

**THE SOUND FROM A BOX OF BONES:  
FIVE STORIES AND A NOVELLA IN PROGRESS**

**THESIS**

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**By**

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## Pastoral

For our fourteenth anniversary, Duncan gave me a large black rooster and a hen that lays green eggs. The week before, I'd left the house angry and gone for a drive in the country. Out on the blacktop with the windows down and over the sound of the wind spinning a yellowed sheet of newspaper behind the seat, I heard a rooster crow—a banner call, full, sustained, one to conjure the sun or wake farmers, but it was already late afternoon. I slowed the car. Land fell away on either side of the high, deserted road into pasture dotted with cattle, trees, and an old tin barn that lurched at an impossible angle. I pulled off into the thick grass and listened.

That rooster's crow was abrasive and serene, like Janice Joplin singing *Amazing Grace*, and it made me feel I'd missed something important. I knew enough to be wary of nostalgia, but his call made me feel like the moment Wiley

Coyote runs past the edge of a cliff over a gorge despite the familiar territory, the obvious warnings. Beep. Beep. Of course, we all know if he doesn't look down, he will make it to the other side. That's how it is. Nobody hurt, nothing destroyed, nothing is met until it is stared in the eye. Was that it? I shouldn't look down? Was this a warning?

My flesh grew cold at the thought of being engulfed again by gravity and my legs spinning in the air.

I shook the coyote out of my head and ran through a mental list to be sure I hadn't really forgotten something. It would be easy to do: Medical checkup, rent, birthdays, renewed prescriptions, utilities, a casserole out of the freezer for dinner. Gas? A glance told me I had just under a quarter tank. I cupped my hand over my eyes scanning the field. Wind rattled leaves in the tree behind me. A black pick-up whined across the intersecting road ahead, like an amorphous memory, too slippery to catch. Was there a wound I had failed to nurse or acknowledge? My best friend, Alice, from tenth grade came to mind, and it occurred to me that she had known all along I had lied about kissing Richard Finnegan on the Pioneer Farm fieldtrip, and that she forgave me. Okay, but that couldn't possibly matter now. I listened once more for the rooster then pulled back on to the highway. No sight of him, clever bird, but I felt as if someone had taken my face in both their hands and looked into my eyes. That is why I came home from the drive with a distant smile, as if I'd spent the afternoon with a lover.

Duncan was waiting for me on the porch when I pulled in.

I glanced at the clock on the dash. It was later than I thought. He met me at the car.

"How was the drive, Jill?"

"Fine," I said, knowing my angry wanderings irritated him. "I heard a rooster crow." I turned off the car, leaving the windows down. "I love that sound." I sat looking ahead with the wheel in my hands, trying to hold the memory.

"So," he interrupted my thoughts, "I get my omens mixed up. Does that mean someone is going to die, or are we having chicken for dinner?"

A week later, on the afternoon of our anniversary, Duncan announced that I was to come to the back yard. He disappeared into the garage for a moment. Robin, our eight-year-old daughter, darted around, watching me for a reaction, but I knew what was up. She'd spilled the beans when I woke her for school.

"I know what Daddy is getting your for your anniversary," she taunted, head still on the pillow, her hair looking luxurious to me, even if it reached only to her chin.

"Oh, you do?" I said, cocking an eyebrow. Duncan and I had already decided year fourteen would be a good one to wallflower. No babysitter, no wrapping paper, no silk. This was in deference to the financial help we'd

received from both our parents to meet Robin's medical expenses, but, also, neither of us wanted to make a big deal. Fourteen was a lot, but so was thirteen. And next year would be fifteen. Marking yearly wedding anniversaries seemed like a ploy of the restaurant association, champagne importers, Victoria's Secret.

When Robin got sick we fed the doctors money as if it were hope. Here, we said, do you want more? We can get more, just fix it. We sold our house and when we spent all we had, we took our parents' money. The doctors provided the medicine, we provided the mechanics: we stood in line, we waited on hold, we listened closely. We bought scarves for her head. Late in the evening, we searched the internet just in case there were *something else*. We walked Robin in, we carried her out. It was what we could *do*. Then they sent us home and told us to wait.

It had been weeks since Duncan or I had looked into a mirror or into each other's eyes. What I saw frightened me and I moved away. There was a dangerous hunger there. I knew neither of us would survive Robin's death. There was too much of a deficit.

Duncan sought me out in the dark but there was nothing left over. I was being consumed. "I need you," he growled, when I pulled away.

In the long moments of waiting, I cleaned house, and while I cleaned, I let different scenarios play out in my head, what would happen if we lost her.

Without saying a word, we would both head out in different directions one day

and keep going, fading until only brittle bones were left behind, on the side of some highway. We learned to function this way, Duncan reading aloud to Robin late into the evening and I curling up next to her until it was much too late to return to my own bed. This went on even long after the doctor called and said the one word we'd been hoping for: remission.

Slowly I opened the curtains and began letting the light back in. Sunlight was free. We could afford it.

That's why Robin's comment about a gift caught me by surprise. I raised my voice so Duncan could hear me from our room. "We agreed no gifts this year."

Robin giggled, pulling away from me in the bed. "Well, that shows what I know and you don't. And I know how much they cost."

They? Earrings.

Duncan stuck his head in the doorway. "Hey, Robin, put a lid on it. That's our secret."

He'd bought me earrings.

He must have felt the date couldn't go by without a gesture of some kind after all, so he was going to surprise me and damn the budget. Damn the strain of the last year or so and the meanness. It occurred to me that we might put ourselves back together, climb back out of the chasm. Carefully, one step at a

time we might rise and cross it. In the midst of the ascent, Duncan broke concentration and reached for me.

Later that morning I bought a slender volume of Pablo Neruda poems. It wasn't the romance in them I hoped to convey, we didn't have that any longer, and I knew we both felt too awkward to begin where we left off – how long ago was it? Two years? More? – but that love abides, that was where our chances lay. I wanted to meet Duncan's gesture half way.

It had been so long since we had been romantic, since we had scaled the walls of fenced pools for midnight swims or had sex in a parking lot because we couldn't wait to get home. Breaking the rules in the form of contraband earrings seemed brazen now, like defying god, and I suddenly loved Duncan for it.

I wrapped the book in a sheet of gold tissue paper, tied it with twine and squared the package on the kitchen counter. The twine had been in the junk drawer for several years, a relic of our life, before. Some frivolous notion of trussing poultry or some balk at gastronomie that left it scorned and jammed behind batteries, needle-nosed pliers and a warped roll of masking tape. In tragedy, so much can be delayed, forgotten or jettisoned all together. Earrings, I thought, like a hand on my shoulder, like a rooster crowing, were a way of calling me.

So why did Duncan emerge from the garage with an enormous pet carrier, the kind the airlines use? Robin flitted here and there, her cheek pink, her hair grown back enough to call a shag, and oddly curlier.

Duncan leaned over to peck me on the cheek. "Happy Anniversary, Jill."

Robin was the peanut gallery, clapping and cheering, "Hey Dad! Chickens! Mama, this is so great!"

Chickens?

"Whoa. Better shut the gate," Duncan said. It dawned on me I had miscalculated on the earrings. He opened the cage door, swept his arm grandly out in front of him and stood back. Robin was at our elbows. We watched. Waited. Nothing.

"Yes?" I said, looking from the pet carrier to Robin to Duncan. The sharply angled sun kept the cage in shadow.

In unison we kneeled down to peer in. Then he emerged: a jet-black rooster so dark his high arching tail feathers fractured into an iridescent green. He strutted out with precise, aristocratic timing. Each of us rose back to our feet as he passed. Then he noticed us and halted. He rotated his head in quick, small circles like he was playing hula-hoop, his plump wattles and comb brilliantly vermilion. A few more head gyrations, then he proceeded with imperturbable self-possession.

"What do you think?" Duncan asked.

Robin swirled from the rooster to us. "Where's the hen, Daddy?" They looked back to the carrier.

"Oh - the hen," Duncan said holding his hand palm out at me as if to arrest pre-mature judgement. "She's beautiful," he said looking straight at me.

"Autumn colored." The hen appeared cautiously at the mouth of the carrier, eyed the lip of the opening and scrambled over, joining her high-stepping mate at a Calvinist distance. Robin followed joyfully behind her.

"She lays green eggs," Duncan said. "She's an Aracana." He folded his arms across his chest. "South American breed."

"Ah." I nodded. A bad taste came from my throat which I swallowed back hard. "Duncan, whose poultry are these?" I forced my hands into the pockets of my jeans trying to quell my alarm. Something else to care for. Robin's heart already given to these birds.

"Yours," he said, "Happy Anniversary. Remember what you said last week about hearing the rooster crow?"

"Duncan! You bought live animals because I mentioned that I liked the sound of a rooster crowing?"

"Loved," Duncan corrected. "You said you loved the sound of a rooster crowing."

Was he mocking me? "All right, but you don't intend for us to keep them, do you?" He seemed to be ignoring my concern. "What about the neighbors?"

The poultry parade continued around the yard. The black rooster with his jester's comb and flapping wattles marched arrogantly. The hen, frantic and nervous.

"What are we going to do with them? Where will they stay?"

"Well!" he said, lifting his index finger at me, invigorated. "Robin and I are going to build a coop for them. Right Robin?" he yelled to her.

It was all so fragile, yet they were beautiful. The jet-black rooster and his skittish mate. All of them. All of it. The child, the man, the chickens. I thought again about the neighbors. The thick fall canopy of leaves and branches above us and the rudimentary fence separating our house from the next wouldn't conceal their presence. I imagined the reaction of Jean-Michel, the French expat who lived next door. Livestock? Here? His nostrils would flair.

"Is it legal?" I asked, figuring I could handle Jean-Michel. "Can we have them in the city? Does our lease allow it?"

He stepped slightly away from me and looked out at the roofline of the neighbor's house, the angle of its windows. "Why not?" he said, "Sure. I'm completely sure about the chicken."

I told him it wasn't the chicken I was worried about. Robin scattered chicken feed in the grass watching them peck. Every now and then, the rooster stopped stock-still and did the hula thing with his head, his comb rocking, his

brilliant nubby wattles slapping back and forth. "Do you think he'd act so cocky," I said, "if he knew he looked like he had his scrotum attached to his face?"

Duncan turned. He looked at me for a long time. Without smiling he said, "He probably thinks it looks good."

I tried to hold his gaze. I watched him look at my face, my jaw, my breast where I had nursed our daughter for a year beyond the time recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. I thought I could see everything so clearly. He wondered if it were possible to ever be at peace again with this woman who had grown so brittle and severe. Was anything recoverable? He knew it was. He had Robin back. Would he have me?

How *did* I mean the comment about the rooster's wattles? For a brief moment, I thought I might laugh and say, "Oh come on, Duncan. It is a joke," but I didn't. We sat in silence. Watching. I said, "Thank you for my gift, even if we had an agreement."

"We had an agreement no frivolous gifts." Duncan held up his hand to me, palm out. He drew down his third and fourth fingers making the sign for "I love you," then he pointed at his stomach. This was Duncan's trump. It meant he loved my guts. It meant 'all the way,' with the intensity of a kid who cries out, "I hate your guts!" We turned it upside down. The sign for 'I love you' was in all the books. The 'guts' part we made up ourselves. During my pregnancy, we decided to teach ourselves sign language, a way of preserving our separate relationship,

separate from the daunting new role of parenthood facing us, separate from the world.

He had, in fact, seen my guts. During Robin's birth by C-Section, Duncan looked around the curtain that shielded my eyes from the incision. When he had looked back at me, there was a green pall to his face. He explained later the doctors had laid out my intestines on my belly and were sponging them off before tucking them back inside. He'd seen my entrails, and like the gypsy fortuneteller, believed this gave him special knowledge. I thought of the Neruda poems and began to hope poetry could make a difference.

