B."

It is my train they are calling. I pull out the crumpled card. I smooth it out and put a card into the telephone. I got the number months ago from an overseas operator. I make sure I push each button carefully. The telephone rings and rings. I reach her answerphone and the message is bright and chipper.

"Hullo, you've reached Janice and I'm afraid I'm engaged at the moment but leave a message and I'll return your call."

My stomach turns and I want to hang up. I wait for the beep.

"Yes, hi, it's Po, ah Pauline. I'm just calling to confirm that I'll meet you at Prince Albert Pub in Coldharbour Lane at 6."

I hang up quickly and head toward my track.

Trains leave the station hourly. They go everywhere and anywhere. The click of the schedule board in the train station whips through cities every few minutes, Amsterdam, Marseille, London, Toulouse, Dijon. The trains shoot off into the outer edges of Paris, all abandoned railroad cars with French graffiti and high rise apartment buildings. The train shuffles out past industrial complexes until it suddenly goes through

a tunnel and comes out the other end in a different France. This France, unlike the one with the high rises, is the one that is waxed poetic, fields of sunflowers, lavender as you go further north, cottages with red tiled roofs and sun that lights up the faces of freshly scrubbed French children as the train whips through their town. I fall asleep, my mouth open, the drool puddling on my bottom lip.

I dream of my mother. Her small house, its thatched roof and there are children playing in the front garden. A little girl and a little boy with curly brown hair who smile when they see me.

“Po!” they call out and run up and grab me by the legs and I hug them and I am so happy. I kiss their fat little cheeks and we go into the house together. There are biscuits with honey and tea and my mother greets me with a smile and kisses me on both cheeks.

“We’ve been waiting for you Po,”

She calls me Po, my grandmother’s pet name for me, and strokes my hair and tells me how lovely I have become.

She is beautiful, her hair is long and shiny, her face is round warm and welcoming. We sit and talk. The clock strikes 3 and she looks up worried.

“You have to go Po,” she says.

“But Mummy, I just got here, can’t I stay?”

She laughs a tinkling and lilting laugh and grabs my arm and squeezes it.

“No, Po, you don’t belong here. This is my life, darlin’, not yours.”

Her grip on my arm becomes tighter as she guides me toward the door. I wake up and tears are on my cheeks. The dreams are so vivid I wake up with a five-year-old’s desire for mummy. I stretch out and check that my suitcase is under my seat, that Granny

is still safe. In my dreams I find my mother and the reunion is always beautiful. She welcomes me into her arms with a Crest toothpaste smile, and apologizes to me for every single second we've ever spent apart.

The countryside whips past me now in a blur of images. The flowers, the hills, the cottages. I have not been out in the French countryside in a long time and on this particular trip I have yet to leave Paris. I rub my eyes and stretch. There is a tiny French girl sitting across from me. Her body is small, but she has a large head and big green eyes. Her curly hair is done up in pigtails. She twists her hair with one hand and eats with the other.

"Bonjour, Mademoiselle" she says, she takes a bite out of a baguette nearly her size slathered with butter and jam.

She looks too small to be riding the train alone and I don't see her family anywhere around. The car is half empty. Passengers drift in and out, students traveling in groups, business travelers sipping coffee from the dining car.

"Avez vous faim?" The little girl holds out her bread offering me a piece, I shake my head no. The little girl shrugs and gets up smearing jam on the arm rest. She walks out of the car. As she leaves I realize I should have helped her find her parents, asked her name, or found a conductor to look after her. I can't imagine what kind of mother I would be. Perhaps the type that would let a small child wander around a train full of people alone.

I close my eyes and I plan out the rest of the trip. Once I get to London I will check into my hotel, and I will make my way into Brixton. Other tour books have described the place as having 'palpable Caribbean flavor.'

The cabin door slams open and a heavy older woman walks into the car. Her hair is tied back with a scarf printed with brightly colored blue and red parrots, their tails create a fan down her back. Gray hair peeks out at the scarf's temples. She wears a clashing light pink windbreaker over an orange print t-shirt. Her eyes dart quickly around the cabin.

"Bernice," she calls out. "Bernice!?! Don't you hear when your granny call you?"

The last part is delivered frantically and I recognize the same frenetic Jamaican patois that my grandmother always used when she would try to find me on the playground. I would hide and pretend I didn't know her. I would pretend that it wasn't my name that she called.

"Po!" My grandmother would call, her head tied in that hair scarf I hated, her house slippers dirtied with the dust of the playground's small pebbled surface. "Don't you hear when granny call you?"

I feel ashamed for all the moments that I screamed at my grandmother "You are not my mother and I hate you." For the times I told the kids in middle school that she was not my grandmother, but my babysitter. She had been the only person to look after me, and I was too rushed to pretend I wasn't upset by her death that I hadn't even given her the funeral she deserved for that effort. I haven't been nice. But I will make things up with my mother.

The woman calls one more time and looks around the car. I look away because sometimes you see people from the island and they want to know you. They want to play: "Who your parents?" "Where they from?" "What are you doing all alone in foreign?" I watch the French countryside whip by my window, we are about to enter the Chunnel. I

do not want to be peppered with questions for which I have no answers while submerged under thousands of feet of water, and trapped.

We go underground and there is darkness and in the window's reflection I see the woman standing behind me in the aisle looking out the opposite window, gazing into the dark and shifting her weight from one foot to another. She looks lost, staring at her own reflection. I wonder what she sees, if she is trying to figure out how she got here.

The little girl wanders back into the cabin. The bread is gone and her face is dirty.

"Grand Mere!" she says, surprised to see the woman standing in the aisle. She climbs into the woman's arms, puts her little arms around her neck and kisses the woman's face. This is Bernice. She nods and pats the little girl. She strokes the child's hair roughly and lets herself be kissed. She looks out the window again into the darkness and I think maybe she can see something I can't.

After I check into my hotel I spend the early afternoon going to Harrod's and browsing in the shops on Oxford Street. I find young women to talk to for my article. I pretend to look for places to pick up eligible English men. The city seems to be crawling with Jamaicans. I imagine what Brixton will be like. I stop in Selfridge's and buy a tin of biscuits for my mother. It is a tin filled with assorted jellies, shortbreads and chocolates.

The store is thick with tourists looking for afternoon tea and I stop into one of the telephone boxes and dial Andreas's number. He answers after the second ring.

"Allo."

“Hello, it’s me.”

“Hello *chou*.”

It is reassuring to hear his voice again and I close my eyes and let it slide over me.

“How is London?”

“Alright. It’s overcast here. I suspect it’s going to rain soon.”

Our conversation is forced and stilted over the telephone. What am I thinking? Of course I cannot go back to this man, not for the long term, perhaps not even for the short term. I think about taking the tube out to Heathrow and charging a ticket to New York on my credit card.

“Well try not to get too wet, I wouldn’t want you to catch cold,” he says.

There is a pause and I try to think of something to say that will not give this phone call unexpected weight.

“I miss you,” he says finally.

“I know.”

“When are you coming back?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “It is hard for me to tell how long things will take here.”

“No excuse please, Po, just come back.”

His voice is intense, serious. There will be no overly romantic gestures or pleas, just a simple request to come back and give things a chance with him.

“Yeah,” I say. “I’m still thinking.”

I look at my watch. I will get on the tube soon and ride down to Brixton.

“What is to think about? I love you,” he says.

“Me too,” I say breezily and place the phone back in its the cradle.

I put the tin of biscuits in my purse. I head back out into the street where it is overcast and grey.

Brixton is not the London that tourists often see. The fanny packs, sprawling maps and newly white sneakers all but disappear as the Victoria Line chugs toward Brixton. As we move further and further from the city center, the train stops less frequently. The ride between the Vauxhall and the Brixton station seems interminable. A pleasantly accented voice informs that this is the end of the line as the train pulls into the station.

It is not raining yet in Brixton but the sky is dark and I can see the potential forming in the ominous clouds. I am not meeting my mother for another hour. I wander up Electric Avenue where the tube has left me. I remember the song with a smile. I'd read once in an old issue of NME that Eddy Grant had written the song about the lack of acknowledgement of Brixton's growing Caribbean population. This is my mother's home, and in her neighborhood I feel as confused as ever.

I am one of a long tradition of Jamaican children left behind by their parents. They go off to Canada, to the United States, to England, and then they send for us when the money is good, when the weather is warm, when they have found a school where they can bully the teachers. My mother left me in Toronto, in the middle of the winter. I was born there, and sometime before my second birthday my mother's husband, my father, disappeared, and so Granny came to stay. My mother was young and inexperienced, or so Granny told me. I heard stories about my diapers being put on backwards and my mother letting me run around the house naked whenever my little heart desired. These stories would make Granny laugh until the tears at the corners of her eyes turned to the kind of

tears that come from sadness instead of happiness, and then she would get quiet and say Mummy's name and sigh. When I was three and my mother decided to move to England, and I was left with Granny.

The Brixton market on Electric Avenue is bustling. I walk through stalls with halal meats and consignment clothing. It reminds me of the Portobello Road Market, but I remember I am at the outskirts of London and I am surrounded not by overzealous tourists but neighborhood people doing their shopping. I fantasize about my mother rummaging through the stalls picking out breadfruits and ackee for a Sunday brunch. There is no need to take notes here.

There are still another 45 minutes before I meet my mother. The pub is on this street, the Prince Albert, her choice not mine. I had never ventured into Brixton during any of my previous trips to London. I walked the areas that my industry traffics in: Big Ben, Westminster Abby, Buckingham Palace. Travel writers don't enjoy the travel so much as describe the mundane details. Places you can use your student ID, where to go for a cheap lunch and sadly, in my case, where to meet other cute backpackers.

I never much enjoyed traveling in London. The idea of my mother has always hung over the city, like the ghosts that supposedly haunt some of London's most famous monuments. I could always feel the specter of her hanging over the city. But there has never been a need to find her before now. My grandmother was alive then, and I didn't want a mother who did not want me. In the past Granny suggested seeing her, slipping my mother's number in my purse and awaiting my arrival from each trip to the UK with a breathless anticipation. But she didn't ask, I think mostly because she didn't want me to know how much she cared.

The street lights are coming on now and the sun lowers and seems to want to hang for a moment before dipping out of sight. I have been warned about Brixton at night, its muggers and drug dealers. But I think that it looks much safer than Alphabet City, the rough edges of outer Greenwich Village where I live. A bit of sunlight peeks through the clouds and hits a metal sign illuminating the word 'Joy' across the street. The letters sparkle in their last bit of the late evening sunlight and I shield my eyes from the glare. My arms goose pimple and I look right then left and sprint quickly across the street and pull open the shop doors.

The shop is crammed with bits of jewelry and hip clothing, trousers with "Black Sabbath" stenciled across the bottoms and t-shirts with anachronistic screen printings. It is the type of shop I would have loved when I was 20. I flip through stacks of books about Elvis, detox, botox and yoga. I browse dishes with 'eat' painted on them and backpacks crafted from refuse. I have broken six of Andreas's wine glasses. I pick out two with delicate stems and hand painted globes. They are tacky. But I want to replace them.

The saleslady wraps the glasses in confetti colored tissue paper and I tuck them inside my pocketbook. I look at my watch. I have another 5 minutes to kill. I wonder if this shop has brought anyone the sentiment that is its intent. I want to walk out feeling light and happy like the kitsch-y pictures and novelty t-shirts advise.

I forgot that people in London begin drinking early in the day. The Prince Albert is more than half full by the time I reach it.

I don't know if I will remember what my mother looks like, so I scan the crowd for a dark face that looks familiar. There are none, so I sit at a table near the window. I

get a cup of tea. She is late. It has started and rain drops hit the glass with a steady beat. Even now I begin to fantasize about my mother's lateness. I daydream that she is buying me a gift. I think that she is rushing to pick up a husband who she cannot wait for me to meet.

Inside my pocketbook is Granny, a piece of Granny, tucked next to Andreas's glasses. This is the part of Granny I brought for my mother. This will be our connection. Granny will bring us close, the way she never could in her life. We will have one of those Lifetime channel movie moments where we're both so achingly beautiful, sad and touching that you cannot help but fall in love with both of us.

She is 20 minutes late now and my panic begins to set in when the door swings open. I am surprised. She looks young. Her hair is cropped close to her head and is tapered expertly at the back of her neck. Her jewelry is tasteful and stylish. She is slightly overweight, but still looks like the career-minded, savvy, woman, not the kind that you would think had a 30 year old daughter dressed in wrinkled jeans who lived more than half the year out of luggage. She wears the kind of sunglasses that wrap around, covering even her peripheral vision. They are both costume-y and chic. She comes right toward me. I get up to greet her.

"Pauline," she hugs me lightly, patting my back in a way that reminds me not to linger too long. Three quick pats and she releases me without sentiment.

"It's Po," I say. "Everyone calls me 'Po instead of Pauline.'"

"Well, yes I see."

There is none of the music in her voice that was in my grandmother's. Her tone is flat. British inflections have mellowed the Jamaican musicality. She studies me through the shades and I wonder why she doesn't take them off.

"So Po is it, would you be a darling and get me a pint at the bar."

I get up to get the glass without even a please from her, trying so hard to be the obedient daughter. When I come back she has taken off her sunglasses and is cleaning them with a napkin. I set the glass down in front of her and she pats my hand lightly as a thank you.

"So how did you choose an odd little name like Po?" she asks setting the sunglasses down.

"Granny said that Pauline was too much of a name for a little girl, so she called me Popo, and then as I got older, just Po."

It seems odd explaining a name I've had as long as I can remember to the woman who gave birth to me. She laughs, but it's not the laugh from my dreams. My mother's laugh in my waking life is harsh, the sound of pebbles being thrown against a metal garage door.

"Well that's lovely dear. It was so kind of you to think of me while you were here. What is it you do again, darling?"

She takes a sip of the ale, and I explain the travel writing, the books about backpacking, European vacations for the single girl. I am tap dancing, doing jazz hands, cart wheeling and doing my best to scream out "love me, love me, love me." As I speak I realize I don't know what she does. When I finish she looks at me curiously.

"What an odd job. And you enjoy this, do you?"

I am flustered.

“Yes, yes, I guess I do. It’s challenging, interesting, lots of opportunities.”

“Odd,” she says again leaning back into her seat. “Quite odd.”

She gets quiet and I wait for the glowing woman of my dreams. I wait for her tell me how much she loves me, how sorry she is, how she missed me. But instead she begins to talk about Granny.

“I was sorry to hear about your Granny,” she says, as though she had no connection to the woman. “But I’m not surprised. That woman did absolutely nothing for herself but was always putting herself out for other people.”

I don’t know what to say.

“She did a lot for me, but I won’t ever live my life that way,” Janice continues, taking a sip from the ale. “If you learn one thing, Po, learn that you can’t live for anyone but yourself.” She leans across the table. “Always make yourself the priority.”

I feel the anger rise up into my face and I hold myself back.

“I think Granny always wanted to make sure everyone was taken care of, I think that made her happy, to make sure that people got the things they needed. She certainly always made sure that I always had the things I needed or wanted.”

She seems oblivious and shrugs her shoulders.

“Well, hope you don’t end up like her,” Janice says. “I think I’m a much better role model in that department. Besides, you don’t know everything about your Granny.”

I lean back in my chair. I wonder how she can say this to me.

“What can you tell me that I don’t already know about her?”

I keep my tone even.

“She was judgmental as all hell,” my mother says. She begins systematically tearing a napkin to shreds, one of my own nervous habits. “You couldn’t do one thing wrong without that woman holding it over your head for the rest of your bloody life.”

This is not what I know of my Granny.

“She tried to make everything a parable, a lesson to be learned and sometimes I just wanted to say, ‘okay, okay I fucked it up proper and I know that, you don’t have to couch it in some sort of moral high ground.’ She could never say anything directly, it was always about a song, or an Anansi story. Bloody hell. I hated listening to her go on and on about what was right, as though her way was the only right way.”

Janice has raised her voice to a near shouting pitch and a couple at the next table looks over at us and she glares at them with a sense of entitlement. These are all the things I loved about my Granny, the gentleness, the way she let me figure things out for myself. Janice grabs my hand and I look into her eyes for the first time. They are cold and it takes me a while but I realize that she has been drinking.

“I hope you didn’t let her brainwash you against me. I am. A. Good person.”

Her grip on my hand is tight and when she lets go of my fingers they are red and the blood rushes back into the digits gratefully. She has been drinking more than the ale she has been sipping for the past half hour. Not just one glass of wine, but the kind of drinking that has made her eyes bloodshot and her hands shaky as she reaches for the glass on the table in front of her.

“Well, why did you leave then?” I say it quietly because asking the question terrifies me and I know I will have to hear an answer and live with whatever it is. No more dreams.

She shrugs her shoulders at my question. My stomach bottoms out around my feet and she smiles at me with a tight-lipped smile that is so fake and repellant that I want to smack the glass from her hand.

“I was young,” she says. “Besides, your Granny was better at mothering. I never really liked it. I never really wanted to have children. You see, I work in fashion now,” she says with a look that seems to want me to be proud of her. “I manage a textile company. You see, I wanted to be more than just a mother.”

She looks at me pityingly, as though she is explaining this to a small child, who cannot understand the importance of a career or success. My mothering, she is telling me, was less important than textiles. My head swims and I don't know what to say. Did she get drunk because she was frightened of me? Because she knew my questions would be too hard and she needed to shield their blow? Or is my mother just a drunk? I don't know and I don't care enough to ask. We finish our drinks and she slips her sunglasses back on. It is raining harder and harder. Without the umbrella I will be soaked.

In the window I see people shielding their faces against the rain. The wind whips and shrieks louder and louder as a woman's umbrella is blown inside out. I reach my hand inside my pocketbook; I feel the tin of cookies and the edges of the Ziploc bag. I think about giving Granny to this woman, but what connection will she have to either of us? I imagine Janice stuffing the Ziploc in the backseat of her car and forgetting about it, or tucking it into her garage behind a pair of hedge clippers. She would throw away Granny the same way she had thrown me away.

“Is there something else I can do for you, dear? I do have some other errands to tonight.”

“No,” I say. “I just thought it was important that we meet.”

“Yes,” she says with a confused frown. “Yes I guess it is, family and such. We can chat another time I suppose. Can I give you a ride somewhere?”

I refuse and she gathers her expensive pocket book and pulls on her jacket. The hug is another quick three pats on the back.

“Well, give me a ring next time you’re in the city and we’ll chat or something, love.”

I watch her go out into the gusty evening rain. I sit there for an hour. I have another cup of tea. I think about my grandmother in my pocketbook. I don’t know what I to do with the piece of her that belongs to my mother. The ashes are all I have left now of a family. I know I will never see my mother again. I won’t write or call, she will probably change her telephone number.

I stay in Prince Albert’s Pub until the rain begins to let up. The streets of Brixton are quiet in the early evening and most of the shops are in the process of shutting their doors. It is a weeknight and I imagine people will head back home to families that love them. I have no one to go to. But I did for a little while, didn’t I? I think about Andreas. Can a person make a home as well as a house?

I go out into the drizzle and catch a cab back into central London. I have done what my grandmother would have wanted. I tried to make amends, but the certainty of my mother’s rejection floors me. But I am even more shocked to realize I have rejected her too and I feel the tears in my eyes.

“Let me out here,” I say to the cab driver as we cross over Westminster Bridge. I get out in front of the Abby and I watch as tourists line up for the final tour of the day.

The abbey is haunted with ghosts and I am among them. I see myself visiting the abbey for the first time at 18, hoping, in vain to see my mother somewhere in London's crowded throngs of people, but too frightened to seek her out. But I've done that now and I am sorry. I turn away and walk toward the clock tower. The rain begins coming down hard and I am without an umbrella. I'm dressed up to see my mother, a skirt, leather kitten heeled boots, and an expensive Petit Bateau t-shirt that cost two months worth of pay. I don't care.

The clock chimes for 8 p.m. and on the banks of the Thames, the rain hits my cheeks. It feels calming. Granny has never been one to keep a grudge. Forgive and forget she said again and again. I could not recall ever having felt the rain beat down upon me. It makes me sad that I have to wait until I am 30 to experience this for the first time. The water of the Thames is rough it has seen centuries of turmoil itself. I look up to the London Eye, rising up like a maniacal Ferris wheel and looking out over the city. It can see me, here on the banks of the river, sad, and disappointed. I wonder if it sees my mother, whoever she is, in the heart of Brixton, shopping on High Street, spending time with some family, in some life that I can't touch or try to become a part of.

My grandmother's ashes are still with me. I wonder if she is proud of me. Even with my silly career and my erratic love life, I wonder if she wants to make sure that there is a part of me that is happy, a part that is loved, a part that is protected.

If there is a heaven I hope she is there. I reach into my pocketbook searching for the cookies. I touch the fine tissue paper and I realize the glasses are shattered. I pull them out of my bag and shake the glass out into my hand. The fine slivers are colorful

and bright. I throw them into the Thames. I pry open the lid of my cookies from Selfridges and eat the whole tin sitting as the rain soaks through me.

I want to think that water can wash away all things. The piece that I have of my grandmother wants me to remember though. The water will not wash us away from each other. There will be no fresh start for Janice and I.

I walk up through the city, getting progressively wetter. When I get back to my hotel, I drip water on the expensive carpets and I don't care. Rivulets of mascara have run down my cheeks and I look frightening. I had wanted so badly to look pretty. I use the house phone to call Andreas. I get the answering machine with him greeting me in both German and French; it sounds a lot like love. I leave him a message in English. I want it to be cooing and lovely. Instead it is simple.

"I'm coming back," I say. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Rice and Peas

Thanksgiving was usually a day for Sonja Menesh and her sisters to catch up on their homework. Sonja couldn't ever remember seeing a turkey in the house. But her father walked into the kitchen as she was finishing up washing the breakfast dishes, and fifteen pounds of frozen meat hit the counter with force enough to turn over a bowl of soaking peas. Sonja raced to scoop up the peas before they turned over the pair of hand painted salt and pepper shakers that she had taken down for their company.

“What's that for?” Sonja asked.

He wasn't a man who liked to be questioned. Her father glared at her and rubbed the turkey's belly fondly. His hands were dirty and they smeared the plastic covering the bird.

“I think you'll cook this bird for us for the holiday.” Her father grinned and patted the bird with the kind of love he reserved for inanimate objects that made him happy, his pipe, his embroidered and the worn deck of cards he'd carried in his back pocket for the last 20 years.

“Thanksgiving?” Sonja asked surprised.

Her father looked up from the turkey with a look that gave no hint of humor.

“Are you deaf, girl? Of course, for the holiday.”