He turned from me. "Let's get this backyard dinner rolling," Duncan said, wiping his hands in front of him. What was he brushing off? "Robin, over here," he called.

Together we lay out blankets, lit the grill, poured wine and ginger ale. As we dined, the sun faded and the chickens instinctively made their way back into the pet carrier to roost. The sky dimmed then grew black. We sipped wine and watched Robin curl around a corner of the blanket and sleep.

I saw the beauty of the evening. I wanted to make love to Duncan. I didn't care if the neighbors saw. I didn't worry about the possibility of Robin waking. I reached out my hand to lay it on his chest but he stopped my wrist and held it out in front of him. Then I knew I had left solid ground and was over the abyss. I waited for the rush of air that would come with the plummet, the howl of the

coyote. I steeled myself, then looked. When I did, Duncan caught me and pulled me to him.

### The Lafite

The fucking sky—Brandon thought, looking out the window—stretching out into infinity, a zip-a-de-do-dah vastness that made him go up on his toes, lurching against its cheerful promise. Eight stories below, on West Broadway, the traffic snarled like a chained dog. The sharply angled sun illuminated buildings across from him and sent brilliant flashes of light careening off cars jamming the street. Brandon realized if the tunnel were shut down, it might be hours before she got home.

He jingled the change in his pocket letting the cuff links fall through his fingers along with the quarters, nickels and dimes. For a moment he let himself imagine they were his, that he'd just slipped them from the fine weave of his own cuffs and dropped them casually into his trouser pocket. They were hard and

square, classic. They'd been in Taylor's zipper pouch folded in a cocktail napkin from 21. 21, he thought, who goes there?

Jealousy was sentimental, of course, an early casualty of irony. What wasn't adulterous, what contract, handshake, what pressing of the flesh? Moments before, he had turned off a news report lauding the mayor for cleaning up the Bowery, getting rid of the grizzled bums with bad teeth. Where did they go, Brandon wondered? "Keep 'em atta here," a nattily dressed young man offered, giving the camera a thumbs-up. Mayor keeping the view tidy. Brandon looked up at the sky again and shook his head. He had no name for that color blue, so beautiful and vacant.

How many times had he stood here, watching the movement of the city, the river? When he and Taylor, first saw the apartment, this window drew them in. The other rooms weren't lacking, the whole building had character, but the window was its feature. They organized dinner parties around it. They once had caught each other's eye in its reflection and for the briefest moment held one another there before turning back to their guests. But even on days when the air seemed to pause, particulate, the glass was alluring, transporting the observer's reflection out into all that indescribable beyond.

Brandon thought of being a boy, of drawing back the curtain from his bedroom window and raising the sash, the breeze lifting his hair and carrying in a multitude of smells and sounds: cut grass and rain, leaves blowing across the

drive, the drone of insects, and his parents' crystalline voices carried across the lawn or through the house but shorn of meaning. He and his next door neighbor, Charlie, stretched a wire across the span separating their bedroom windows and rigged a soup-can telephone. At night when they were supposed to be asleep, one roused the other by signaling with a flash light or tossing pebbles against the glass. One night, Brandon used the soup-can phone to tell Charlie about algebra. That the teacher was unfair, that he didn't get it. He paused and looked across the way. Charlie started flashing in Morse code from the Boy Scout handbook: F-U-C-K A-L-G-E-B-R-A! Moonlight reflected off his toothy grin. Brandon had grabbed his own light and flashed "FUCK ALGEBRA" back. Instant communication. Charlie had understood. They danced in their underwear and made scary faces holding the light under their chins until Charlie's mom opened his bedroom door and they both shut off the lights and dove for their beds. At the time, Brandon thought this must be the way it was for his mom and dad. Finishing each other's sentences, glances like code. He expected he would grow up and talk and share a drink with someone who would know instantly what he meant and vice versa. Like with Charlie.

Taylor got home two hours late, still sweaty from the gym. Her hair was in a ponytail. Her pores were open. She brushed her lips across Brandon's cheek and when he tried to detain her, she demurred.

“Did you forget dinner tonight with the Fitzgerald’s?” she said. “I’m just going to shower.”

She stopped at the answering machine on her way to the bedroom. Brooks Brothers called. The suits for would be ready Tuesday. Beep. Taylor’s sister, Marion, was redecorating. Did Taylor think cayenne was too passe’ for the den? Beep. Bran? Tay? Carolyn here. We have to push dinner back an hour. Jacques agreed to hold the table. See you at ten. Beep.

“I’ll be right out,” Taylor called over her shoulder.

Brandon stood a long time in front of the wine rack. He wasn’t hesitating, he knew exactly which of the two dozen bottles was the ‘61 Lafite-Rothschild. He observed the symmetry of the rack and the slight tilt it imposed on the bottles so that the corks would remain in contact with the wine. Without this crucial contact, the cork dries, shrinks. The wine turns.

It was dark outside now. The large living room window reflected Brandon back in. At night, the window framed their lives like a television set. They were their own drama.

He waited. Between index finger and thumb, he twirled one of the gold cufflinks making the engraved initials “AH” spin. He inhaled. Of course the metal had no odor, but the subtle peppery aroma of the leather couch mixed with Taylor’s perfume. Arpege? Chanel? She would switch without his realizing and

when he brought her a bottle home as a gift, she would laugh and say she hadn't worn that for months. Of course, Brandon would smile, what could he have been thinking?

He put the cufflink to his lips. He imagined Taylor lying in bed with her lover, A.H., and he wondered if she opened herself up, showed him what was inside. He wondered if she lay her head on his shoulder and told him why she sometimes awoke whimpering at night. That she felt joyless and lost and despaired of finding her way back. Brandon wondered if she had told "A.H." that when the brief storm blew in that morning, the rain fell against her skin and that she had held up her brief case like an umbrella and the zipper bag had fallen out, the one where she kept his cuff links and that sentimental napkin from 21, and that now it was gone, that she was sorry.

Brandon turned. He thought he'd heard something. He slipped the cufflink back into his pocket.

"Yes?" but the room was empty. He went to the bedroom. Taylor's short velvet dress was laid out on the bed. He could hear the water in the shower. He entered the bathroom. "Taylor?" He saw her silhouette on the other side of the glass. She didn't answer. "Taylor, what did you say?"

"What?"

"What did you need?"

"I didn't say anything," she shouted above the steam.

When he and Taylor had moved to TriBeCa, Brandon made sure that the Lafite was carefully handled and kept at the right temperature. They had moved it themselves along with the silver, Taylor's jewelry and the Picasso sketch Taylor's parents had picked up forty years ago in Barcelona. After the movers were gone and the wine case re-assembled in the vestibule just off the living room, Brandon lay the bottle in gently, mindful of the label.

The wine had been one of the wedding gifts from his parents six years before, commemorating not only the wedding -- "We're so happy for you!" --but also the year of his birth. 1961 is said to have produced the finest Bordeaux of the century.

"You'll want to save that one for a special occasion," his best man had told him. "This bottle will make anything a special occasion," Brandon answered.

He had thought of the day he would share it with Taylor. He depended on the knowledge that it was a promise with the potential to change the ordinary into the extraordinary, banter into truth, a moment when she finally told him what she was most afraid of, or wanted, her heart's history. At this moment, it seemed to Brandon that he knew only the basic obituary-style details. She was raised in Connecticut, father in insurance, mother committed to too many volunteer

groups, girl's school, private college. A wild summer with some girlfriends in Florence before she met him and married.

Would he mention the cufflinks? It intrigued Brandon to think of Taylor's maneuvering discreet meetings, thrilling to imagine her pulse racing with anticipation and deception. And it wasn't the infidelity. That was worth enduring because if she actually talked to her lover, perhaps she could talk to him. If she only would. Then he could tell her how he felt that morning standing where her little purse had fallen, watching her disappear into the crowd beyond him. If she would say what mattered, then he wouldn't bring up the cufflinks at all.

But there was the silence. That golden, thieving silence. He slid the bottle from the center slot. Its weight belied its fragility.

Three weeks ago, they were in St. Tropez. They breakfasted on croissants and drank Crystal, ate snails from tiny forks. Sunbathed on the Mediterranean. They dangled their feet in the shallow eddies the incoming tide made around their lounge chairs. Taylor surprised Brandon by taking off her bathing suit top on the beach. He teased her about going native. She shrugged and said, "When in Rome." Later, in their hotel room making love, Brandon said, "Why don't we talk?" watching Taylor's brown breasts scrambled around on her chest as he moved above her.

"Umnff, umnff, umnff," Taylor had said.

Brandon heard the water shut off down the hall. He thought how Taylor would come from the shower, offering him a kiss and sit on the couch to buckle her shoes. He would cross the room and kneel before her holding the bottle of Lafite between them. Even in his imagination, she affected him. Suitable for framing. A "glossy" he'd called her to his friends before they married. Her muscular legs were set off by the dress, her hair, pulled into a lazy bun made her glamour seem incidental. He savored the idea of looking across the length of her body then up into her eyes.

He imagined what she would do when she saw what he held in his hands. Smile. Perhaps one of her anointing laughs, a vague curiosity playing at the periphery of her thoughts about 'why the Lafite now.' Mentally, she would check the date. Not a birthday. A promotion? But Taylor was the sort of woman who expected gestures. Ah, yes, she would say. The Lafite.

Even in his fantasy, Brandon desperately wished she would say something. That in the rain... But her eyes would be on the bottle as if this were long overdue.

With his left hand, he would take her shoulder and pull her to the carpet. She would fall clumsily but recover her poise. In his imagination, he straddled her. She would look into his eyes. In a graceful arch, Brandon would swing the bottle against the edge of the marble coffee table shattering its base, still pinning her down with his forearm. Taylor, arms flailing now, would reach for his face.

This reaction would intensify his annoyance. "What Tay-lor?" he would yell. He would be hoarse, his mouth dry. "Do you have something to say?"

Brandon, in a trance now, paced the living room. What he imagined next: He drove the fractured bottle into the smooth taut skin just below Taylor's jaw and was surprised at the ease with which the flesh separated. Wine and blood would mix and move across the carpet toward him in a wave. He would smell the ocean, taste salt. Taylor's eyes would remain fixed on him. Then it occurred to Brandon that she would suddenly have a new, a different mouth. Her throat opened up to him and this gesture stilled his angry clench on the bottle, and everything was quiet, all but the pouring out of her heart. Taylor's old mouth, those familiar lips, froze in a sort of oval but her new one, the one he'd just given her, grew wider. His knees soaked in blood, he bent forward, hopeful, to hear what this mouth might tell him.

A faint gurgling was all he could make out.

"What's the point in trying to talk to you? Brandon shouted into her deep, still eyes.

"I said the drain's clogged." Taylor walked into the living room turbaned and toweled. "There are three inches of water standing in the bath and it's draining slowly."

Brandon turned abruptly and faced her. Catching sight of herself in the window's reflection, she backed into the hall rolling her eyes, feigning modesty. "Someone ought to call maintenance tomorrow, don't you think?" She shook loose the towel on her head and started rubbing her hair. "Brandon?"

He looked at her. Mascara was smudged beneath her eyes. She had perfect teeth. "Sure, Taylor."

"Did you hear? Dinner's pushed back to ten. I thought we might stop at the 21 Club for drinks on the way. I'll lay out a suit for you?" She headed back down the hall.

In the window, Brandon watched the reflection of a man standing at the center of his living room gripping a bottle.

## Horse People

Faye stood at the dining room window looking out at the paddock beyond the drive. The horse with its back to her was unaware of the approaching predator. Horses eyes are oriented toward the outside so they can scan for danger. If this fails, horses can smell carnivores; meat-eaters reek of the flesh they eat. Faye had read this. In a moment, the horse whipped around and whinnied low. The predator, with her eyes evolved forward in the skull for acute depth perception didn't slow, but clucked and said in a low voice for a girl, "Whoa boy. Whoa Cyrano."