She had taken over the cooking duties six months earlier when her mother had fallen ill. The cancer had spread through her body leaving Sonja's mother thin lipped. There was only a shadow of her formerly plump and round face left beneath the skin and bones.

The bird sat frozen between Sonja and her father on the kitchen counter. The

bright orange sticker on the side advertised “discounted for quick sale.” It looked like the kind of bird that Sonja had only seen in movies. It looked like it would feed masses of people. It was certainly too much for their family of five, with Uncle Benjamin making six. Also, she’d never cooked a turkey.

“But how do you expect me to cook this?” Sonja asked.

She touched the bird tentatively, hoping that in her touching she wouldn’t show her fear. Ice crystals came off in her hand. Her father shrugged at her question.

“How ever you women cook poultry. Cook this the same way.”

Her father pushed her hand aside roughly and wiped the rest of the ice crystals off the bird.

“But make sure you use the curry,” he warned, looking up sharply at Sonja. “I have tasted these things that have tasted as bland as newspaper.” He narrowed his eyes as though the memory of the meal was still assaulting his taste buds.

She held her voice in. She stared down at the frozen turkey; she wished only that it had a face, something that she could look at instead of the headless body, captured in time through the freezing processes. She had no idea what to do with turkey.

“We eat at 6 p.m., and have it ready by then.”

He wiped his hand on the seat of his pants and clapped his hands together in a way that Sonja knew was more threatening than cheerful.

“And don’t sit in here and pick, pick at the food all afternoon. You’re fat enough already.”

“I’m not fat,” she said softly.

“What?” Her father hung his coat on the rack at the back of the kitchen.

"I'm not fat," she said again, raising her voice only slightly above a whisper.

"Humph. Then what's this?" her father said, grabbing a piece of flesh at her side and twisting it.

The pinch hurt. Stung her dry winter chapped skin and even when she twisted away from his grip and looked out the window she could still feel the vise grip of his fingers on her flesh. Her father folded his arms across his chest and stared at her.

"What about boys, Sonji? Don't you want a husband? These young boys now want skinny-minnie girls."

Boys. Everything with her father was about finding a husband and she was only in high school. But she didn't want any young boys, it wasn't worth the effort. Her father was right in that way. The boys weren't any nicer to her than he was. The only man who ever had one kind word to say was her Uncle Benjamin.

Uncle Benjamin never insulted her weight. It was the thing Sonja liked the most about him. He smiled politely and took second helpings of Sonja's rice even when Sonja's mother and father complained that it was too sticky or that it was overcooked. Uncle Benjamin would smile and say "Good, very tasty."

Uncle Benjamin was one of the uncles who wasn't really an uncle to the Menesh girls. Uncle Benjamin wasn't like other uncles. He lived alone and he read things other than the newspaper. His bachelorhood left doors open for him at dinnertime almost anywhere he wanted. The uncles were men who had met Mr. and Mrs. Menesh before any of the girls was born. The pretend uncles traveled to the same types of grocery stores that the Menesh parents shopped at, tiny family owned groceries that sold food imported

from the islands. People longing for a piece of home would pay nearly any price for spices sold in plastic baggies or dented tins of ackee.

“Well, I say you’re fat, and you need to finish dinner,” her father said and pushed the frozen turkey across the counter in Sonja’s direction .

She could finish the dinner, but she had better not taste much of it. She could study hard, but she got yelled at for spending the whole day with her nose in a book. She could be a rocket scientist but without a husband, in her father’s eyes she wasn’t a daughter worth having.

Her father’s words floated down like the leaves spinning toward the ground and settled all around her. The fear of the cooking seized her stomach. She doubled over as soon as he left the kitchen as the pains shot through her belly and up her throat. She bit the insides of her mouth until she tasted the metallic taste of blood on her tongue.

It was this way every time, the fear, even when her hands could make the dishes faster than she could think about them. Sonja spent the months cooking the food her father insisted on having. Even though there were no more guests to eat the 20 dumplings Sonja made for the soup or to eat the heavy cake sweetened with honey and garnished with dyed pink coconut. Mrs. Menesh’s illness had kept all the uncles away. But Mrs. Menesh’s hair was beginning to come in and she had grown comfortable with wearing her wig.

Sonja had planned to make channa dal with roti and rice and peas. The peas sat in the sink looking solemn. The dal sat in the sink, judging her with the same eyes that her mother would. She was so used to seeing the green plastic basin, nestled in the crook of her mother’s arm that it seemed solitary sitting in the sink alone. She’d soaked the dal

overnight like her mother had told her a million times before. But each little pellet sat stubborn and firm as though she had never touched them. She dumped tepid water out in the sink and made the water as hot as she possibly could. Her mother's illness had not meant that the chores were evenly distributed. Terry and Lorna, the Menesh twins, had been channeled into different areas.

Her twin sisters waved off the idea that they would be anything but pretty and popular, leaving Sonja to wonder where, at the chromosomal level, there had been so much difference between her and her twin sisters. Sonja had never been thin, but Terry and Lorna were lithe with long legs and bony knees. But she had padding around her mid section and was a full two inches shorter than both her sisters, although she was two years older. While she handled the kitchen, the twins went to parties and feigned homework when Sonja asked them to help with even the dishes. The twins could shake off family responsibilities with the ease of pulling off a sweater.

"Duh, we're American," they would say as though their American-ness explained their selfishness.

The pot of rice and peas was already on the stove. Sonja stirred the pot, making sure to wait until the pot was boiling to add the pepper. The pepper was the most important part; rice and peas without the pepper could ruin the dish. But even worse was letting the pepper burst in the pot, letting its fiery hot juices leak into the rice and spoil it entirely.

Some people liked their rice and peas hot, some people burst the pepper on purpose and ended up with something you could barely eat. Uncle Benjamin had told her once that he had spoiled lots of pots of rice that way. He'd done it some many times and

had to eat that he started to like the taste. The fiery hot rice started to taste as good as the rice the where the pepper had stayed intact.

Later on in her life, Sonja knew she would describe Uncle Benjamin as distinguished, but that when that happened she would omit the word “uncle.” Her sisters called him Benny behind his back, although Sonja always liked to think of him as Benjamin. They said he was cute. His skin was fair, his thick black hair was tightly curled and his eyes the type of green that Terry and Lorna said “you could lose yourself in.” Uncle Benjamin took sips of the strong coffee that Sonja’s mother wrapped her blouses around when she traveled back from her trips to the island. He would press his fork onto the last crumbs of the coconut cake, making sure he didn’t miss one bite. He would wipe his mouth, sigh contently and murmur softly “Very nice, very nice.” Sonja liked the way he said it. It seemed real and genuine and she hoped that one day a man would say those same words about her.

She still had to cook the turkey. There were cookbooks in the Menesh household, but they were mostly for decorative purposes. They were gifts from well meaning neighbors who wanted to help introduce American foods to their foreign neighbors. But the Meneshs had been in the United States over 20 years. The recipes that called for tins of Campbell’s Mushroom Soup and involved heavy gravies and cream sauces were outdated by now. The books had pictures of Jell-O molds and Baked Alaska, things that the three Menesh daughters had only read about but never actually tasted.

The cookbooks were on the shelf above the sink and to reach them Sonja had to drag a chair out of the breakfast nook and stand on her toes. She was sweating by the time she came down. The moisture collected underneath her armpits and made the wool

of her sweater feel all the more scratchy. The Betty Crocker cookbook was old, its cover yellowed and faded but the pages were crisp as though it had just been purchased. On the front was a picture of a large turkey next to a bowl of fruit salad. The cover art had been carefully crafted and the turkey looked appealing, reclining on its bed of green beans. The fruit salad, thick and syrupy, seemed an odd accompaniment.

Mrs. Menesh had been defeated by the image of the smiling woman on the cover and the artfully arranged, tidy looking pictures promising the flavorless dishes her daughters wanted to take with them; rice crispy treats, layer cakes and brownies. Flavor was her mother's favorite work. It was something to think about and use as a test of good judgment, a smart and skillful cook would be judged by their flavor. She would taste and smack her lips together declaring something to be with flavor or without. Without was always a bad thing. Sonja remembered Mrs. Menesh puzzling through the recipes and eventually messing them up. Her mother sent the girls to school over the years with crunchy tarts filled with guava paste and coconut and decorated with dyed pink sugar. Mrs. Menesh had put the Betty Crocker book aside, along with all the other cookbooks that puzzled her with their shiny pictures of bright and well lit food. Instead, Mrs. Menesh went back to the recipes she knew worked, recipes that involved measuring ingredients by the handful. These recipes always turned out perfectly, in the same way that they'd been taught to her. Her cooking was not about bright and cheerful artfully displayed dishes. There was no love in the meals, just a practiced hand. Even before the illness there was no happiness in her mother. The illness left even less for Sonja and her sisters. Her mother would say to her often,

"Just embrace your misery. Happy isn't fun or interesting. Happy is an idea, it isn't real. You can't accomplish much by being happy, anyhow. Just be a good girl and wait to be delivered to the lord."

Whatever happiness was left after Mrs. Menesh's illness was replaced with a faraway look in her eye, as if she could see the future and didn't care for what she saw. She was a woman who was defeated easily, Sonja knew that much.

Sonja was small and squat like her mother. Her face was unremarkable, so instead her hair became what attracted attention. It was long and thick and she wore it in a braid that reached her mid back. Sonja believed in her happiness. She held on to the idea of happiness. This idea lived around her heart because she couldn't spread her hope into the world and wear it on her face in her smile, or her charm. She held her small amounts of happiness inside for no one else to see, or to touch.

The stillness was around her and she could hear the shudder of the appliances and her mother's cough from the downstairs bedroom. The turkey pages in the cookbook were carefully organized. There were pictures of large families holding hands, saying grace, smiling at the giant golden turkey in center of the table with hardened expressions of delight. Tiny white cartoon hands took the reader through the stages of turkey making one step at a time. The book was clearly written for a 1960s absent-minded newlywed. The cookbook chastised Sonja for not thawing the turkey ahead of time; but told her that she could have the turkey on the table in time to please her husband and their family.

Sonja thawed the turkey in the oven. She locked the kitchen door, sat in front of the oven door, and watched the ice melt off the bird through the oven door. The ice poured off the turkey's pimples and filled the bottom of the foil baking pan.

Through the door she could hear the blaring television, her sisters running around upstairs and hear her mother's slipper feet as they shuffled past the kitchen to the downstairs bathroom where she spent most of her time.

As she got better and better, her mother summoned the energy to come to dinner each night. She would pick at her dinner, criticizing Sonja's roti or her curry. When Sonja would stare back at her not knowing what to say her mother would snap at her.

"Don't just sit there like a fool, girl, write down what I'm telling you so I don't have to tell you twice."

There was a right way to do things and there was a wrong way. Sonja learned her way was usually the wrong way. Using the microwave to heat water or to melt butter was the wrong way. Standing in front of a stove, her shirt sticking to her back and sweat forming in a pool under the roll of her belly, was the right way.

Her mother had first pulled her into the kitchen when she was seven. There had been tenderness in her touch, and as Terry and Lorna fought over Legos and Barbies, Sonja's mother whispered all her secrets to Sonja and dotted her nose with flour. Her mother had spoken brightly to her then, lavishing the type of affection that Sonja hadn't seen since. The tone had changed when she was thirteen. The trips to the kitchen were forced and Mrs. Menesh would eye her daughter like an interloper into her world. She became more and more critical of the dishes Sonja would make, sometimes throwing them out and making her start over entirely.

"At home when girls are ten and they don't know how to make a full dinner yet, people will talk," her mother would yell angrily when Sonja made mistakes. She would cry and then Sonja felt bad until she realized that her mother's tears were not for Sonja,

but for herself. Sonja learned how much her mother didn't want to be here, in this foreign country, with the foreign food, with the foreign girls she barely recognized as her own.

When all the ice melted off the turkey Sonja pulled it from the oven and poked its flesh with a fork. It was spongy like the cookbook had said it should be. She rubbed the skin with curry powder, tamarind, coriander and cumin.

The kitchen smelled of curry and dal, the smell that the girls at school called "that Indian smell."

"We're not Indian," Sonja always wanted to say.

But the explanation became too much of a travelogue and the barrage of questions would continue until she felt as bare as one of the nude African women pictured in the pages of a National Geographic.

The kitchen smelled just as it should in that moment. The smell of the cooking dal, the roti dough, warm and yeasty and ready to be rolled out onto the countertop. It looked just the same way as it would if her mother was cooking. She checked on the rice and peas. The pepper was still intact and she stirred the pot. When the dinner was done and eaten and digested, would anyone even remember who'd cooked? Sonja knew then that really good girls didn't worry about being happy because they only ended up spending their lives cooking; greasy and overweight, flipping roti for a belching man.

She rolled the roti dough out on the counter, pressing her fingers tightly to form perfectly concentric circles like her mother taught her to. She dropped the three roti into the grease and watched it sizzle. She flipped the roti in the frying pan; they were a perfect light brown. She stared at them and thought about how they were supposed to taste. She

thought about how well made roti melted in your mouth. Whoever ate them was always grateful that they knew someone who could cook so well. But she didn't want that gratefulness, she didn't want to be the girl that cooked "well."

She held the spatula down on the roti until the edges turned dark brown and crispy then she held the spatula down on the roti until they cracked in the middle. They were the kind of roti her mother had warned her never to make; it was the kind of roti made by single and childless women who were bound to go mad. The rest of the dinner had to be ruined.

She turned the heat up under the rice and peas. The pot boiled furiously and white foam poured out of its lid snaking its way down into the heating element's coils where it sizzled and burned. The channa dal had to be soaked until they were mushy. She cooked them down to a paste and served the gummy paste in the burned roti.

"What's that burning I smell?"

The question was shouted through the door of the kitchen and her father jiggled the handle.

"Nothing," Sonja called out.

"You cannot be doing *nothing* or I would not smell something charred," her father yelled. He pounded on the screened door with his fist so hard that Sonja was worried that he might punch a hole in it.

"I need to finish dinner," she called out. She huddled next to the refrigerator, the tightness returning in her stomach as she gazed at the blackened pot of rice and peas.

"You better not have burned anything," her father called. "No man wants a woman who can't cook, me included."

She scraped the burnt rice and peas into a serving dish. She enjoyed the sound of the serving spoon scraping against the sides of the pot. She scraped until bits of burnt metal flaked off the bottom of pot into the dish.

When Uncle Benjamin arrived at 5:30 p.m. Sonja had just finished cooking the turkey. She unlocked the kitchen door for Terry who feigned side-splitting hunger.

“It smells good in here,” Terry said pulling open the oven door. “Is that a turkey!?”

Sonja gently shut the oven door.

“I think dad got it half price, so it looks like we are actually celebrating the holiday this year.”

Terry grinned. “Did you make potatoes too? Or rolls.”

Terry had seen Thanksgiving leftovers at other houses and was interested in eating something comparable to the other leftovers that she’d seen.

The twins had decided they would just be exotic; a catchall term that said nothing, but made them just foreign enough to be interesting at their friends’ dinner tables. But Sonja couldn’t shake it all off so easily. She laughed at Terry’s hopes of fitting in.

“I don’t think so, we are having channa dal with roti and rice and peas.”

Uncle Benjamin poked his head into the narrow space that Sonja had opened for Terry to get into the kitchen.

“It smells delicious,” he said.

Terry immediately leaned against the countertop, jutting out her hip in a way that she thought looked sexy and adopted the giggle and squeak that worked on the high school boys.

“Yeah, doesn’t it,” she said, looking Uncle Benjamin up and down.

He backed slowly away from the door.

“Yes,” he stammered. “Smells quite delicious.”

He walked away as quickly as he had come.

Sonja placed her turkey in the center of the table. She arranged the less burnt part of the rice and peas at the top of the platter and put the roti in the center of the table out of almost everyone’s reach except for Benjamin.

Her father eyed the dinner accusatorily when the family had all taken their places at the table. She watched as her parents exchanged glances. Her mother’s criticism would come after the meal, when she didn’t feel the need to demure in front of Uncle Benjamin. She would tell Sonja exactly the type of girl she was on the path to becoming with burnt rice and peas, with a burst pepper. Nonetheless, no one, not even her father could deny the turkey’s beauty, browned and scented sweetly.

“You know that animal only cost me three dollars,” her father said. He looked around the table waiting for his accolades. When they didn’t come, he grouched. “I don’t understand how this is a holiday anyway.”

Mr. Menesh took the responsibility of carving Sonja’s bird and handing out portions as he saw fit. Uncle Benjamin and the twins saw their plates piled high with the juicy golden brown meat while Sonja and her mother each only received a tiny piece.

“This meal is delicious,” Benjamin said and wiped his mouth twice after his first bite. “Just delicious.”

“No,” her father interjected. “It isn’t delicious at all.”

Uncle Benjamin looked up, surprised to be contradicted. “What?”

“Sonja made these. She is learning to cook, and with what I taste here, she has a lot of learning to do.”

“But Cecil,” Benjamin said. “You’re being too harsh.”

Her father shook his head

“No, she has to learn, or she won’t find a man to marry.”

“No, Dad, it really is good,” Lorna said chewing a mouthful of the turkey. “I think this is one of the better dinners you’ve made, Sonja.”

Mr. Menesh narrowed his eyes. He was unaccustomed to having his daughters speak after he had spoken. They were to keep their mouths shut and work on finding good husbands, and that was it. He stared at Lorna, looking for a sign that this had been some mistake. But she had already turned her attention away from him. Sonja saw that Lorna had won that argument, whether her father would admit it or not.

“You girls don’t know what you like,” he grumbled, and he took another bite of the rice and peas, making an effort to show Sonja all his displeasure. She looked away, realizing for the first time that, like Lorna, she had the power to shift her attention away from him. She kept the smile on her face because she liked being right. She knew that the victory was there, in each mouthful of the juicy turkey that she ate, she swallowed her contempt and relished the victory.

Later in the kitchen when she was supposed to be washing the dishes, she slipped the Betty Crocker cookbook into the sleeve of her fall jacket. She knew it wouldn’t be missed. It was hers now, the turkey had laid claim to that. There was something about the fall that always made Sonja sad. Where other people felt invigorated by crisp autumnal

breezes and the prospect of light jackets, she felt only a sense of death. It was a stillness that crept into her heart, lying wait until spring.

It was dark already. Nights had started coming sooner and sooner. She filled the kitchen sink with water and added dish soap. She searched her reflection in the window over the sink, trying to see her parents in her face. She was there staring at herself when Uncle Benjamin found her.

“Don’t be upset, he didn’t mean it.”

Uncle Benjamin always knew the right things to say, the one who brought the best cards, who knew what kind of candy Sonja and her sisters liked, who would always said the right thing with his curly hair and light colored eyes.

When he wrapped his arms around her waist it felt so good. Her fists clenched in the warm and soapy dishwater and bits of their meal floated in between her fingers in the dingy gray water. She couldn’t remember that kind of embrace before. His hands felt smooth like she’d imagine the dough of the dumplings and his breath was hot on the back of her neck as he pulled her closer than any of her uncles had before.

“Nice,” he whispered. “Like the turkey, very nice.”

She wished that he had told her she was beautiful that he had found something in her to call beautiful. He slid his hands down her legs and touched his nose to the tip of her braid. She didn’t remember how long they stayed that way. As he pulled away she knew that this would be the last time that Uncle Benjamin came for dinner.

That night when the dishes were put away and her father had thrown what was left of Sonja’s turkey into the trash, she took the Betty Crocker cookbook into the front yard. The night was cloudy and yard looked like it had been misted with a crystal. She slid the

book out from under her jacket and peered again at its cover. It promised a kind of America that she couldn't imagine ever tasting and she wasn't sure that she wanted to. The heavy gritty taste of the overcooked dal lingered on the back of her tongue. She spat into the grass and wiped her gloved finger trying to escape the lingering taste. There was a new moon. Sonja gazed up at the waxy yellow longingly and breathed in the cool air. She slipped the book from underneath her jacket. She ripped the turkey recipe out of the book and burned every other page in the Betty Crocker cookbook, one page at a time, savoring their smoky scent and enjoying the brisk breezes of an autumn night.

Weaving

Delroy only has 30 more minutes before the fight. He is sitting in one of the warm-up rooms off the gym's main ring. He can hear the scrape of the chairs as people sit down, get comfortable, wait for the show to start. It's all happening on the other side of piece of dingy gray curtain. They usually start with the featherweights. He fights second tonight.

People are a lot easier to hit than punching bags. People duck and weave and bob, they throw punches, but they let you strategize and usually that is what gets Delroy excited. There's something nice about moving around a person and seeing what they might do next. It makes you feel like you're high.

Just now, though, he can feel the heft of tonight's fight. He warms up on the bag. He hits the bag as hard as he can and it sways back and forth, taunting him. *"Such a loser Delroy."* *"You ain't never gonna be a good fighter, Delroy."* *"Dellllllroy, Dellllroy, Hit me harder, you won't hurt me none with those little sissy punches, old man."*

The bag is a mean motherfucker and Delroy hits it harder and harder until his lungs feel empty and the sweat runs down his forehead and stings his eyes. He is happy to have that bag to warm up on, and when he is good and warm he hugs the bag and worries about how he is going to look in that Fanakov's eyes and put up any kind of a fight.

He bounces back and forth on the balls of his feet trying to stay loose and limber. Fanakov is pretty young, can't be more than 19 or 20 and he has a mean look. When they weighed in on Monday morning Fanakov had looked him up and down and laughed before coming over to introduce himself. Delroy had tried to pretend that he cared, like

he really wanted to take the little prick. “Have respect, son,” he’d muttered under his breath and even added a few extra looks for good measure. Truth is, it’s Sunday now and he doesn’t really care; it’s all a show. He’s going to get his ass handed to him and when that’s done he’ll clean himself off and go home and drink until he gets the spins and passes out.

Delroy has already decided he won’t put up much of a fight. He’s going to take that beating and be happy to have it. There aren’t reasons to fight anymore. He doesn’t remember what the reasons were in the first place.

Two days ago when he’d called, he asked his ex-wife what the kid wanted for her birthday and she snorted into the phone.

“And what can you afford to get her?”

He wanted to tell her he’d give anything, everything, but the woman was right, he couldn’t even pay the court-ordered child support. He wanted to tell her that things could change for him after this fight, but she had heard it before and then her voice got that hard edge to it, the kind that could shatter him as easily as an uppercut to the jaw.

She didn’t invite him to his daughter’s birthday party. She mentioned that there was to be a party, but she didn’t say anything about him coming. So he was going, fuck her, she wasn’t keeping him away from the kid.