Faye watched her daughter grab a hank of mane, hop once and swing her leg over as the jug-headed horse strolled lazily out of the paddock. About the size of a small mountain lion, Faye figured; her ten-year-old daughter, Abbey,

was fair, green eyed. Faye couldn't stop thinking how impossible the whole thing was, her daughter clinging to the back of a thousand pound prey animal. It was counter-intuitive to allow this. Abbey was going to fall. All riders did. The critical thing was how.

Sometimes when Abbey was away, Faye would walk out with a carrot and look the horse in the eye. It wasn't a bribe so much as a business deal. They'd both lean on the rail fence, Cyrano's ears forward and Faye running her hand down his broad, elastic neck. As far as Faye was concerned, a deal was struck: *do not harm my daughter and I will keep you in carrots.* Of course Faye didn't say these words out loud, she conveyed them: with the proximity of her body, with her posture, the degree of solemnity with which she held the gaze of the glassy brown hemispheres of his eyes. A compilation of actions gleaned from old Westerns, Saturday morning serials, and a dog-eared copy of *Horsefarming on Small Acreage*. She wasn't 'horse people' yet, for now, she had to make it up as she went along.

Dusk was gathering. Faye turned from the window. She scooted the salt and pepper shakers together and collected the unused silverware. The sight of her daughter riding was myth and mystery and simple sweat. She'd said those words before, explaining her daughter's love for this horse. *Yeah, but why do I keep thinking about Rhett Butler's broken child at the foot a small white pony and*

*Superman in a wheel chair?* She glanced over her shoulder once more toward her daughter before returning to the kitchen.

It was an easy summer evening, with a faint coolness lingering from spring, the western light caught low in the trees and nothing pressing.

"I need my awesome shoes, Mom," four-year-old Sam said reaching for a banana. "I'm going outside with Dad."

Faye took the banana and replaced it with an orange. "I need that for the bread, Sam. Here."

The boy halted and looked up. "I told you to call me Tree." He studied the orange in his hand. "Somebody else can have the name Sam."

Faye imagined driving to Goodwill as she did occasionally with the children to donate outgrown clothes, unused toys. *Here's my son's name. It's good, hardly worn. Just didn't fit.*

She said, "Shoes are on the porch, Tree. Tell your dad I'll be out as soon as the bread's in the oven." Sam turned and padded toward the front door in sock feet.

Faye made two loaves and put them in the oven. The extra loaf was for Abbey to take on a weekend trip to the beach with her friend, Pascal, and her family.

Dinner dishes and bread bowls filled the sink. She ran the water and considered the three avocado seeds rotting in a shallow bowl on the ledge

above. It held an assortment of botanical attempts: two pineapple tops, now with roots showing, a sweet potato whose delicate vine climbed up the cabinet toward natural light, and a desiccated mango seed whose hairy husk had softened to fluff. Faye intended to make a collection of furry mango seeds. She found them interesting to look at. Then again, maybe they'd just accumulate on the kitchen ledge. Faye shut off the water after washing her hands and reached for a towel. In the sudden quiet, she heard her daughter scream.

Adrenalin, when turbo charged through the body, has a quality, Faye considered much later, not unlike electricity. She tasted it on her tongue, something copper-like, and a burning sensation in her chest and fingertips. She had a sense of being way out in front of her body and absurdly having to wait to catch up with herself before she could open the door.

Before Faye reached it, Abbey flew in the back door, her eyes wild and wide. "Something's wrong with Cyrano. Mom, hurry."

Faye nodded, slowly at first and managed to switch gears. It wasn't *that* moment, yet.

They turned together and moved through the house to the front door - closer to the field. Faye grabbed the cell phone off the credenza so she could telephone the vet if necessary.

"Will?" Faye called for her husband, turning in a circle on the front porch. She had expected to find him there, tying Sam's shoes, but the porch was empty.

Faye and Abbey ran around to the rear of the house. "Will?"

"Daddy?"

From the front porch Will called, "Abbey! Faye!"

Full circle. He'd run from the front to the back with Sam when he heard Abbey cry out the first time, followed the path she took through the house then back out the front behind them.

*Why is there always an element of the Keystone Kops in each tragedy?*

Faye wondered. When she joined up with Will he was carrying Sam in his arms. Together they ran to the field.

Cyrano had fallen near the roadside fence. Whites of his eyes showing, tongue protruding, heavy head rocking.

As Will kneeled next to the horse, Faye dialed Mrs. Graham, who had rescued Cyrano from the neglect of a wealthy couple who kept him around for the rare visit with their grandchildren.

"You'll require a vet," Mrs. Graham said succinctly. Faye pressed the call-end button knowing there wasn't time.

The Mackenzies from down the street, a barrel-racing family with three horses at home, drove by. Grandparents in the lead in their lime green Cadillac and their granddaughter, Melissa, behind in a pick up. Faye started to wave them down, but they had seen the horse in distress and were already pulling off the road. There was a clattering of doors shutting.

The granddaughter, Melissa, was a 20 year-old who had quit junior college to go on the circuit. She had come over to ride with Abbey a few times. Horse people are like that. Western, English, thoroughbred, paint, they have an affinity for one another. Melissa reached Cyrano first, her grandparents came up behind. Cyrano's legs were thrashing. Faye led Sam back a few steps, calling to Will to be careful. When he looked up, she wondered how the Mackenzies had gotten through the fence. She had watched them pull off the street, but couldn't work out how they got over the fence. The gate was much farther down. *One of those blurred moments of shock, Faye figured, when people seem to sprout wings, walk through wire, lift eighteen wheelers.*

Will pushed on Cyrano's heart, dodging hooves, but the horse was dying. The rest stood around him, hands empty at their sides. Faye took Sam's little hand. The struggling mass of animal seemed huge to Faye and it would not have surprised her if all the neighbors, from up and down the street poured out to witness the spectacle.

"I asked him to trot and he refused," Abbey said. "He stopped and started swaying. I took off his bridle and ran to get Mom."

Faye looked at the horse, the seizure in his body palpable in the air. Nearby there was a toy partially buried in the dirt. It looked like a plastic cow, part of a set of barnyard animals Abbey had outgrown that was now Sam's. She looked back at the horse. How odd he looked on his side, like another toy fallen

over on the carpet, and Faye sensed a sudden heaviness in her own feet, like the toy's molded base, that kept her upright. How unprepared she felt, how stiff. How suddenly make-believe her fence-side conversations with Cyrano now seemed, like Sammy holding a dinosaur in each hand, making conversation for both of them. Faye could sense the sacred all around her, but she couldn't make out which part was *real*.

Mr. Mackenzie, a grizzled, round man who had lost both thumbs to calf roping, put four fingers on Will's shoulder and said, "Send the kiddos in." Faye was grateful for the instruction. Mackenzie's wife, a little white haired grandmother dressed in pink cotton and black leather ankle boots led them to the back door. A thought struck Faye. She paused on the patio and looked back at the field: if the horse had fallen a moment sooner, he would have crushed Abbey when he fell.

The two men were bent over the horse. His legs were still. She heard Mr. Mackenzie's voice, "Best git him covered up, there."

At the threshold to the back door, Mrs. McKenzie pulled Abbey to her ample breast and held her. The girl slumped and began to cry.

"You're gonna cry a long time," Mrs. Mackenzie rubbed the girl's back. "And you're gonna see him fall – dream about him falling. In your mind it will always be just that way."

Melissa joined them on the porch, her Wrangler jeans still creased from being new, a Miller Lite tee shirt tucked in behind a large silver buckle engraved "Champion 2000." She told Abbey there wasn't a thing she did wrong. "This just happens sometimes, could have been a heart attack or an aneurysm. Horses are like that," she said.

*Fragile*, Faye thought, and opened the door to the warm smell of bananas.

"Why is everybody sad?" Sam asked after Mrs. Mackenzie left. He crawled into Faye's lap.

"Because Cyrano died and we won't be able to see him anymore."

"Why can't we see him?"

"His body will go back to the earth now, Sammy." Already, she'd begun to worry about vultures, neighborhood dogs, possums, invertebrates. How long did it take? She had seen the flimsy blue camping tarp Will carried from the storage shed to the field.

"You mean he's going to turn into a plant?" Sam slipped his hand into Faye's shirt then inside her bra, a gesture from his nursing days that Faye was reluctant to end.

How much do you explain? "It's possible."

"Maybe he'll come back as a guitar," Sam said.

"Okay, Tree." Faye pulled him close.

“You can call me Sam.”

The sun went down. Abbey’s friend Pascal came over for an impromptu wake. Faye looked for Emily Dickinson’s fly and sliced banana nut bread, grateful for Pascal, aware of how a parent can usurp an event without intending to. Together, they would devise their own mourning. They slipped off to Abbey’s room.

Will stood beside Faye and spoke softly. “Mackenzie told me about a man in Bastrop we could call. He takes care of situations like this.”

Faye looked at him.

“The body.” Will glanced around, not wanting to be overheard, “I’ll call tomorrow. When Abbey’s at the beach.” He held a piece of paper out to her. ‘Horse People’ it said, and a phone number.

Abbey and Pascal came in with flashlights and scissors. They wanted to look at Cyrano and to cut some of his mane and tail. Will said he would take Sam to bed so that Faye could walk them out. Once there, she held the flashlight and pulled the tarp back. The girls knelt down to cut some of the long tail hair.

“Mom-” Abbey said, hope rising in her voice, “There’s poop. He pooped! Is he alive?”

Near his tail was a small cluster of manure. How many wheelbarrows full of it had Faye hauled to her garden or loaded in bags for her friends?

“No Abbey.” Faye said. She told her how all the places in the body that usually stay shut open at death, the anus, the mouth. “Remember the kitten we found near the creek?” It had tangled with a dog or racoon. At Abbey’s request, they made a sign on an index card and placed it nearby: Keep Silence. Little Kitten Decomposing. “It’s like opening the gate, so the scavenger insects can do their work.”

They went to the other side of the tarp where Cyrano’s head lay.

“Look at his eye,” Pascal whispered to Abbey.

“Yeah,” Abbey said. “You can tell he’s not there anymore.”

Faye looked too, surprised that it wasn’t grotesque. She felt different than she had earlier, standing near him, stiff, like one of her children’s toys. She expected Picasso’s *Guernica*. A painting he’d said was not meant to decorate apartments, but was an act of war. She looked at the delicate lines of her daughter’s bones kneeling beside the horse’s body. Abbey cupped the horse’s chin in her hand, its stiff whiskers bending to her touch. Faye recalled Abbey on his back earlier. Predator, beloved.

Back inside, the girls braided hanks of mane with ribbon, lined a basket with fabric and made an altar. There was a photograph of Cyrano following Abbey into the paddock, a hoof chip trimmed from the farrier’s last visit, a small model horse painted with Cyrano’s markings.

Sam wandered out of bed around ten o'clock and found Faye and Will sitting with Pascal's mother at the table, banana bread sliced on a platter. "I saw a movie once," he announced standing before them in his underwear. "It was called, *Die Horse, Die*. In it a good horse has a heart attack." Then he told them that his own heart was inside some really strong bones and that if they hit it, it wouldn't even hurt him a bit. Faye rose to take him back to bed.

"Let us still take Abbey tomorrow," Pascal's mother suggested, "if she's up to going."

Faye had been wondering about that. It was a three-hour drive. She said, "I suppose I could always come get her, if she needed to come home."

The next morning, breadcrumbs were still on the wooden cutting board. Faye brushed them off and used the board for toast, jelly and butter. Abbey dragged her weekend duffel to the front door, her eyes swollen and red.

"Sunscreen and a hat?" Faye said.

On the back of Abbey's tee shirt was a character drawing of a girl using all her strength to pull on the reins with the caption, *Whoa pony!*

Abbey got into the back seat of the car with Pascal, toast in one hand, the worn, stuffed horse she had slept with since she was three, in her lap. The large blue tarp and the huge form beneath it were conspicuous from the drive. Faye shut the door and stepped back. The car began to pull away then stopped,

Abbey's window came down and she shouted, "Mom, I want to bury Cyrano back by the creek. When I get back. By the creek, Mom, okay?"