He got on the road right after his workout. He left later than he planned and then had to borrow the money for gas. He owed so much money at this point he didn’t have

any shame about borrowing a little more. Delroy listened to the radio the whole way. He liked Motown songs mostly. The kind from the sixties, with backup singers who sang “sha la-la” into the microphone. He didn’t know the names of most of them. He turned them up in his truck and he sang along.

Now if I appear to be carefree

It's only to camouflage my sadness

And honey to shield my pride I try

To cover this hurt with a show of gladness

The town where his ex-wife lived was built as far on the outskirts of Philadelphia as you could get. You had to pass the Amish and all that other shit before you got to Millersville. He turned on his high beams and pushed through the darkness. He fought the urge to sleep.

He had planned to get the little girl a great present. He’d seen a picture of a little kid-sized carousel in a magazine once. He tore out the picture, but when he called to ask for the price, the man told him it cost \$3,000. He couldn’t even imagine what \$3,000 looked like all in one place. He’d borrowed \$50, just enough for gas to get him all the way out there. So the present was going to be stolen. A pig. A baby pig for his baby girl. Every little girl loved animals, right? Something to snuggle with. And baby piglets were small, easy to cuddle, better than any goddamn stuffed animal; cause it was real. Cause he knew all about pigs, how they looked, what they tasted like, what you fed them. His daddy had raised pigs and Delroy could smell the pig shit on every letter he sent him

from the islands. The words were always written lightly in pencil, with spellings that he could barely understand until he stopped trying to understand at all.

The farm he chose was only about 20 miles outside of the town where his ex wife lived. Even in the dark he could tell where they kept the pigs. He knew the smell just as well as he knew the smell of himself. He climbed the fence slowly and lowered himself into the pig pen. The sow looked like one of them great big pregnant ladies all ready to pop, but she already had her babies. She lay on her side, her eyes closed, piglets suckling at her teats. She groaned, a sound that came from deep inside her, but she didn't move. He wondered who had impregnated the sow; there were no male pigs in the pen, only the mother and her piglets. He wondered if pigs laid claim to family, and protected them. He wondered if this crime was worse than stealing, ripping apart a family, taking a baby from its mother. The thought ached at his side for a while and he swallowed hard, trying to let it go.

The sow opened one eye, but she seemed uninterested. Maybe she had an idea that she and her piglets would end up someone's breakfast or wallet and she could not muster interest. Whatever it was, he was glad. He had seen sows get angry, rush a man, make people sorry. You had to be ready for situations like this, so he got in his stance, crouched low and braced himself. He stopped breathing for a moment or two, knees bent ready to jump the low fence again if the sow chose to attack. But the sow didn't stir, just lay on her side, eyes shut, being manhandled by those greedy piglets. He walked up slowly and moved behind her head and stroked it gently. She leaned gratefully into the caress like she was a dog, her eyes still shut.

The piglets reminded him of what his daughter looked like when she was first born, all wriggly, small and hairless. Delroy was in the hospital the day his daughter was born. He and the wife were already done by that time. He never hit her. Never. He knew some fighters who hit their wives, who beat them as bad as they beat any man in the ring. But not him. He knew better than to hit a woman.

His wife glared at him the entire time she was giving birth, like he was the one hurting her. He sat in the corner watching like it was one of those TV nature specials. And when it was all over she held the little bundle that had her daddy's dark skin and her mama's blue eyes. He stayed in the corner and let the wife hold the baby first. He stood in the background and stared in a way that made him feel dumb, wondering how he was going to make the kid love him. When they finally let him hold her, he knew he had to do anything for her, that he had to do everything for her.

There weren't many times to fall in love. He'd been in love only three times and they all seemed to come out of nowhere, the first was a grocery store clerk, the second was his ex-wife and the third was his baby girl. But just like everything he always messed it up. He always ended up treating the people he loved like shit. That way when they left, cause they always left, he didn't feel quite so bad about it. But he swore he would try to do better with this little girl. He thought it would be kind of like fighting, when you loved you could anticipate the hurt just like you could anticipate the punch. Treating people like shit was his best strategy to avoid direct blows.

Years later drinking in some dive bar or getting his eye stitched up after a fight he would think about that pig. "That pig" he would say. "That goddamn pig was the only thing I treated right for love."

It would be a lie. He hadn't even been able to do that. He didn't know how to treat anything right for love, or anything else. He thought the pig would grow with his little girl, their bellies would get fat together. His little girl would love the pig, and she would always remember the daddy who brought it for her. When you raised something, you could take some pride in it. He didn't raise his daughter and so he could only be proud in a faraway kind of way, feeling some ownership and knowing at the same time he had nothing to do with the success.

He lifted the sow's teat and discovered a piglet fast asleep with a full belly. He lifted the tiny creature gently out from under its mother and immediately it began to shiver. It made little half grunts, half squeals in its sleep and Delroy tucked the animal inside his down jacket. He felt the piglet nuzzle against him, finding a comfort spot and settling down. He smiled in the dark, dank pen, feeling the piglet's body warm against his own.

He ran out to his truck before the thing could realize it was getting stolen. In the car he sang to the piglet like he wanted to sing to his baby girl. He knew all those old Jackson Five songs, and he could sing like Michael if he tried real hard. His voice was rough and low and eventually he stopped singing and started coughing. The piglet vibrated against his chest with each dry hacking breath he took. It squealed and he pulled the animal tightly against him.

"Don't cry," he murmured. "Everything will be alright soon enough."

The pig's whined and then it got higher pitched and louder. It squealed louder than he could have ever imagined.

"Dammit," he yelled out over the screaming piglet.

He pulled the truck over on the shoulder and unzipped the jacket where the tiny thing had shit itself and was screeching and wriggling against him. He tossed the animal away from him roughly and he wiped at the shit with a napkin. The piglet ran around and squealed even louder. He mashed his hands over his ears.

"Stop it!" he shouted.

But the little thing was frightened. It ran underneath the truck's wider seat and Delroy could hear it under there. Crying and breathing really hard. He sat back for a second. A clean shirt ruined with pig shit. The ex wife was going to have a field day with him now.

Not only was he late, but now he was late and smelled like pig shit. The clock in the truck flashed '12' over and over. It was no reliable source. There was pink crepe paper strung up over the porch. There was one light outside but the rest of the house looked dark. The piglet was crying softly in a way that did nothing but annoy him. It was a soft mewling sound, almost like a kitten, and he couldn't stand it. He left the pig in the truck. The porch stairs creaked as he came up them and he rang the doorbell three times in a row. There was movement in the house. A light in the upstairs window. He pounded on the glass in the door. It made his hand hurt.

"I'm coming," he heard from inside. "Stop the pounding I'm coming."

"Delroy?" she said, opening the door just a crack "Its midnight. What are you doing here?"

“I came for the party,” he said.

“Are you insane?”

She pulled the door open the rest of the way. That was the way she spoke to him, like he was an idiot. He remembered how much he hated her.

Her hair was tied back in a scarf and she had on a bathrobe. He hadn't seen her in two years, but she looked good. The last time he saw her, she threw something at him. A shoe, and a bottle of nail polish, the two things she could get her hands on the quickest. He brought the little girl back late. She called him a kidnapper.

“I brought her a gift.”

“A gift? You brought her a gift at midnight? Her party ended hours ago and you show up here at midnight? What the hell do you think this is? A nightclub?” She shook her head and her voice went up on the last word.

“I got here as quickly as I could,” he looked down. Nothing he ever did was good enough for this woman. “Is she awake?”

She laughed that hard laugh that he hated so much. It made him want to drape her up in the bathrobe. It made him want to hit her.

“No, she ain't awake. She went to bed three hours ago, and I ain't waking her,” she said as her voice got louder.

“Dammit,” he shifted his weight from foot to foot. He could feel himself getting angry. “Come on, I drove all the way out here and I got a present for her in the truck.”

Another light was flicked on and he looked past her into the house. The husband was there. He was backlit and Delroy couldn't see his face. But he wasn't afraid of that punk. He could take him, damn he'd taken men twice his size.

“Is there a problem?” he called.

“No baby,” she called back.

She turned back toward him

“Delroy thinks I’m gonna wake Jenny at midnight.”

“You are gonna wake her,” he insisted, raising his voice. “You ain’t gonna keep my child away from me.”

“Oh really, Delroy,” she sneered. “You and what army are coming to get her? You got some loser friends to come help you out. Oh or maybe you could get the police and tell ’em how you never pay your child support, yeah maybe then.”

She started to push the door shut and he smashed his fist against it hard. It caught her and she stumbled backward.

“You better let me in,” Delroy said, his voice low. “I don’t think that you want to mess with me tonight.”

His knuckles were bloody and they smeared against the pretty white paint on the French style doors. He could feel the blood rushing through his veins, down his arms into his fists. She wasn’t going to make him into a joke tonight. She wasn’t going to go back into that house and have a good laugh at his expense with that fancy husband of hers. He pushed harder against the door. He wanted to cry and he wanted to scream at the same time. He wanted to smash the whole door to pieces.

“Don’t you touch me, Delroy,” she screamed. “I’ll make you sorry.”

She’d already made him sorry. No, tonight she was going to be the one who was sorry, the one who felt guilty and bad and sorry. She pushed the door back harder and he pushed too, and the door popped opened. It was the husband that pulled it.

“Delroy, I think you’d better go.”

The man was younger than him, but Delroy bet the husband didn’t have his stamina, his jab. The man steadied himself and he gently pushed Delroy’s ex-wife back into the house. But Delroy could see that she wanted a fight. She hopped around her husband yelling curse words out from behind him, trying to make Delroy mad. She was doing a good job where that was concerned.

“No,” Delroy said. “I don’t think I better had. I think you had better let me see my daughter for her birthday.”

“You’re six hours late,” the husband said. “We have rules in this household and we expect everyone to abide by them, you included, Delroy.”

The husband wasn’t much younger than him, maybe five or six years, but he looked good. His face looked smooth like a college kid’s and his haircut looked expensive. Delroy hated him.

Delroy looked out toward his truck, he thought about that baby pig in there. He thought about how little he’d seen his daughter’s growing up time. All he wanted to do was to give her the present. He would barely recognize her now; she must have been about 10 years old, almost a woman. This was the last good time to give her a piglet.

“You look a mess, too,” the husband said. “And you smell. Is this really how want to see your daughter?”

The husband took a step back into his house, the big house that he was rich enough to afford. This made Delroy more mad. Who the hell is this guy? Let him get his own daughter. The husband started to shut the door.

“Go sleep and take a shower for Chrissake before coming back to see your child. And calling first wouldn’t hurt.”

If it was a fight, Delroy would have been close to getting knocked out. He would have had a dazed look in his eyes. But he wasn’t one to give up so quick. He’d gotten up lots of times, his face pulpy and his spirit in worse condition. He might not be a winner but he wasn’t done until everything was beat out of him. Delroy took a step forward. He caught the door jamb with the back of his hand; he wasn’t down for the count yet.

“No, man, I don’t think I’ll be doing that tonight,” Delroy said. “I think I’ll just be seeing my daughter, thank you very much.”

Just like in the ring he could sense when the first punch was coming. The husband sensed it and while he didn’t move, he didn’t let it floor him. Delroy took his stance, tucked his chin and jabbed the guy in the nose. He hit hard enough to draw blood.

She screamed. The blood was everywhere. When you hit someone in the nose, the blood always spurted. It sure did this time and went all down the front of Mr. Fancy Pants expensive t-shirt, all over the nice expensive carpet and the designer bathrobe his ex-wife was wearing. Delroy hoped he broke the son of a bitch’s nose. He hoped that it ended up crooked, he hoped he made him ugly and destroyed his pretty face.

“Delroy!” she shrieked “You stupid fuck.”

He felt that all the way down to his toes, because it always came back to his intelligence with her. He was an idiot to laugh at, shake her head and remember when she was naïve enough to love him.

She shoved and beat at Delroy before she saw about her husband. His hands were cupped around his nose. He looked up for a second and Delroy saw that he was thinking about hitting him back.

“I just want to see my kid,” Delroy said.

“It’s always about hitting with you, isn’t it, Delroy? You don’t have an ounce of class and you never will,” his ex-wife screeched at him.

“Are you alright, baby? Are you okay?” she asked her husband. She tried to move his hands from his nose but the blood was everywhere.

“Don’t touch me,” he said.

Neither of them could bother with the door anymore. The husband walked away down the hall. He left blood on the carpet and his ex-wife followed behind him. They forgot about Delroy for a second.

He thought for a second about the pig in the car. He decided that it would be fine. Pig was a resistant animal.

The little girl was sleeping when he went into her room. She didn’t look anything like he remembered. He watched her chest move up and down for a while before he shook her shoulder.

“Wake up, Jenny,” he said roughly because he didn’t know any other way to say it.

“What?” she murmured. She sat up in bed, her hair messy and sticking out at odd angles.

“Who are you?” she asked, rubbing her eyes.

She said it with no kind of fear, just some strange man sitting in her bedroom and she was all casual about it. It hurt him worse than his hand, which was starting to bleed again.

“I’m your daddy.”

“No,” she said flatly. “You’re not.”

“Yes,” he said. “I am.”

She stared at him as best she could in her half lit bedroom. Peered at him with a look he recognized from her mother’s face, suspicious and searching.

“No,” she decided. “You’re not.”

She lay back down in her little bed and turned away from him. He grabbed his stomach. It hurt so bad.

“Jenny,” he said, shaking her shoulder again. “Wake up.”

She rolled over and sat up again.

“What?” she asked, exasperated. He was surprised at her annoyance. He wanted to get mad, but he couldn’t.

“I’m your daddy and I came for your birthday. Remember I saw you when you turned 8 two years ago and we went to the zoo and got ice cream.”

Her eyes narrowed. She thought hard.

“Yes,” she said finally. “But your face looked different then.”

“Well, I’m a fighter and I get banged up pretty bad.” He pointed to the cut above his eye and the puffy cheek that swelled around the bones.

She stared at him a moment and shrugged.

“I remember you got ice cream on my dress,” she said accusingly.

He laughed. He had ruined the little girl's birthday dress by dropping his ice cream into her lap. She had fussed at the dress, blotting at it with napkins and insisting over and over that chocolate would stain.

"Well, my party was this afternoon," she said. "You're late now and I'm tired."

She lay back down again and turned away from him.

"I brought you something, baby," he said to her back, not wanting to see the blue eyes flash at him again.

"What is it?" she said, not turning toward him. "I got everything I wanted."

"I got you a pet."

He had her attention now and she flipped over to face him.

"A puppy?" she said excitedly.

"No, better."

She laughed. That same hard laugh as her mother. "There's nothing better than a puppy."

"It's a piglet, honey, your very own to play with and cuddle."

She made a face.

He furrowed his brow.

"Nothing could love you more than a little pig."

"But what would I do with it," she said exasperated. "No one has a pig, they're gross."

He could feel the slap of her words across his heart, like she was squeezing all the blood out of it.

"You can keep it," she said. "I don't want it."

He was angry now.

“No,” he said. “No, dammit, I came out here to bring you a pig and you’re gonna take that pig.”

She opened her eyes widely.

“No,” she said. “Don’t you understand. N-O.” There was something in her tone there that reminded him of his ex-wife and he pulled away from her.

“Yes,” he hollered. “You’re taking it.”

The husband was at the door.

“Are you alright, Jenny?” he asked.

“Yeah, Dad, I’m fine. He,” she said gesturing toward Delroy “wants to force me to take a pig.”

She glared at Delroy, her eyes narrowed.

“Don’t worry,” the husband said to her. “Just go back to bed; I’ll take care of everything.”

Delroy knew then that he wouldn’t see her again. He followed the husband out of the little girl’s bedroom and into the hallway. The husband closed the door behind Delroy as he left the room.

“You better leave,” the husband said to him. “The police are on their way.”

He was holding a giant wad of tissue to his nose. He was not only hurt, but now he was angry. He shoved Delroy a little as he hustled him out of the house. Delroy took it.

When he opened the car door the pig was dead. He held it in his hands and felt for a heartbeat. Its tongue was hanging out of its little mouth and wrapped around its neck

were the strings from the boxing gloves. He stroked the pig's belly and wrapped it up in some old newspapers that were in the back of his truck. When he was done he laid the little body on the seat. He climbed out of the truck and vomited into his ex wife's front yard. The vomit splattered up on his shoes and pants. It was blood mostly. It stained but he wouldn't have money to clean it or to buy new pants.

He drove all through the night heartbroken. He'd thought about not coming at all. He'd thought about just turning the truck west and driving out to Las Vegas, and ruining himself in whatever way he could. But something made him turn around. Hell it wasn't *something*, it was money. He'd spent the last of the money on gas and a joint.

The pig is still in the bed of his truck. In a day or two it will start to smell. He has priors and between the incident and the smell coming from the back of his truck the police won't be so patient. He has to get rid of it tonight after the fight. He opens the lock. 30-12-06, a combination he's learned by heart. The combination lock he bought when he'd first started fighting. When he'd picked it out at the K-Mart in the school supplies section his ex-wife had teased him.

"A lawk," she said. "Your buying a lawk like a school kid."

The way she said the word had irritated him and he remembered the way he'd snapped at her.

His fight is next. He lights the joint he's holding in his hand. His wet hand makes the paper wet, but it still crackles when he lights it and he holds the smoke in his lungs

long like a professional and coughs it out. He is getting old and he can feel it. He can see, and baby the mirror doesn't lie. He doesn't hardly like smoking this shit anymore. It takes a lot to get the same feeling he had at 20.

Take the beating is what he is planning to do. He will get at least \$75 for the ass whipping. Not much, but enough, enough to get by. The prize for the winner is \$500. When the fight comes though, he gets pissed off. He starts pummeling the kid. Fanakov fights back, works his mid section mostly. The last name is the same as his wife's new husband. He thinks it's Russian maybe. But he isn't sure. The idea of this kid being related to that man gives Delroy all the more incentive to whip his ass. And he does. He forgets all about his daughter, her birthday party, his ex-wife's new husband. He just thinks about how good it feels punching the kid. But Fanakov is fast and young. Delroy has him on his ass for a second and then the punches come until he can't keep up with them anymore and he doesn't want to, because he's wondering how many chances he has left to beat a man?

Collage

Photo 1, Bottom Left hand corner: Graduation Day

You stand next your dad. His arm is wrapped around you. Your smile is a little lopsided and he is looking off camera. He is mouthing the words "It's late."

Your robe was made out of something that wasn't exactly cloth and wasn't quite paper but the rain had managed to turn the cheap fabric mushy on your shoulders. No one knew it was raining and the whole class poured out of the auditorium together.

You saw your dad standing behind the gates with the other parents. You were so proud, so happy. You ran toward him and clasped his hands in a way that made him go rigid because you didn't usually touch each other.

"Are you proud of me, Daddy?" you asked, looking at him, seeing your mirror image, wanting to hear hope and promise. You were still a little girl. You still talked to him with little girl frankness. His eyes were glassy.

"What's to be proud of," he said with a shrug. He broke your gaze and pulled away from you. "You did exactly what you were supposed to do. You're supposed to graduate from high school."

Your heart and your smile fell.

"But I finished, Daddy, isn't that an accomplishment?"

He looked at you pityingly like you were too young and too stupid to understand.

"Let's see what you do with the rest of your life first. If you never do anything as good as this, then I'll be over the moon." The tone of his voice was sweet and condescending all at once.

“But, I,” you faltered. “I made good grades, I tried hard.”

But he was already done with you. You felt like the unpopular girl at a party. He was already searching for someone better to talk to.

He raked his hands through his white blond hair and straightened the designer tie. He was still youngish, still had that charisma that he could turn on and off. It felt so good when the light was on you, it felt special and perfect. He used the white skin to his advantage; he made what was different desirable. You hadn't ever really figured out how he did that.

After graduation you all went out to dinner at a theme restaurant whose theme you couldn't quite figure out. Your mother picked the place and she looked miserable the entire time. The walls were an assortment of movie memorabilia, street signs and knick-knacks that looked like they'd been collected from various garage sales. Some kids had parties, some took vacations; you ate a steak covered in blue cheese dressing. You remember it because it was the last time you ate steak, the last time you ate meat at all. It was medium rare, the way you always ordered them and you remembered the way it looked, blood red in the center, and pinker toward the outer edges. The whole thing felt disappointing, and you couldn't believe that this was the start of the next chapter of your life.

At the table next to you there was a girl celebrating her birthday with her friends. Your family sat not talking. The thing you remember most about your graduation dinner was the discussion those girls had about different types of acrylic nails. You wanted to switch places with them. You wanted your biggest problem to be where to get your nails filled.

Your dad left the table to use phone the three times. Your mother and the boyfriend she broke up with two days later smoked three cigarettes apiece. Your brother left early to hang out with his friends and your father left shortly thereafter. He kissed your cheek with the lightest possible touch and handed you an envelope before he left. When you'd ripped open the envelope there was a \$10 bill inside and a "Congratulations on your Graduation," card unsigned.

Photo 2, Bottom Right hand corner: Liberty Ave train station

In the sweeping dome entrance a father stoops down to kiss his daughter goodbye. In the background stands his wife watching the whole thing and behind the wife is Pittsburgh, snow falling softly on the train track.

You took the train to Pittsburgh once with your dad when you were a little girl. It looks different to you now, looking at it with your adult eyes.

While you wait for your train you take pictures in the station. You take a picture of a man with his family because it reminds you of that time. You try to pretend like you are taking a picture of the old station's architecture, its domes ceilings and gothic columns. You pretended to get really involved, but really are watching the family.

When you get on the train 15 minutes later, the man, who you figure must be the father, ends up sitting across from you on the train. He falls asleep an hour into the trip and snores lightly.

The jostling of the train makes your teeth feel like they are rattling around inside your skull. Your jaw was knocked out of alignment when you were 14 and your top teeth

jut out over the bottom ones and you can feel the bones and teeth clanking against each other in a way that won't let you fall asleep. Everything is white. It snowed the night before and the sky is gray in a way that makes you wish you'd stayed in bed instead and caught a later train. You brought magazines, nail polish, and a granola bar.

You try to pay attention to each of these things in one way or another. The pages of the magazine feel heavy and the acetone smell from the polish makes your stomach churn. You divide the granola bar into small symmetrical pieces and stare at them. Eventually you ball the entire thing up in a napkin without eating any of it. The man sitting across from you wakes up and looks your way with worried looks. You know why, and at the same time you don't know why. You smile at him and he looks away.

The lack of color is disconcerting to some people. Your skin is a blinding white, so white the blood is almost visible running to the surface, a reddish hue beneath the lack of color. It makes people squirm. You look alive and fragile in a way that is palpable and frightening. It frightens you, too sometimes, and you like to project confidence. So you smile a lot at strangers on the street, in the coffee shop, at the grocery store. You might not be the most attractive person but faced with a smile people will either think you are slow or someone desperately in need of a little kindness. Both are a little true.