Faye waved as the car pulled away. She looked at the tarp. The form beneath it had grown, bloating. The gate to the pasture was open. It looked odd. A sign that something was not right. When the car was out of sight, she squatted down on the driveway and hugged her knees to keep from walking to the fence and shutting the gate. There was nothing to keep in. But she felt a sense of responsibility, as if there were something she'd missed that would have accounted for Cyrano's death. Her part of the bargain.

Shut the gate. Shut-the-gate. Shutthegate. She and Will had said over and over to the children. Cyrano could get out and wander into danger. It didn't look right, the gate standing open like that.

"Faye, it would take a backhoe, a hole ten-foot square. Think about it. Ten-foot square and lined with lime. And it could contaminate the well."

Faye knew everything Will said made sense, but the look on Abbey's face as the car drove away stuck in her mind. Or was it Cyrano, himself, that jug-headed horse, his side of the deal as they leaned against the fence those many times? How could she have taken away so little from him, besides the intoxicating smell that lingered on her hands?

Will put his arm perfunctorily around Faye, "I'm calling Bastrop."

Faye came to understand that people made a living picking up large, dead animals. Hundred and fifty-eight bucks a shot, Blaine Sipleby told them on the phone, he'd be by around five o'clock.

Faye and Will stood at the front window, looking at everything but the blue tarp laying off to the right.

"What exactly is a rendering plant?" She asked him, but she didn't want an answer. White bottles of Elmer's glue came to mind and a buck-toothed boy from kindergarten named Teddy who ate hardened balls of it. She checked her watch. Five thirteen. When she looked up, a pick-up was coming down the road toward them stirring up a whirlwind. It pulled into the drive.

"I should give him a hand," Will shrugged. "Keep Sammy occupied."

The man driving the pickup apparently didn't expect a warm welcome and like an undertaker, quietly went about his job. He pulled his trailer—gray, full-slat sided (*so you can't see what's inside*, Faye thought)—through the gate and backed it up alongside the tarp. The spare tire bolted to its side was flat.

The night before, Faye had dreamed the tarp lifted and floated heavenward on the wings of thousands of buzzing flies revealing a lush garden below where Abbey sorted rocks into baskets and Sam played guitar and sang cowboy ballads. She woke up Will and told him that when she died, if Abbey wanted to cut her hair to braid into hanks, that would be all right.

"Okay," he mumbled, his cheek buried in the pillow.

"No, Will. This is important." She sat up. "You have to be okay with that. If that is something she needs to do."

He leaned up briefly on an elbow and struggled to open an eye and connect. "I can be okay with that."

*Yoko cut her hair off and put it in a jar, Faye thought, when John died.*

"Get some sleep now, huh?" Will had said. He turned away as politely as he could at 3 a.m., slowly, in case Faye intended to say more, then caved back into the pillow and sleep.

Faye let him sleep. She was wishing she'd gotten a phone call from Abbey asking to come home. She wanted to have her near. She listened for Sammy but the house was quiet. Faye sat up against the headboard watching the dark figures in the room come slowly into focus.

Blaine Siplely wore a tank top, "Cowabunga" scribbled across the front. Long blonde hair fell down his back in a ponytail. He walked to a corner of the tarp and pulled it back. With his hands on his hips, he circled around the horse. Faye wondered what was he thinking. Angle? Weight? Pitch? The trailer obscured Cyrano from her view. She didn't know how quickly decomposition occurred. What if the body didn't hold together? She looked at Siplely. What does a man like that say to his friends over a beer at the end of the day?

Will was out there, but kept his distance. Inside the trailer, a wench handle turned as Siplely hauled out a long chain. Faye turned away, her elbows cupped in her hands. When she looked back, the body was in the trailer. Faye watched Siplely pushing, pulling, lifting. Finally satisfied, she supposed, he jumped from the back of the trailer, shut and latched the back.

Will met him at the door to the cab and wrote a check. Faye watched them talk a minute then Siplely was gone. Cyrano was gone. Road dust hung in the air out the drive.

Will folded the tarp and came indoors. He handed her the checkbook. Faye saw where he'd made the check out to *Horse People*.

"He left in a hurry," she said. *Did he have other appointments, other people's dead horses to pick up and haul away?* "What was he like?" she asked. "I mean, what did he say to you?" She wondered about the imaginary deal she'd struck with Cyrano, about how she felt the normal objects of their lives had begun to take on odd definition, get up and switch places with reality. Metaphors slipped around hazardously.

Will looked at her. "He asked if I wanted a receipt."

## Textiles

Jane flung open the front door. The soles of her shoes tapped across the foyer, fell silent across the living room then tapped again on the tile near the kitchen. Jane had lived in her grandparent's house since she was three and her parents were killed in a boating accident that left her bobbing in a light rain in her life jacket. Still, she hesitated before entering the kitchen. Louise sat with her back to the door, her broad feet garaged inside a pair of gray sneakers, heels sticking out the back.

"Don't stand there like a ghost," Louise said without turning around or looking up. "When you come into a room, say something."

Jane walked in and touched the back of Louise's chair. "You know it's me."

Louise said, not unkindly, "Don't slip up on someone. It's polite to say something, even if you are making a racket in your new shoes."

Jane glanced down. She did like the shoes.

In the foyer, Jane's aunt Catherine was just now shutting the door. Keys clattered against a tabletop. "We're back," she called out, her voice trailing up the stair where she went to check on Jane's grandmother.

"I saw this blue dress," Jane said to Louise, edging around the table. "At Sanger's." Louise reached for another bean, snapped the ends, tossed them into the steel bowl. Jane bent slightly to be at eye level with Louise. "Aunt Catherine wouldn't let me get it."

Louise arched an eyebrow but kept her eyes on her work. She said, "There's fresh tea on the counter and lemon in the bowl. Go on and pour yourself some."

Jane took a glass from the drain board and filled it. "She's just mean," she said. Each step she took was punctuated by her new shoes. Before, in her sneakers, she didn't make noise. She put a hand on her hip and looked down at her shoes again. The brown bangs she'd tucked behind her ears fell across her face. Jane sighed. She would have traded the shoes for that dress.

Louise said, "I always did like blue. I'm sure your aunt had a good reason for telling you no."

“No,” Jane corrected her. “She didn’t. Unless ‘Not today’ is a good reason.” Jane thought about it. The dresses her aunt showed her were stupid. Ruffles and bows. If she couldn’t have the blue one, she wouldn’t wear dresses. Forget it.

Aunt Catherine entered the kitchen. Nodding back toward the stairs, she asked Louise, “Has she been asleep long?”

“Yes. When I took breakfast up to her, she said she wasn’t feeling well.”

“Well, that hardly surprises me,” Catherine said. She looked sideways at the large woman seated at the kitchen table. “I suppose you know what happened last night,” but didn’t wait for an answer. Instead, she blinked. “And no lunch?” she said, tapping the counter top with a fingernail, “She’s had no lunch either?”

“I haven’t heard a peep out of her, Mrs.” Louise said.

“Well, then. Take a tray up for her at two, if you would. Maybe some aspirin and an Alka-Seltzer.” She addressed her niece, “Janey? Stay out of Louise’s way. I’m going back out.” Catherine left the room. Louise checked the clock. Jane narrowed her eyes and scowled at the space where her aunt had been.

The pinging of the beans in the bowl brought Jane’s attention back. She watched as Louise’s fingers broke the narrow tip, drew down the tough string,

and tossed the pale bean into the bowl hammocked in her black dress with white apron. Jane couldn't remember seeing Louise dressed any other way.

"How come you wear this?" Jane asked, touching the hem at Louise's knee.

"It's my uniform."

"Do you like it?"

"Some people do. It makes them feel good to see a uniform."

Jane wondered what Louise looked like when she went home. Or dressed up with lipstick. Louise's hair was mostly gray. It went straight past her chin and curled under. Jane imagined her in rollers applying face cream with a large cotton ball. It was difficult to make any mental pictures work so she thought about a doll she used to have that came with an assortment of outfits in a pink trunk. Louise in the white tennis outfit. Going to the Ambassador's Ball in the jewel-tone evening gown and tiara. But even the Casual Fun Slacks didn't work. It was like that time the elementary school art teacher came to a party Jane's grandparents gave. He wore a sort of cape draped over his shoulder and held a cigarette like he was checking the time on his wristwatch. He didn't dress like that at school. When Jane spoke to him he stubbed his cigarette out and said he didn't realize that Findlay Weaver was her grandfather.

"It means I'm at work." Louise said. "I wouldn't want to get my own clothes dirty, would I?"

#

The few memories Jane had of her parents were slowly replaced by a collection of silver framed photographs arranged carefully on her dresser and referred to often by her Aunt Catherine and Uncle Bill. They were black and white pictures, mostly, portraits done by a professional photographer. Jane's mother had been Catherine's younger sister and one of the pictures was from when they had been away at camp together as teenagers. In a small sailboat, Catherine manned the rudder and sheet while Jane's mother knelt out on the bow, face to the breeze.

Jane had the room her mother grew up in with a canopy bed and a window seat. Her Aunt Catherine and Uncle Bill had stayed in the adjoining room with a shared bath until her grandfather moved out, then they took his large room at the opposite end of the hall from her grandmother's.

Grandfather made the announcement at dinner about a year ago that he would not come home again. The adults had looked at one another. Aunt Catherine set her fork down and covered her mouth with her napkin. Grandfather looked at Jane and said, "I give you my attic studio, Janey, and whatever of interest you may find there." Jane smiled at him.

"I don't get your meaning, Findlay." Uncle Bill had said. He liked to understand everything very clearly.

Jane's grandfather explained he would stop by now and again for his mail, attend certain social functions and, of course, be here for Janey's birthday, but otherwise, he could be reached at his studio downtown. He looked at the empty seat at the opposite end of the table where Jane's grandmother usually sat and said, "I trust one of you will inform my *wife*."

Aunt Catherine dropped her napkin in her lap. Two red crescents formed a surprised oval on the starched linen. She looked relieved, "So, you don't mean that you—"

Grandfather lined up his fork and knife at ten o'clock on his dinner plate and left the table. On his way out he passed the kitchen. "Thank you for a wonderful meal, Louise."

#

Jane wondered if Louise knew about her grandmother being brought home by the police. She had to. Louise always knew. Things happened and left echoes that sank into the walls, the woodwork, the drapery. Even the paint held it. Sometimes, Jane could lay her head against the wall and smell her mother. Even when her mother got stuck in Jane's memory and could only appear the way she looked in the framed photographs, in the same clothes, with her hair in the wind, Jane could slip through the house and find parts of her that hadn't gotten lost. She never told Louise; it wasn't something you talked with anyone

about. But it just seemed to make sense that things sank into Louise, too. That's how she knew.

Last night, Jane had sat with her grandmother as she dressed for a small cocktail party that was already going on downstairs. Even Grandfather had come. Louise had shooed her from the kitchen all day.

Jane thought her grandmother looked like an ancient queen, not beautiful or dreamy. It was as if she had already taken in all she wanted and had begun shutting doors. Jane watched her brushing out her short curly hair. It crackled with electricity. Jane smiled when her grandmother caught her staring.

Grandmother laid the brush down and asked, "would you have a kiss?" as if she had a platter of them laid out and Jane was invited to take one. Jane nodded, rolled off the bed and walked up to the dressing table. Her grandmother tilted her head, laying her cheek alongside Jane's. Then she picked up her brush again and said, "The Hendersons and Davises will be here. You don't know them, but the Hendersons have just come back from Africa. We'll hope they have a good story."

Her grandmother sat in a pale white slip that contrasted with her tanned shoulders. She found many reasons to go to Mexico. "I get to be Catholic," she told Jane once, "but don't tell the Unitarians." Jane's grandfather's side of the family were thin lipped Yankee Unitarians.