It is a seven-hour train ride from your house to your parents' house. It is the slowest way to get there, but you want the trip to be slow. You want to stretch out the time between the now and the then because you're going home to bury your father. You feel too young to have a dead parent. The ride doesn't turn out to be slow. It's fast and the sun dips into the sky quickly and the next thing you know you are pulling into the station.

You only have one bag. Folded tightly inside is a black dress, probably severely wrinkled at this point. You have lost so much weight since you bought the dress six months ago that you think that it will hang on you. It was for a party you never ended up going to, with a man whose only memorable quality was his engraved Zippo lighter. He enjoyed whipping it out to light your cigarettes and you loved the stark gleam of your skin in the lighter's reflection when you leaned in close to have your cigarette lit. Even after you've forgotten this man's face, you will remember his lighter.

There isn't anyone to meet you at the train station. You spend a couple minutes looking for eyes to catch yours in the massive station, to try and look for a familiar face. There aren't any.

The cab from 30th Street Station to your parents' house is expensive, for a 30-minute ride. You watch your childhood fly by. School field trips, the place where you bought your prom dress, the spot where you first kissed a boy. All these landmarks that hold your memories. You want to take pictures but instead you hold the camera in your lap.

You are a photographer of science textbooks. Your employers are a big publishing company. They are in New York. You say you are disabled, that you can't come into the office. The fluorescent lights, you claim. You send film through the mail in giant FedEx envelopes. It has been years since you have seen a doctor about your albinism. The last one tried to reach for your breast even though you didn't know why you needed to take off your clothing in a dermatology office.

Yesterday, before all this, you photographed fungi. You went to the aquarium and photographed a manatee. You went to the mall and took pictures of a frozen yogurt stand.

They were odd pictures, usually used to make some point that didn't require a photograph, at least as far as you could tell. You are thin, but still strong enough to carry all the camera equipment your work requires.

Everything is digital now, but you shoot everything twice; once on film, once in digital. You still like being in the darkroom, smelling the chemicals, watching the images appear on the paper as you swirl them around in the solution. When they are overexposed it looks like there is a thin white veil covering everything you've photographed. You had two pictures that looked that way yesterday. You had just pulled them out of the pan with tongs and were inspecting their milky white surface when the phone rang.

"Come home," your mother rasped into the phone. "He's dead. Your father's dead."

"What?"

"A heart attack," she said. "Last night."

She made a sound somewhere between a sob and a sigh, and you pictured her rubbing her eyes on the king sized bed in the downstairs master suite in your parents' house. You could see the impression of your father's body on the other side of the bed.

"Come home," she said again.

"I'm coming," you said.

When you hung up, you stood there for a second in your tiny kitchen, your hand still on the receiver.

Your father was dead. You'd said the words aloud.

"My father is dead."

But they didn't seem to make any more sense when you did. Hadn't you wished him dead more times than you could count? To his face and behind his back? When he'd screamed so loud in your face that you could almost see the words and letters hanging in the air in front of you.

Photo 3, Centered: Photo booth Eskimo Kisses

You and your father face each other in a mall photo booth. Your face is much smaller than his, but your features are identical. Your noses touch giving each other Eskimo kisses.

You carry the picture in your wallet. Because the flash is so bright and you are both so pale, the photos looked overexposed. "Eskimo kisses," you screamed before the last frame clicked and you turned toward each other. They were taken in a mall photo booth, something he'd never allowed. He was a photographer and he thought those things were crap. But he relented that day because he wanted to pacify you, to keep you happy so that you didn't tell.

The first picture was stoic and serious. One picture showed the two of you giving each other rabbit ears and one showed you making silly faces for the camera. Your tongue was sticking out. His eyes were crossed.

"See," your dad said, waving them around when they came out of the machine. "Total shit."

"That's okay," you said. "I want to keep them anyway."

The Eskimo picture is the one you carry around in your wallet. The others got lost long ago. It was the best and the worst day of your life and you needed a souvenir.

You were 12 and had stolen five dollars from your mother's purse. You stole it and took the money to the corner store and bought all the candy you could, lemonheads, bags of gumballs, gummi bears, chocolate kisses and peppermints. You were the pied piper that day. Boys who ignored you took the candy from you and thanked you by name. Girls who usually looked the other way when you came down the hall labeled you a "sweetheart." And when you left that day there had been goodbyes, padded with sugar, but you took them anyway. You saved the best for yourself. You could hardly wait to eat it. You wanted to sit in the deep recesses of your parents 'walk in' closet, the darkest, quietest place in the house and peel back the silver paper and feel the sweet chocolate melt on your tongue filling each groove and ridge, sucking it so it would last longer.

You ran home after school that day, your chest was heaving by the time you reached the back steps. Your parents' bedroom door was closed. You didn't figure anyone was home. You could tell someone was in the room the second you pushed opened the door, you heard the murmurs, then saw the flash of tanned skin intertwined with stark white flesh.

You could tell from the way his eyes were tightly shut that he hadn't heard you come in. You had never seen his face look quite that way; every muscle clenched as if in some mortal pain.

"Dad?"

You weren't sure why you called out to him, but you know it was the last time you would call him dad. It was the only time you had seen your father naked. He kept

well covered, you both had to. Shade and heavy sunscreen were the best that doctors could offer for albinism. His body was covered with a layer of downy white/blond hair and was shocking in a way that made you forget that this is what you looked like with no clothes on.

“God damn it,” he yelled when you’d called out his name.

The woman looked at you, her mouth forming a bright red ‘O.’ You recognized her. You saw her every morning dropping her daughter off at your school. Her daughter was about your age, popular and pretty. You didn’t have any classes with the girl, but you knew of her. You supposed everyone knew of her. You had gone to school together since you were very young.

He slammed the door shut with such force that you stumbled backward, not sure of what you saw, but you knew that this life the four of you had together was over. You were sure you were in trouble. You knew you weren’t supposed to go into your parents’ room without knocking. You heard the woman crying on the other side of the door. It was sort of a jagged cry where she stopped to talk between short staccato breaths. You couldn’t move, couldn’t make your mind work to find a lie or a reason why you burst into the bedroom during the middle of the afternoon.

When he came out of the bedroom, dressed, you were still standing there dazed, and he was gentle.

“It’s okay,” he said soothingly. He stroked your little head and handed you a tissue. You blew your nose and wanted to lean into him, but you held back.

He stooped down to your level and looked into your face with concern.

“Are you alright?”

“I bumped my elbow,” you said, holding the arm out for inspection.

He’d taken it gently and looked the elbow over carefully. You were too old to have your arm examined for bumps and bruises, but you wanted him to look at it anyway.

“It looks alright,” he said.

He took you downstairs, offered to take you shopping, let you change the stations on the radio in the car. He had been nice all day. It was one of the nicest days with him that you could remember. He never said one word about what happened and you never saw the woman again. It was also the last time you ever ate chocolate.

Photo 4, Middle right: Your parents’ house

The siding is painted yellow and brick is crumbling a little. There is a sad little patch of dead daisies that haven’t been covered with snow. The curtains are drawn. The rope from your tire swing is still hanging from the tree.

They’ve had the same curtains for the past 20 years and they are thin now and showing their age. They let in more light than they keep out. Your parents bought the house when they first got married. Then your mother got it in the divorce, your father moved back in when they got back together.

You pay the cab driver in twenty dollar bills that are folded into a roll and stuffed into your pocket. You tip him ten dollars.

“Thank you,” he says when you hold a ten dollar bill to the window right before he is about to pull away. He rolls down the window but won’t look you in the eyes. You

are used to this, and you hold the bill firmly so that he almost has to touch your hand. There is a moment there where his whole body tenses up like he isn't sure the money is worth touching your skin. He takes it finally and pulls out of the driveway. Why do you always do things like this? Why do you want people to feel uncomfortable?

Your mother's eyes are red when she hugs you. It doesn't look like she is still crying, but her face has that look of a crumpled paper bag. Even in her grief the hug is kind of stiff and formal.

"It's just all so sudden," she keeps repeating.

"Yes, Mom," you say finally, just so she'll stop.

She tells you that your brother will arrive in three days, in time for the funeral. He lives in New York City and has a wife and baby, things he can't rush away from. You are lucky. You work at home. You live alone. You can leave easily, and there is the expectation that you will.

The house smells like old food, things your family doesn't eat, things baked in casserole dishes, and things with gravy, and melted cheese.

"People keep bringing by food," your mother says as you follow her into the kitchen. She is thin, almost to the point of looking sickly. She has always looked like this, sort of frail and fragile. You and your brother are tall, and substantial in a way she has never been.

The countertop is covered with casserole pans, burp-able Tupperware lids and styrofoam take out trays from the deli.

"I think I'm just going to throw the whole lot of it out," your mother says.

"Don't," you say. "I'll eat some."

“I’m going to lie down,” she says. “I’m exhausted.”

When she leaves the kitchen you make your way toward the containers and open them up, eggplant parmesan, cold cuts, chicken soup, spaghetti and meatballs, tuna casserole, cannoli. You don’t even get a plate, you grab a fork from the drawer and take bites from each container, mixing the tuna with the tiramisu, the lasagna with the coleslaw in your mouth.

You don’t taste any of it. You unbutton your pants and your belly distends. You let your mouth get dirty and you just swallow and swallow until your stomach hurts. It isn’t used to this much food. You don’t get the benefit of nausea and you run to the bathroom as the bile climbs up your throat. Every last bite of it comes up. Every part of you hurts when you are done. Your throat and eyes ache. They hurt bad enough to draw tears. You lay your forehead against the cold seat and close your eyes and feel waves rush over and around you. Part of you wants to lie there forever, feeling like this. Because it all feels so good, the rolling stomach, the cool porcelain against your forehead, the cool damp washcloth you’ve pressed to your lips, your belly empty and flat, the hunger, the aftermath. You haven’t turned the lights off in the kitchen and you don’t reach for them. You leave them on and you go upstairs.

Photo 5, Bottom right hand corner: First day of school

The carpet in your living room is pink shag and next to your feet is a pink plastic lunchbox. You are wearing a pink dress. The skirt is loose and flowing, the top is embroidered with yellow daises and the elastic from the puffy sleeves cinches your arms. The picture is taken on an angle and slightly blurred. You stand in between your parents.

Your mother kneels, adjusting the ribbons in your curly white hair, your father holds your hand limply. You look like you are about to cry.

“You look so pretty,” your mother said. “What a big girl. You’re going to school all by yourself.”

“Stop babying her,” your father said. “She’ll be fine.”

The school you attended was right around the corner. You were nervous, and you had a right to be. There were so many stares that day and you weren’t sure what they were for. You didn’t realize until then that you were different. You threw up on the jungle gym, all over the front of the pink dress. You spent the rest of the day hiding under the slide, covering your legs in sand. When your dad came to get you in the afternoon, you were dirty and he was angry. He stooped down to your level and hissed in your ear.

“What is wrong with you? Why do you look so filthy?”

It wasn’t a question, but an accusation. He shook you slightly with each word for emphasis.

He held you tightly by your arms. When other parents walked by and looked down to make sure you were alright he loosened his hold on you and smiled up at them winningly and they smiled back, because they found him so charming.

“What a caring father,” most of them murmured as they walked away. Because it was mostly mothers.