“Here, try this color,” she said, handing Jane an opened lipstick. She pulled the top off another, unwound it and they both leaned into the mirror. Jane was still plotting how to apply it when Grandmother recapped hers, blotted her lips and took a deep draw from her highball. “Don’t be afraid of it, it’s just for fun,” she said. Jane began carefully outlining her top lip.

Catherine came into the room and smiled painfully at her mother. “Do you plan on joining us or not? Your guests have been here half an hour.” With one hand, Catherine whipped out a sheet of tissue from the box on the table and handed it to Jane while taking the lipstick away from her with the other.

After the guests had left, and the dishes had been put away, the doorbell rang. Uncle Bill went to the door.

“Della Weaver,” a man’s voice announced.

Jane leaned over the arm of the living room couch where she was reading and craned her neck to see what was happening.

An officer held Jane’s grandmother by the elbow. She was draped in a blanket marked Police Department Property. The only other things she had on were a necklace and high heels. In her left hand she clutched her silver lighter and a package of Salems.

Aunt Catherine entered the foyer.

Della Weaver looked her daughter in the eye and said, "I wanted to walk in the gloaming. The air," she said, looking toward the ceiling and waving an arm, "It was so ripe—" She halted. "What's the matter with you people? Is everything so ugly?"

Aunt Catherine turned to the living room. "Janey? Bed time. Go up stairs."

Jane sank back into the couch and held her breath. She opened the book where she had marked it with her thumb, but no matter how hard she looked at the page, the words swirled in front of her, slid off the page and away. She knew they couldn't be caught with her hands, they ran through her fingers. Gone. Gone. A storm of words, all lost, and she couldn't stanch the flow.

"Jane," Her aunt said, "Now," punctuating the command with a double snap of her fingers.

Jane shut the book and slouched toward the stair.

Aunt Catherine took a coat from the closet to put around her mother. Before she got to her, Jane's grandmother let the blanket drop to the floor, and stood naked.

Jane was afraid to look at first, but when she did, she was surprised to see it was all right, her grandmother was still there. Jane had imagined something would break when she looked, that she'd hear something shatter and that they would be picking up broken pieces of plaster or marble in the days to come, and

that they'd all be picking it up, not just Louise. Her grandmother reached out for the coat, put it on and cinched the belt in tight and threw her shoulders back. She stepped over the blanket, her feet beneath the large overcoat were slender and delicate, the leather straps of her shoes decorated with jewel-cut glass. Jane remembered believing those shoes were worth a fortune, when she was a child.

"I'm putting her to bed," Aunt Catherine said.

"Have Louise bring me a chicken martini," Jane's grandmother said, "And Goodnight to you, Officer." She reached out her hand as if to pat him on the shoulder, then drew it back and smiled. "We've kept you too long, I'm sure." She looked over her shoulder toward the kitchen and called, "Louise? Just a small one before night-night. Bring it up, won't you?"

Jane's uncle and the officer stepped out onto the front porch closing the door behind them and Jane found herself standing in the sudden quiet, feeling the walls reverberate in slow waves. She collected the adults' after-dinner glasses on a tray from the sideboard. Of course, Louise had already gone home. She had left soon after the party was over. The kitchen would be empty. She would leave the glasses on the counter for Louise to find in the morning.

Back in the living room, Jane parted the curtains behind the couch. The porch and lawn were empty and the sky was dark. Jane drew the heavy curtain around her. In a moment her eyes adjusted and she could make out the stars

and planets in the sky. Grandmother should have waited until the light was gone, she thought.

When she was younger, Jane often played behind the curtains. Sheers and drapes on all the windows and windows in every room and hallway. Heavy brocades, velvet, woven tapestries. Louise kept the downstairs drapes open during the day, but upstairs, some remained closed. It was behind these that Jane created passageways. She could move from room to room, down hallways and to the top of the stair with minimal dashes across exposed walls. She hid provisions in the loose hems. Packets of melba toast, her Swiss army knife. A color snapshot of her parents' boat. Even a fancy lipstick she once took off her grandmother's dresser. After her grandmother missed it, Jane overheard her grandfather tell her grandmother that if she wasn't a drunk, she wouldn't lose everything.

After her grandfather left, Grandmother and Louise watched soap operas together in the afternoon. Jane wasn't allowed to watch television during the week, but she would slip in behind the curtain and watched her grandmother and Louise, sitting up on the large upholstered bed, bolsters and pillows behind them, sipping tea. They shook their heads in disbelief and discussed the characters on the show. Once, something terrible happened. Jane could tell by the way her grandmother and Louise were acting.

“No!” her grandmother said, looking dreadful, pointing to the screen, “He won’t.” She put her hand to her throat. “He can’t. He won’t.”

Louise clucked, “Here it comes.”

The two women sat silently. For a moment, it seemed to Jane as if they might be looking at her, not the television between them, but then her grandmother began fishing around for the remote control like a blind woman, depending on touch, unwilling to move her eyes from the screen. Louise found the remote and turned up the volume.

The music coming from the television speaker got louder and louder, reached a crescendo before breaking and a female voice started talking about laundry detergent.

“You see there,” Louise said, nodding her head at the television and letting loose a little chortle. And that was it. Louise was up, smoothing out the wrinkles in the bedspread where she had been sitting, before her grandmother even let her eyebrows relax.

But the last time Jane eavesdropped on a show, her grandmother slept through most of it. Then, they stopped watching all together. The television stayed on but the sound was muted. Aunt Catherine made more of a presence, keeping Louise busy going through old storage boxes in the garage. Then, everyone began to show an interest in Jane’s homework.

#

Back in the kitchen, Jane rested her chin on her forearm watching Louise finish the last of the beans, rise and put the ends in the trash. The good ones, she left in a buttered casserole in the refrigerator. She brought a basket of red potatoes to the sink and began washing them. Louise hummed. A steady thrumming, like the radio. When Jane was little, she used to think when Louise was humming she was distracted, but Louise always knew how many cookies were laid out or just how the icing was, if Aunt Catherine had said no more sodas, or if you'd used the kitchen sink for getting mud off your sneakers, even if you'd rinsed it out carefully after.

"Want me to help?" Jane offered, but not moving.

"This won't take a minute."

"What are you humming?"

"A melody," Louise said.

"Is it a hymn from your church?"

"I said it's just a melody. A tune I like."

Jane listened. The leaves of an oleander rapped against the window. Outside, the sky was colorless and flat, hovering above the rooftops like a sheet snapped open above the bed the moment before it wafts down upon the mattress. Traffic noises, a front door shutting, some voices commingled, swirling up from the streets in a whirl like the white noise of a television.

Louise shut the water off in the sink and left the potatoes draining in a colander. "I'm making a plate for your grandmother. If you want something, get it now. I don't want you messing up the kitchen before dinner." Jane took a plum on her way out and watched as her feet in the new shoes glided across the living room. She thought of checking on her grandmother. She wished she could tell her about the dress. Before she got sick, Jane's grandmother would square all sorts of things with Aunt Catherine for her. But not any more. Jane ate her plum on the front porch, listening for cicadas.

A dog came into the yard. He was golden brown with floppy ears and a white tip on the end of his tail. He let Jane come right up to him, but when she reached to pat him he turned on her and snarled, his head low between his shoulders. Jane froze, her hand still extended. If she blinked, he'd lunge. She knew it would come. Neither she nor the dog could move; each one awaiting attack. Beyond the fixed axis of their gaze a car passed, titmice and chickadees flitted, a front door slammed. The dog filled his lungs with air, and growled again. A penetrating ache gripped Jane's body.

Faintly, Jane became aware of the sound of Louise's voice. At first, she thought it was just in her head, then realized Louise was there, behind her. She tried to concentrate. Let the words filter through. She didn't know how much longer she could stand. Louise was telling her to back up slowly.

Aunt Catherine's car pulled into the drive. She got out, slung her purse over her shoulder and reached back in for her shopping bags. When she turned, she saw Jane and Louise. "Janey!" she screamed. "Don't touch that dog!"

The dog redoubled his growling. His lips climbed up his gums.

Again, Louise's calm voice reached Jane. "Back up slowly." Jane's arm was cramping. She must turn and run. "Don't you turn," Louise commanded. "Back up. Slowly. Until you get here to me."

Jane felt her hand was on a tether to the dog's jaws.

"One step, Janey."

Louise kept talking. Her voice drew Jane back a step. Then another. A little further each time. Then the dog relaxed. His gaze went limp. He raised his head and loped out of the yard. Jane ran the rest of the way to Louise.

Aunt Catherine's ashen face appeared over Louise's shoulder. "What on earth were you thinking? Don't you know better than to go near a stray?" She shifted the packages in her arms and looked down the street in the direction the dog went. Not seeing him among the trimmed lawns and tight, geometric hedges, she said, "How'd a dog like that get here, anyway."

Jane kept her arms around Louise's middle until Louise suggested someone call Animal Control. Aunt Catherine thought that was a capital idea; she would. She fumbled for the cell phone in her purse, found it dead, then

announced she would use the one in the house. Louise and Jane followed behind.

Louise paused on the porch before reaching for the doorknob. "You better be prepared when you look a dog in the eye, girl," she said quietly, "because when you do, you leave it no where else to go."

Louise took the lunch tray upstairs to Jane's grandmother's room at two o'clock. Jane followed. She slipped in the door behind her, then behind the bank of curtains. To make a space for the tray, Louise cleared wadded tissues and pill bottles from the bedside table. She turned on one lamp, then another and moved across the room toward the curtains. Afraid of being discovered, Jane slipped to the far side just as Louise pulled the cord. The abrupt motion caused a shower of dust to rain down, illuminated in the sunlight.

"Shut that curtain, now!" Her grandmother's voice was hoarse. Louise ignored her and moved away from where Jane was hiding to another set of drapes. Mrs. Weaver opened one eye. The pale gray iris moved slowly until it found Louise. "Louise," she said, the gin whispers in full effect, "close it. Please."

"It's two o'clock. You need to eat. You need some orange juice." Louise shook her head at the thin woman whose faint copper hair was rumped. "Della, you need to get out of that bed."

The skin surrounding Jane's grandmother's eyes was wan and powdery like it had been collecting its own dust and hadn't been needed in a while. Della repeated, "Please. The light...hurts." It was as if a thin voice inside her had woken up, but not the rest of her. Jane watched her roll away from the window. Louise watched her employer's back rise almost imperceptibly, then fall in shallow breaths. Then she closed the curtains.

From beyond the drapes, Jane heard her grandmother say, "I'm dying."

Jane parted the curtain slightly and peered through.

Louise took a big breath. Filled her chest with air. She said, "There's not a thing in this world keeping you in that bed, forcing you to stay in that bed all the time. Mmm. Mmm. You're going to drown yourself if you don't make up your mind not to. You get up outa that bed, Mrs. Weaver. You get on up in your own time. But get up."

The room was quiet. Dust swirled and twinkled between them, on its way to settling on the lamp shades and table tops, spun off from the vortex of the opened curtain, galaxies cut loose, looking everything like the sky that had revealed itself to Jane the night before. Only now, it spun on this side.

Della turned back and said, "I've shit myself, Louise. Look at me." She watched Louise carefully as she said this. Louise stared back at the woman in the bed. Jane let the curtain fall back into place and closed her eyes. At last, a moan escaped her grandmother and Jane heard her sink back into the bed. She

heard Louise's heavy footfalls cross out of the room and descend the stair. After a moment, Jane slipped out, hoping her grandmother would rest.

#

Aunt Catherine found the body before dinner. She had carried the dress bag from Sanger's up to Jane's room, lay it on the bed and said, "Now. No more stray dogs, hmm?" She turned and headed down the hall:

"The dress!" Jane said, holding the hanger and letting the plastic bag slide to the floor. Jane was reaching around behind her to zip it up when she heard her aunt cry out from her grandmother's room.

EMS didn't try to revive her but they agreed to wait until the Weaver's personal physician, Dr. Allison, arrived, a formality Uncle Bill suggested and Aunt Catherine insisted on.

"He delivered both her children, you see," Aunt Catherine said to the technician who seemed to be in charge. He nodded to his assistants who stood outside the bedroom.

Dr. Allison arrived shortly and Jane's grandfather pulled into the drive right behind. From her bedroom window, Jane watched the men strike a somber pose in the driveway before Findlay Weaver jutted his chin out and led the way inside. Jane heard them climb the stair and watched their backs as they strode down the hall to her grandmother's room.

The EMS workers struggled with the metal gurney on the stair. Jane watched from the landing in her new blue dress, the sash hanging untied at her sides. When the technician in front misstepped, the gurney teetered, and the sheet draped over her Grandmother's body slipped off her face. Jane saw her jaw open wide like a hatch. So wide it seemed the breeze was flooding in.

By early evening, many friends and neighbors had come. Grandfather took his usual spot, by the fireplace, drink in hand, receiving sympathies and condolences. Catherine was at his side. The kitchen counter and the dining table held pies and casseroles, condiments, meats and bread. People came and went so often, Bill carried over a heavy iron doorstep to keep the front door from blowing shut. Jane stood aside eating olives. It began to feel oddly to her like so many of the other parties that had been inside these crowded walls, people standing with drinks in their hands, telling stories, an infrequent glance toward the stairs when someone thought of her grandmother.

Jane went to the kitchen. Louise was on the telephone explaining to her husband why she had to stay over.

"Oh yes, umm hmm—" Jane heard her say, shaking her head back and forth. Jane didn't want to interrupt. Louise probably knew she was there, anyway. She heard her say something about sleeping pills into the phone. Then, Jane heard her say, "She made a mess of herself. She took every last pill in the bottle—" *Then she laughed.* It started like a hum. Jane heard her laugh and it

didn't end. Not until the saucer with the olive pits slid from Jane's hand and rolled on the floor did Louise turn and see Jane standing there, staring. Then her voice went on the way it always had, softly, persistently across the room and beyond, through the doorway, across the dining room, into the living room where people stood, red-eyed and resigned, clapping each other in embraces. It seemed to Jane that Louise's laugh wafted through the house and back again, like the tide, carrying with it the shuffling of leather on carpet, high heels and soft soles, assured tones of heaven's promise and the tinkling of ice in amber liquid.

Louise placed the receiver back in the cradle, the laugh now merely a soft thrumming, the gathering of loose threads into a single cord. She and Jane looked steadily at each other, neither blinking, neither backing away, until Aunt Catherine came in with an empty ice bucket and broke the final strand that held them in each other's gaze.

## A Degree in Botany

Eva sat in the glass enclosure of the sun porch watching the grey sky billow with the promise of something to come. She was like the figure in a snow globe lifted from the shelf by an expectant hand. There was a time, once, when the hand had been her own, but since then, she had become familiar with the way the world could suddenly lurch one way or another, sending everything toppling down. Even so, she continued to keep fragile things around her, like the delicate vases lining the windows and table tops of the sun porch.

“Is that you?” Eva called out, hearing bags of groceries land on the kitchen counter. She sipped bourbon from a forty-year-old coffee mug and worried about the bread; her son held the bags too tight to his chest and carried more than he should. He wasn’t young anymore. She could have them sent over by a service, but she was afraid the suggestion would be misconstrued.

The passionflowers were rejuvenated by the new soil mix. Eva brought the mug to her lips and admired the healthy vines. They would be robust by summer. She sat on the glider, slowing her breathing so her wheezing wouldn’t catch her son’s attention. Today, she meant to ask him to move the oxygen machine out

here. There was sufficient tubing so she could move around, do some light repotting, pruning. She intended to start growing roses again; it had been years. An old interest, hobby, a habit, really, that had shattered and been abandoned. The greenhouse wasn't there any longer, but she could do it here. She had to get out of the bedroom. She was a prisoner to the machine there, its burp and whirring noise drove her crazy, like a militia on the move. She could set up a pallet out here, use an electric blanket.

It had begun to snow. It would be the last of the season Eva thought. She could sense the change coming. Beside her, the Christmas cactus held its final flowers on long arms branching out, a few red blooms sprouting.

Just inside, she heard the television click on. She kept the door from the kitchen to the sun porch propped open; it tended to lock up on her. She slipped her drink behind a dieffenbachia and made her way to the kitchen, an island counter separated it from the den. She had served Nathan breakfast there every morning until he was a senior in high school - on these same chrome barstools. Eva stared at them. The leather had held up well. Funny how some things last. She looked at her son. Nathan had liked omelets then, and orange juice. And a glass of milk.

"It's too cold out there Mother. You should be on your oxygen," he said without turning to her. He was watching a show with a fireman rescuing a woman in a blue suit from an icy river. A helicopter hovered, its lifeline extended.

Eva couldn't place the actor. Not James Garner or Tom Selleck. She didn't know most of these younger one's names, but this one was familiar, good looking, salt and pepper hair. You get older, she sighed, you let some things go.

"Is it a rerun?" she asked. She wanted to be cheerful. Bracing herself on the counter with one hand, she clutched the sash of her robe with the other. She was breathing fine. She'd get back on the oxygen soon. Another five minutes. Nathan hadn't taken off his jacket. Did he mean to stay? On television, the firefighter was turning back to the banks of the river where more people huddled beneath blankets. A light snow fell there, too.

Eva thought about her drink on the porch but she didn't want to hurry him and he refused to see her drink. She had a problem with it a while back, but that was years ago, after he'd kicked morphine. She had almost lost him then. There was a terrible bout of hepatitis. She watched him spiral down into his addiction until he was a haunted pair of eyes atop a jaundiced bag of bones. She couldn't say she helped him through it, but she stayed with him, saw him every day he'd allow it. She had been a surgeon's wife. The clinic extended her the courtesy of discounted fees. When he was clean and left the clinic, he kept going and didn't look back. It wasn't until she had to give up cigarettes that she began sipping again. She missed tobacco's mild effect. She just needed a little something. The housekeeper who came once a month brought her a single bottle. Eva made it last.

Nathan stopped by once a week to bring groceries. Sometimes he set out something for dinner. He kept track of the bills. Sometimes, he'd stay for a meal. When he did, Eva was grateful. They had lost years when Nathan left. No contact. He'd been such a young man then. When he did come back into her life, Eva knew it was not to put things right, but to do the right thing. He believed in doing the right thing. Mostly he volunteered at the shelter. Took care of old vets. She worried about him. Nothing turned out as she expected.

"Who is that actor?" she said of the man on T.V. "I've always admired him."

"Quiet Mother." Her son held up a gloved hand to silence her. The space where his right index finger should have been flopped over, empty. "It's the news. There's been a bus crash in the river. This is real."

Eva looked again. "No, Nathan," she said gently, "I don't think so. That's an actor. I've seen him before."

"Of course you have," he narrowed his eyes. "It's Dale Preston. From high school. Bonnie's husband."

\*

It had been at least thirty-five years since Dale Preston stood on the door stoop holding a casserole. His mother had sent him. She'd made extra, he said Eva, who had been washing up after her and Nathan's dinner, tucked loose black hair behind her ear. It had been almost a year since her husband died

and Dale's mother sent dishes over once or twice a month. Eva reciprocated with cuttings from her roses. She had a green thumb. Her husband, Spencer, had been a surgeon and removed a benign cyst from Dale's Achilles' tendon a few years before. The boys were friends. They played football, double dated.

With the corners of her apron, Eva took the casserole and noticed that Dale wore a uniform, Army tan, a crisp pleat down the front. He slid the cap off his head, collapsing it into flat folds, then tucked it into his belt. It reminded Eva of the paper boats Spencer and Nathan made when Nathan was a boy, Spencer teaching him to press his thumbnail hard along the creases before launching them on the pond at Hysmith Park.

"Have a seat," she said to Dale. In the background, Walter Cronkite brought the latest on Vietnam. "Nate's in his room I'll just get him for you." But she didn't move. She asked him, "Did they call your number or have you enlisted?"

"I was thinking of enlisting," he told her, "but my number came up."

Eva forced a smile. "What was your number?"

"Twenty-seven."

"I'll call Nathan for you."

She made her voice calm, but this impulse did nothing to quell the panic she felt rising. Like a steel rod crammed in her throat, it was something she had to swallow around. She walked in measured steps down the hall.

Her son sat at his desk doing homework with a pair of stereo headphones on. She had worried about that, but his grades hadn't faltered, and since Spencer's death, she

allowed him more freedom. And with the savings, she indulged him. It wasn't right he should have lost his father, especially now that he was becoming a man, good man, too. She could see it in him. He had told them last year he wanted to be a surgeon. Like you, Dad.

*Well then, take care of those hands, son.*

"Dale Preston is here," she said. Her son looked up from his book. "In the den."

"Thanks, Mom," he said, tossing a pencil into his trigonometry book to keep his place.

Eva lingered in the doorway watching him walk down the hall. He'd matured so much. He was a young man. She cherished him. She wondered how much longer he would be hers. His draft number was fifty-four.

She turned back to his room. Through the doorway, it looked like a slim snapshot of time, frozen and framed so that the arbitrary arrangement of his things took on a significance out of proportion to the evening, to a boy, number fifty-four, called away from his homework for a brief visit with a friend, number twenty-seven.

His bed was partially made. The blanket dragged the floor, at the foot, a lump where the sheet was kicked into a ball. He slept like his father. Nate had record album posters tacked on the wall. Their wild psychedelic drawings, bright colors and swirls organized in groups of four. Her son and his contemporaries awed Eva. They played with ideas that would take them places she and her generation could never go. The rest of us will be shut out, Eva

thought. It was not our world now, though it looked the same. They'd pay the same price for a gallon of milk, but it wasn't the same place she and Spencer had grown up. Parents didn't understand. They didn't like the hairstyles, the language, the sandals. Eva knew these subtle differences were the ticket out. Of course it makes us uneasy, she had told Spencer; it is the changing of the guard.

Next to his bed, Nate kept a photo of his girlfriend, Bonnie, dressed for prom.

Eva liked her, liked how she and Nate challenged each other. Some nights they'd stay in, listen to music and debate Nixon and the war, civil rights and pregnancy. She knew they had discussed marriage, after college she hoped, but now with the war intensifying? The week before, she had come home unexpectedly. Bonnie's car was in the drive and Nate's bedroom door was closed. Eva left the house again, quietly so she wouldn't embarrass them.

Eva lit a cigarette and drew the menthol deep into her lungs. Nate's varsity practice jersey lay on the floor near the closet, his number in white iron-on across the front, but anywhere Eva turned, the only number she saw was 54.

Later that evening, Eva sat down to write a note to Dale's mother thanking her for the lasagna. The 10 o'clock news was on. At the commercial break, she heard a woman's voice sing, "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should." Eva stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray, a heavy clay oval Nate had made when he was nine. "I'd rather fight than switch," she said to herself and went to turn off

the set. When she reached for the knob, she saw dozens of soldiers dressed as Dale had been earlier. Khaki. They marched in rows of twenty, saluting men on a dais. Not a word the broadcaster said reached her. It didn't need to; she knew what she was looking at: row after row of children. The footage switched to the jungle of Southeast Asia. Lush growth bursting from the earth, moisture seemed to Eva to be dripping from the verdant fronds. Underneath them, the faces of young men smeared with mud and sweat. Or is that rain, she wondered? Eva put her hand on the screen. Then, on a gray landing strip, black body bags were loaded into an airplane. There were so many. So many. Where were their parents? How could they have allowed this to happen?