“You are going to embarrass me,” he whispered at a lower register. You were frightened at his voice then. You knew, more than anything, he hated to be embarrassed.

“Don’t you realize your behavior reflects badly on me?”

You did.

“I’m sorry, daddy,” you said. The tears had pricked at the corners of your eyes.

Another parent passed and he loosened his grip again.

“Oh hello, Dan,” the woman said, stopping.

He released you and stood up to greet the woman. She was beautiful. Her hair was thick and glossy and you remember that she was wearing a dress and lipstick. Your mother never wore dresses.

“She’s adorable,” the woman said, looking down at you. She stooped down to your level.

“How old are you now, sweetheart?”

You looked up at your father and he nodded at you.

“Four and a half,” you say. “I’ll be five October 10th.”

She laughed a pretty laugh.

“You are a little charmer, just like your daddy,” she said standing up. She turned back toward your father.

“She is adorable,” the woman said again.

“Well, she gets her good looks from me,” he said with a chuckle. He glanced at you and turned back toward the woman. “And gets her fashion sense from her mother.”

He and the woman laughed together. You didn’t understand the joke until you were a lot older but by then he was already gone and it is too late to get angry.

He took you by the hand when he is done talking to the other parent.

“Now don’t go saying anything to your mother and causing problems,” he said to you.

Photo 6, Top right hand corner: Sadness

Your mother's face is accusatory. The tears on her cheeks are still wet. She looks older in this picture, her hair looks white and by the scowl on her face you can tell she didn't want her picture taken. She looks away from the camera though, out the window, avoiding the camera's gaze.

You hear the phone ring, you hear her talking in her high-pitched, whispery voice that seems to come out at an even higher pitch now that she is grieving.

Part of you feels that she enjoys the idea of being a widow. When the funeral director calls, she asks you to pick something for him to wear.

“I can't,” she says. “I can't.”

They've kept separate closets for years now. Even when they got back together their clothing never could. Your father's closet is down the hall from your parents' bedroom. It was formerly a linen closet that he modified to hold his clothing. He was fastidious about his clothes. One wall is lined with shelves, boxes of shoes you know all too well, wrapped in tissue paper and organized by style. You pull down one of these boxes, one up higher on the shelf. You weren't ever allowed in here, weren't ever allowed to touch anything.

In the box there are a pair of shoes that you remember well. They are snake skin boots that your father would never let you touch. You thought they were glamorous. When they were apart, he would put these boots on and leave money for pizza for you and your brother on his way out the door. Those snakeskin boots clicked on the floor. They were polished meticulously. Even now, years later, lying in a nest of wilted tissue

paper they are pristine. They are also tacky. Your adult eyes can see that. You wonder what kind of impression your father made with these snakeskin boots. There are suits on the farthest wall, so you put the shoes down and try to find one for the funeral. There are suits of nearly every color and you are disgusted and impressed by his clothing collection. You know that most of these will end up being given away or dumped in the trash. In the back there is a dark gray suit hanging in a clear garment bag. You unzip the bag and take the suit out and shake it, even though it isn't creased. It looks almost brand new. When you bring the suit into the living room, your mother sighs.

“He wore that to your cousin Marcy's wedding last year,” she says.

She fingers the coats' edges and then lets it go.

“Yes,” she says. “It will be perfect.”

She is the kind of woman who owns almost no clothing. You know what she will wear to the funeral: a 10 year old black crepe she wore for your grandfather's funeral. She won't wear makeup. Because she hasn't ever felt worthy of your father and will look shabby even to say goodbye to him.

There is the business of dying to take care of and that is why you have been called home. Your mother is the kind of woman who cannot take care of herself. At least that is what your father used to say. In some ways it's true. She has asked you to come home because she can't do the things she wants done.

You get in a fight with your mother right away the next morning. She wants your father's office cleaned out.

“Why?” you ask her, “Why can't this wait until after the funeral?”

“No,” she says. “Today, now.”

Tears prick at the corner of her eyes.

“I can’t have this here,” she bites her lip and a tear runs down one cheek. “I can’t have him here.”

She sits in the window and stares out. You photograph her quickly, squeezing off three pictures before she can turn back toward you. She hears you, hears the snap of the shutter, sees the flash of lights but she scowls and doesn’t turn away from the window until you put the camera down.

“You’re just like him,” she says to you. “Always taking pictures at the wrong time.”

She wants the rooms cleaned, purged of some reminder of him that she cannot bear. And then there are papers to go through, people to speak to.

“Please,” she says.

“Okay,” you say. “I’ll do it.”

You do your father’s office last. The wood paneling has been bleached white since the last time you were in this room.

In your father’s desk you find life insurance policies for each of you. When you show them to your mother, she looks confused. “No,” she says, shaking her head. “We never had life insurance.” You don’t show her anything else after that. His office is full of secrets. Your mother won’t go in there. When your parents were apart, this room was shut off. Your mother wouldn’t touch a thing. When you went in there your mother erupted with instant volcanic anger. So it stayed a monument to him until he came back for it. But now she wants it all gone.

He had a roll top desk then. The one in his office now looks sleek and modern and there aren't any drawers. Instead there are three file cabinets filled with paper, not organized, but just shoved in. You go through it methodically. You organize it into piles. Finances. House. Insurance. Taxes. His life is a collection of papers. You try to make sub-categories in the piles. Health and medical insurance. Income and property tax. At some point there are things that belong nowhere. The deed to an ex-girlfriend's house. Snapshots of an unrecognizable child. A certificate for graduating from a local broadcasting school. Everything that is non essential is boxed. You leave the door open while you work and every once in a while your mother creeps to the threshold.

"How is it going?" she says like it's a craft project, like this is something that you wanted to do. She hovers in the doorway but doesn't come in.

"Fine," you say.

"Would you like something to eat?"

"No."

When the sun starts to set, you see that you have made no progress and so you turn off the lights and close the door. You will finish after the funeral, you can't finish sorting through his things until he is in the ground.

Photo 7, Middle left: Wedding Day

Your mother is a beautiful bride. Her skin is a deep brown and her thick dark brown hair is curled around her smiling cheeks still pudgy with youth even though her body looks tiny next to your father. In the picture they look like they fit together.

The picture is above the desk in his office. There weren't any pictures for the second wedding. You turn his office into a makeshift studio. Backlighting the frosted glass table, you crop your mother out of the photograph.

"Lovely," she says, "He is so handsome."

Your father has always been described this way. He is like a perfect porcelain egg, he is made up of perfectly smooth lines and symmetrical features. Your mother is in love with beauty, especially his. Beauty is difficult to resist. He was charming and the skin, in all its transparency, was an asset, something to open conversation, something that made women love him that much more. Your mother has always been mesmerized by his beauty. His beauty allowed her to forgive him of anything. He was someone epic and mythical for her and has stayed that way.

In the kitchen you find her drinking a cup of tea at the kitchen table. Your brother will be here in the morning and the funeral will be in the early afternoon.

"How are you?" you say.

She shrugs her shoulders. It isn't the first time she has been this way.

After your father left, your mother stayed in the house constantly listening to the same record all day. She kept the windows shut and stared at the same spot on the wall, letting the hi-fi pick up the record at its end and then let it drop back onto the turntable over and over again. When he eventually came back, when she took him back, you threw out the record as if the music would make him leave again, make you mother spend all day in her bathrobe. Those songs still gives you chills, make you feel scared even though you are an adult now, and know there is nothing to be afraid of it.

"Would you like anything to eat?" you ask her.

Your mother shakes her head no.

You take her cup and rinse it out in the sink. You sit next to her at the table.

“I’m going to be all alone now,” she says.

You touch her hand cautiously.

“It will be alright,” you say.

“Will it?” she looks to you for an answer and she looks so fragile right then, as though she might break.

“Yes,” you say. “You have been alone before and you made it.”

Your mother is not a young woman anymore. She is seven years older than your father is, than your father was.

“But I wasn’t really,” she says. “A part of me was always waiting for him to come back.

You know it, you’ve always known it and still it is the saddest thing you have ever heard, and the sadness shifts slowly to the surface, it begins to develop like photographs in a pan. But you aren’t sad for her, or for him, but for the composition of you. He and your mother were apart for ten years, a time she will only refer to as “those gap years.” In that time he had married again and divorced, dated, lost some hair, lost some money, traveled. And your mother had padded around the house as though he had hypnotized her.

“You can do it, Mom,” you say, giving her hand a squeeze. You don’t mean it. You know that in six months she will sell this house, take early retirement and drift back and forth between your brother’s condo in New York and your house in Pittsburgh.

“I hope so,” she says. “I just didn’t expect this. I thought we had more time together.”

The tears are at the corner of your eyes and your throat closes. You swallow three times hard and nod. There isn’t any going back. No time to undo any hurts, or wrongs, because your dad is dead.

“Yes,” you say finally. “It’s hard.”

“He was very proud of you,” your mother says. “He always said he thought your photographs did something his couldn’t, they were artistic in a way his weren’t.”

In your last conversation with your father he slammed the phone down on you after you asked to borrow money to buy a single lens reflex camera to start photographing weddings.

“When are you going to learn to be self sufficient,” he huffed into the phone.

You started to answer sharply, ready to spell out your accomplishments and your victories, but he had already replaced the receiver. You heard nothing but dial tone.

“That’s nice to know,” you say to your mother.

Photo 8, Left of Center: Dad, self portrait

He stares straight into the camera. The lighting is stark; he is unsmiling, looking directly into the lens. He is wearing a sweater with a hole in it. In the background are the bare wall of his studio that badly needs painting. In his hands you can see the button for the shutter. His hands are wrinkled and the veins stand up prominently through the skin. He isn’t wearing his colored contacts and the irises look clear and translucent in the lights and darks of the black and white photograph.

The shot hadn't been altered. None of your father's characteristic airbrushing. "He was trying something new," your mother says. "I think he got tired of always shooting other people and decided to shoot himself. He always said he was as good a subject as anyone else."

It is the picture the three of you decide to use for the front of the service program. It has honesty that most of your father's photography lacks. It is a beautiful picture.

The first thing you notice at the funeral are the women. You are overwhelmed that there are this many of them. Many of the women are crying, leaning on each other for support, eye makeup smeared on faces of every imaginable shade. Your father has almost no male friends or associates. There are two uncles, your brother and your father's brother-in-law, who act as his pall bearers. Other than that you only see about seven or eight other male acquaintances in the crowd of 80 mourners.

When the pastor is finished, your father is eulogized by his older brother, who calls him a hero. When he is finally done, everyone stands and sings a hymn. It is one with lots of promise of the life that will occur after this one. Fantastic promises of things you secretly hope your father will never get.

There is a receiving line after the service and the women all squeeze you tightly and gaze at you lovingly.

"I remember you when you were a tiny girl," a lot of the older ones say. Their faces look familiar, like images that have been double processed. "Your dad talked about you all the time," the younger ones say, their faces are fresh and vibrant.

Your mother barely touches the women. They try to pull her into hugs, and she keeps them at arms' length, patting them, her body receding from theirs as much as is possible while hugging. The women all smell of Givenchy. A gift from your father, a scent you notice a lot of these women wear.

They are gone quickly. There will be no party, no platters of covered food. At the grave site just the three of you watch your father's casket descend into the ground. You hold hands with your mother and your brother, your pale white ones hold one of their hands in each of yours. You squeeze them both as you all watch the first smattering of dirt hits the lid of the deep polished wood. His body is inside, white as ever, but lifeless.