Eva sealed the envelope and wrote *Betty Pearson* on the front in fountain pen. She took a flashlight from the utility closet and slipped out the kitchen door to the greenhouse. She lifted her good garden shears off the nail where they hung and stepped back to consider the recent rose clippings she'd made. Where to make the next? She opened the shears and tested the blade with her thumb. She knew how to keep them very sharp. Spencer had bought her a whetting stone one year for Mother's Day. It came all the way from England. It was the same spring he and Nathan built the garden shed. Nathan had helped after school and on weekends.

A limb was missing for each dish Betty had sent over. She looked at a damask rose and the Nevada as possibilities, though the miniatures would bloom indoors through winter. She had meant to send another clipping, but

suddenly decided to give Betty the Nevada, pot and all. It was hearty, would grow tall and had an exquisite arch. It would bloom and take temperature change. It would require some tending, but would be resilient, if that were necessary. This was the one she wanted Betty to have. She dropped the shears into the pocket of her apron, lifted the pot with its saucer and went back into the house.

Nate's door was ajar; the desk light still on. His schoolbooks were stacked neatly at the center of the desk blotter, but he was in bed asleep. Eva pulled the sheet up from the foot of the bed to cover him. She felt the tightness return to her chest. She shifted the flower pot to her hip thinking she might bend down to kiss him, but the first trailer branch from the rose arched out awkwardly and would have grazed him. Instead, looking from its small bloom to her son, she realized desperately her impotence and the danger. No draft board would see this. Asleep in his plaid boxers, her son was her homeland, the residence of her soul. The only possible justification for history lay on his side, hand curled beneath his chin, the scar from his smallpox vaccine dimpled on his upper arm. Her sense of loneliness was immediate and incommunicable. She sunk to the floor. Nothing important had any weight.

Later, Eva walked the short distance to the Pearson's home. The house was dark except for the kitchen light on the side. Eva thought she could make out the silhouette of Betty Pearson sitting alone at the table, putting a coffee cup to her lips. She left the rose and the envelope on the front step.

The shears in her apron pocket swung against her leg on the dark walk home. The street had grown more and more quiet as the war dragged on. The

Pearson home would be quiet without Dale. Eva was suddenly afraid of meeting Betty after Dale shipped out, afraid of seeing her in the driveway, of collecting the morning paper and having to wave, of having to find something hopeful to say to her. How long might it be before she would be the one to have to take a casserole to Betty? Eva pressed her knuckles into her chest to counteract the pressure she felt there. And the Henderson's down the street, their boy had been gone for months now. She pictured all the mothers on her street standing in their housecoats on their front lawns with casseroles in their hands, confused, turning to one another, and the street so deathly quiet.

"We have the savings," she had told Nathan when his draft number was determined. She described the west coast of Canada. "It is a paradise. Snow geese, the Pacific. Grey whales migrate past in the winter,"

He touched her hand. "I have to fight, Mom," he said. "Other guys are going." Eva knew how simple it seemed to him, and it broke her heart, that the boy they'd raised was such a good man. If she could, she'd turn his heart. Just enough to keep him safe.

Back in the house, Eva went to her husband's closet and got his medical kit. Brown fine grain leather bag, worn like a football. She had suggested he get a new one without the scars of his residency years, but he said no. You get a feel for them, Spencer had said, weighing the bag in his hand.

Eva had fallen in love with Spencer in college. He was in med. school; she studied botany, but left school after the wedding. Spencer hadn't asked her to. She wanted to. For the first seven years, while he finished school and his residency, she wondered if their attraction ran deeper than a mutual and

indefatigable lust. Then when Nathan was born, she learned how deep love grew. She and Spencer settled into a ripe awe of life. On the shelf near her husband's bag was the little Wedgewood box. She reached for it and turned it over slowly in her hand, listening to the gentle tumble of her son's baby teeth inside. Eva held it to her and stepped backward into her husband's clothes which still hung on the rack.

Friends remarked about how strong she was, how she held up after losing Spencer, becoming a widow, a single mother. How little they understood, Eva thought. They were still a family. Bizarrely, even Spencer's death didn't shatter that. Eva believed the family was still whole. She felt it like some of Spencer's patients felt their limbs, even after they were gone. But she missed him, someone with whom to stand over the sleeping form of their child, listening to the wordless grandeur of his breath.

She looked for what she needed in Spencer's brown bag. One finger, she thought. He has everything else. The rest can be his. One finger, for his life. She took a towel from the linen closet and with Spencer's bag, went to Nathan's room.

The desk lamp was flexible like the ones that had been in Spencer's surgery. She repositioned it beside her son's bed. She doubled over the towel and laid her son's hand on it. He slept deeply. Beside him on the blanket, she lined up hydrogen peroxide, tourniquets and fasteners, and placed a syringe with a mild concentration of morphine on the bedside table easily within reach. If necessary, there was more where that came from.

She took the garden shears from her pocket and scrubbed them with an alcohol and Betadine solution. They were fine shears and wouldn't require more force than she could summon. She had been with Spencer when he treated Mr. Fellows after he cut two fingers off with the lawn mower blade. She knew if the digit were taken off cleanly, and you're not trying to save it, peroxide and a good tourniquet will do for the stub. Veins close up and recede into the flesh and if the wound is kept clean, dressing changed regularly, the site heals up fine.

She cut a small hole in the towel. Carefully, so as not to disturb him, she obscured all of Nathan's right hand beneath the top flap of the towel, leaving only his trigger finger exposed through the hole. She didn't even need the whole finger, just enough to keep him from being useful with a gun. They wouldn't take him then. He would forgive her. If not now, then eventually. He could still study medicine. He could still marry Bonnie. He could still hold his children. Then he would understand.

She took it off at the base of the second joint.

\*

Nathan kept the news on while he put away the groceries. He told his mother once more to get her oxygen. He mentioned going down to the hospital and donating blood. Dale Preston's face came on the screen again; he was being interviewed. Then all the action moved to the hospital, with the survivors. Nathan shut off the television.

"I'll be back in a couple of days," he told her with his hand on the doorknob.

Eva gripped her robe sash, now, with both hands. She wanted to cross the room to her son, put her hand on his face, to cradle him. He was a phantom to her, the dark circles around his eyes, his face wan. She wanted to call him back to her. Bring him back.

“Wait,” she wheezed, “I’ll send...flowers.”

“No, Mother,” he told her. “Leave it alone. Go back and get on the machine.”

She put her hand on her chest, caught her breath. “...something cheerful to help... Just a minute.” She was stubborn. She hurried to the sunporch knocking her walker against the door. She chose quickly from an assortment of vases. He could take one arrangement. She would have to work quickly now, she knew he was right, been away from the machine too long and her head was spinning. She used her thumbnail to nip off flowers at the stem, arranging them in the small vase. She remembered her scotch, looked forward to sipping it, but first one more blossom, and she’d just get on the machine long enough to catch her breath, clear her head. Then she could finish the arrangement for Nate to carry to the hospital. She was tucking in the last flower when she heard the woosh of the front door closing. The seal against the weather stripping created a brief vacuume. The sun porch door fell shut behind her.

“Nathan?” she called. Her breathing like a drone in her ears. “Nate... the door.”

Nathan thought he heard his mother call on the way to his car. He tucked his head under the hood of his jacket. The snow had turned to rain and was falling heavily.

### The Sound from a Box of Bones

They were married two years when Frances found the first gray hair on Ben's head. She plucked it and framed it and they made plans to take off work early to celebrate. Frances cooked. Ben bought expensive wine. They laughed at the idea of becoming tired and habit worn. They joked about flesh and bones and dust. Dust. It is for windowsills, they said. They bathed in candlelight. They were young and their bodies did not lie. They drank champagne, lit a fire and stayed up late. The next morning, when they came down for breakfast, the cushions from the couch were in various positions around the living room and along the wall, near where their clothes were flung, their shoes lay as they had left them: like drunken comrades fallen, one against the other.

Five years later, the couch had been recovered and the windowsills were spotless. A service came to clean. Laundry was delivered, light starch, on a hanger. Frances had a secretary, Ben, an expense account. In the mornings,

they saluted each other with coffee mugs but didn't look up from the newspaper. Conversation was tossed crisply out the corner of their mouths, aimed obliquely at one another.

"Toast?"

"Later."

The dissolution of her marriage came into focus slowly for Frances, like picking up a telescope and looking through the wrong end of it, but there was no telescope and the distance gave her vertigo. The characters she saw had a vague familiarity, but so did the house she lived in and the shoes lined up in her closet. She felt that if she could catch her breath, get her perception in order, she and Ben would be okay, maybe even laugh about it, how they got distracted but found each other again. She felt lost and reached out to signal Ben but grasping air discovered he'd moved on with out her.

Frances marked time. She visited her parents like going to Lourdes, hoping for a miracle, a blessing, a pat on the back from a fellow pilgrim. At dinner, Frances felt under the table for the groove she'd dug out with her thumbnail when she was in high school remembering how her mother sat in rapt attention to her father's dinnertime lectures. He stirred the salad with his fork.

"It's a shame you can't get more out of your degree," he frowned, as if the ensuing decade hadn't passed at all, wincing at the bitter truth of his statement. "I believe I suggested something more practical, like business."

Her mother scooted her chair back but not before placing her hand on Frances's arm, "We have cheesecake and blueberries. Now, tell us about Ben."

At work, Frances was distracted. Meetings were scheduled too close, deadlines unreasonable. Her colleagues irritable and intransigent. She quit on a Thursday afternoon. Besides, she'd always wanted to work on her Spanish. She enrolled in classes, stayed for the second session. When that ended, she began sleeping late and ate breakfast on the couch, lunch too, alternating watching soap operas on the Spanish station with reruns of *The Rockford Files*.

She telephoned Ben in the middle of the day. He told her not to do this, explaining again, that his work was more important now that she had decided to become a housewife.

Don't call me that, she said.

Dust returned to the windows and clothes littered the floor. Milk soured. Resentment built up like tinder in the stagnant summer heat, threatening to catch the house afire, and not a cloud in the sky. Frances listened as cicadas, released from a seventeen year pupae stage emerged ululating their shrill, burning noise.

Frances knew that if she didn't leave soon, she would grow hard and darken to a grainy walnut hue, that her mother-in-law would swing by with a brocade throw pillow for her lap and a lamp shade for her head, and that eventually Ben would bring his girlfriend home. She would take one look at Frances and smile, draw Ben's body up next to hers then whisper, "Baby, you gotta have a garage sale."

The third time Frances caught herself hesitating in front of the medicine cabinet, it frightened her. She picked up the telephone and dialed.

"Aero Mexico," said the rich, tumbling voice.

She would be gone two weeks. She circled the number of her hotel on the pad by the phone, "in case you need me," she said. Ben handed Frances the leather suitcase she had given him for Christmas and waved as he merged smoothly into the stream of traffic that carried him away from the airport. Frances walked through the crowded lobby looking for a monitor that would tell her which way to go, then found herself suddenly unsure whether she remembered to pack any underwear.

\*

When they were airborne, Frances kicked her shoes off, fisted her toes, and leaned far back into the seat. She twisted the metal top off a tiny bottle of vodka and poured the contents into her tomato juice. Out of the window, a gray streak of interstate bisected the expanding landscape into varying hues of green

and brown while Frances considered the benefit of distance. She couldn't move forward, she couldn't go back. This was no escape; this was only a tangent. Ben had been "supportive." So supportive, he did not ask the embarrassing questions her friends or sister would have asked had she told them she was leaving, alone, to visit the grave of her grandmother who had died and was quickly buried there, almost twenty-five years before. He had practically waved his arm out in front of him, bowing like a butler. She put her finger in her drink and swirled the ice cubes, stuck it into her mouth. She withdrew it quickly, thinking of the airport escalator handrail and of bacteria, of antibiotics, painkillers and the white, quarter-sized, childproof caps she left all lined up in the medicine cabinet at home.

She could have spent the money on therapy. Sit an hour in a carefully chosen color scheme, houseplant growing vigorously in the partial shade, bookshelf of helpful titles. Everything meant to say something hopeful. Frances couldn't get beyond reading each gesture. She knew why *she* was there, but why, she wondered, were *they* who came out from *behind* their desks as you enter the room, then sit democratically *beside* their desks when the session begins. It was meant to be a comforting gesture, as if to suggest their corpus sano earned them hardware they could be cavalier about.

Frances turned to the window and watched the nacre hued clouds. In a moment they had turned from graceful celestial bodies to comic strip dialogue bubbles satirizing the conversations she might have had with friends:

“Get a dog.”

“Cut your hair.”

“Feng Shui your house.”

The clouds grew as a tirade against monogamous relationships wafted past from Adrian, her neighbor, her ex-boss touting the virtues of vitamins. Her brother’s balloon said, “Why don’t you talk to Mom.” Her mother’s, “Don’t drink the water.”

Without the clouds, the blue extended in every direction and Frances had an impression of falling. “Redecorate.”

“Have an affair.”

“Divorce the bastard.”

“Get a job.”

And Ben’s advice: Get a life. What more could she ask?

To be fair, she had not told Ben that she spent hours lying on the unmade bed. Once, she watched a loose spider web waft up and down, interminably, This way. That. The pull and push of the air currents sending it. She imagined the spider hanging on to the end, waiting for fortune to send the strand high and reattach.

Finally, she knew it was a progressive series setting off a silent, gaping alarm to which she felt inexorably drawn.

Frances chose her grandmother. The thing she *knew* wasn't part of a conversation. "I think I'm dying," isn't part of a conversation. Trying it out as conversation is futile. She knew how it would be. The first thing they do is say, "No." They take you by the shoulders and announce, "Everything will be all right." They bend down to look you in the eyes. "Say it." They want you to repeat after them that everything will be all right. You meet their eyes. You nod. This may be your last act of kindness. Their relief is gratifying. And they don't know it but you are comforting them. Them. You are the only one telling the truth. This is why suicide is private, because no one wants to call their friends liars.

Frances remembered how she enjoyed being scared when she was a girl. She and her friends would go to horror movies on the weekends, sit huddled together, the wooden arm rests digging into their ribs. Frances wasn't sure about boys, but she could always peg the girls who were going to die in the movie. "Her, that one," Frances would whisper, pointing up at the screen to a cheerful female form, "She's toast." Frances would nod, and this would be followed by the movie moment, the scene of the girl reaching for the closed door. "No, no!" Frances and her friends would shout, their voices joined by others in the theater,

calling out a warning. Go back. Don't go in there!" As the music crescendoed, Frances and her friends would unlock arms, scoot down in the worn velvet seats and cover their eyes with their fingers, allowing for a single peek hole in case their hearts grew brave. As the monster or murderer snarled and champed, tearing flesh and breaking bones, Frances would shake her head and wonder. Afterward, eating ice cream back at home, Frances and her friends would agree that any girl that dumb, to open a door like *that one* was asking for it. "I mean," Frances would conclude, "you could see it coming."

Men didn't think this. Ben missed all the signs, the echo of her form hesitating in the bathroom, the altered order of prescription bottles in the cabinet. She left hints. She'd given Ben the opportunity to pull her back from the door and its eerie, glowing handle, but instead, he offered her his suitcase.

The flight attendant offered packets of peanuts. The crimped edges of the plastic were hard to separate. The salt made her realize how hungry she was. It had been hours since breakfast. Her stomach growled. Frances shifted uneasily, certain the man sitting in the aisle seat had heard. She cleared her throat, hoping to convey some sort of acknowledgement or apology. She used her teeth to open the second packet of peanuts. Thirty-six thousand feet in the air, Frances realized there was nothing subtle in this. She was in flight, exposed, like waking up on stage in the middle of a routine, trying to carry on despite the shadows

moving toward the lighted exit signs in tandem with random smirks and stifled yawns.

Frances felt a wave of nausea. Was it the peanuts or the past? She reached for the airsickness bag spilling the remaining peanuts into the hammock of her skirt. Then the moan Frances thought she'd been suppressing broke out into a series of yips and barks.

"Is that a dog?" a voice behind her said. The man on the aisle set down his paper. He'd heard it too.

*Dogs?* Frances looked out the window the way she would have in a car, toward the back tires, to find a chasing dog. The barking began again. It was dogs, not her stomach. It came from beneath them, the luggage compartment. Outside, acres of thin space unwound behind her, tractless and blue and nearby dogs were barking as if they were on a front porch.

Two rows in front of Frances, a young, red-headed woman stood up.

"Frida? Lottie?" She looked around. "Lottie?" She was answered by a low-pitched bark. Then a higher one. A flight attendant pushing the meal cart paused.

The red-headed woman laughed. "Those are my dogs."

Frances turned to the man next to her, but he had gone back behind his paper. She gathered the peanuts from her lap, shook them in her hand like dice then tossed them into her mouth.

The passengers exited the plane into shocking brightness, down a wheeled stairway, then aboard a bus that carried them to the terminal. The sun sent them digging into the darkness of their bags for sunglasses. Their thin paper travel documents limp in the heat.

They entered a cavernous room with three desks. Footsteps echoed off the polished onyx floor, passengers fell into formation. A strategist or two struck the diagonal to claim a shorter line, all clutching their necessities: wallet, passport, visa, sunglasses. Next to the Duty Free kiosk, a man in a white jacket leaned against a cart of liquor bottles, reading a thin book. Bottles of *El Presidente* rum and cokes lined a tray.

Frances stood behind the red-headed woman who turned suddenly, looking out the plate glass window behind them. She caught Frances's eye and smiled.

The lines moved quickly. Frances wondered if the man at the bar ever had much business. He had not moved except to turn a page or wave his bar towel aimlessly at a marauding fly. No one broke ranks.

It was Frances' turn.

"Hello," he said without looking up. "Welcome to Mexico. Business or pleasure?"

Frances turned over her airline ticket as if the answer were printed there. Her mouth was open to answer.

“Business or pleasure?” He repeated. He tilted his head up and squinted at her. “Take your time,” he smiled. “One should have a definite idea, no?” He took note of the line behind her.

Frances tried to say. It was a simple question. Business or pleasure. Chicken or beef. What’s the problem?

She shook her head. She put her hand on the counter and leaned slightly forward, “I...you see...”

“Ah,” the man declared, “pleasure, isn’t it?” He turned back to the papers in front of him. “Pleasure, I think.” Satisfied, he took the stamp in his hand, banged it onto her onion skin visa. “Have a nice stay here in my beautiful country,” he said, then looked past her. “Pasale.”

Frances collected her papers and followed the signs. When she rounded the corner, there was the cacophony she had expected and felt relieved. Crowds milling. Masses forming and unforming. The grinding noise of the luggage carousel. Passengers talked back and forth, and just beyond the casually laid out customs inspection area, the room opened onto the airport lobby itself and beyond, open doors to the street: voices raised in greeting, the bleating of diesel motors, horns sounding and tires squealing, and all of it upon a shimmering wave of heat.

In the cab from the airport, Frances passed a mile or more of high-rise hotels with elaborate fountains, tendrils of the yellow flowered copa de oro vine overflowing balcony windows and uniformed wait staff dotting lawns. She saw an airport minivan veer into the circular drive of a palatial resort, disgorging pale skinned tourists juggling camcorders and beers.

Then there was a quick transition from asphalt to cobble stone streets as they entered the old part of town, leaving Sheraton and Hilton behind. On the left, streets and buildings extended several blocks before thinning out into the foothills of the Sierra Madres whose arms reached out, encircling the bay. Frances watched a woman trudge up a steep rise then turn into a narrow doorway, her strong calf muscles bulging above high heels.

"El zocalo," the driver said pointing left to the town square, dominated by a large Catholic church, "y la bahia," he said pointing right. The zocalo was full of people strolling, sitting, vendors pushing carts. A little girl holding a colorful balloon on a stick dashed toward the street. The driver slammed on the brakes.

"Cuidado, nina!" the driver shouted to her from his open window. The little girl paused, then continued across, her balloon bobbing up and down. Frances watched as she ran to her mother's arms then noticed the huge bay stretching out beyond them.

Then it was gone. In a moment, the view was obscured as the taxi cut through the narrow streets, surrounded by buildings, then Frances got another

glimpse of the bay as they crossed a bridge whose river emptied out into the bay, staining the blue pacific water, brown where the waters joined, and littering it with debris. Then it was gone again. Then back. Frances got a staccato view of the bay in-between blocks of storefronts and small residences. At last, the taxi turned and halted in front of a small, whitewashed hotel.

The man behind the counter welcomed her, took her credit card and handed her a key. He eyed her single piece of luggage, then pointed to the elevator. Third floor, he said. Frances turned to go and was called back.

“No phones,” he told her in English, pointing to the dial-less handset on the desk next to him. No long distancia.” He smiled an apology.

Frances turned to the elevator. Ben. She pushed the button. She imagined him at his desk, his shirt open at the collar. Bent forward like that, Frances knew there would be a narrow space between Ben’s chest and his shirt. A place where scent and safety would accumulate like a blanket, and she wanted to draw it over her head.

“Perdon,” the man had come round the front of his desk and was waving her to the street. Frances followed. He took a step out, pointing to a wrought iron gate next door.

“Ruths Bar,” he said.

Frances saw the painted sign. R-U-T-H-S. No apostrophe.

“Ruth’s Bar?” she said.

“Telephone. Call home here.”

\*

Frances settled into her room. Out of the window, finally a continuous view of the beach. The guidebook called it Playa Los Muertos. Beach of the Dead. No one knew why. There were rumors of a massacre long ago and a corrupt general, but nothing solid. The book noted that the tourist bureau tried to change the name to Playa del Sol, Sunny Beach, but no one would call it that despite signs, tee shirts and buttons. It remains Beach of the Dead. The hotels here were small and older. Looking back toward the town center, she could still see the brown stain of the river spreading out from below the bridge but here, a floor beneath her window and a few yards out, the surf was green and translucent. From the floor above, a single strand of the copa de oro vine coiled down providing Frances with a luxurious profusion of yellow trumpeted flowers. She turned off the air conditioner and slid open the window. A warm wind came in off the ocean.

Frances stuck a camera, a notebook and her wallet in a bag. The street was quiet. Across the way, in front of a Farmacia, a tee shirt on a hanger rocked back and forth beneath the awning like a pendulum in a clock. She went in, bought a bottle of water and headed for the beach.

Vendors in white cotton strolled through the sand or congregated in small groups, sipping fruit flavored water. It appeared to Frances that thirty feet away, in a lounge chair in the sand, practically all her needs could be met and more, by the vendors: grilled fish or shrimp on a stick, beer with lime halves, sunglasses, a hat for the mid-day sun, dresses, tee shirts, blankets, extravagant hardwood carvings, silver ear rings, bracelets, and if she chewed gum, thousands and thousands of pieces.

Frances walked along the surf to where the beach resolved itself into black boulders separated from the mountain. A bronze statue of a boy riding a sea horse stood off by itself, uncelebrated and strangely fitting. She sat on one of the rocks at the edge of a tide pool and watched the goose barnacles and small crabs conduct their lives synchronized with the ocean surge.

The coming of evening drew people to the beach to observe the ritual of the setting sun. Frances watched them gather like the tide. A crab following a receding wave into the surf briefly diverted her attention. At the wave's return, it dashed back up the slope and beyond the water's reach. She looked back at the crowd. People were naturally drawn to light. They skittered out into the morning, spent the light, then dashed inside.

A man approached Frances selling fish and shrimp on a stick. Bottles of hot sauce tied together clinked against his leg. Frances took one of each. From a pouch he carried at his shoulder, the man took out a lime and held it between his

fingers. Both he and Frances paused to watch the sun sink below the horizon, then he drew a blade through the lime and handed her the halves.

Frances watched the sky. A three million-mile accumulation of cosmic dust that bent the light and created the spectacle of the sunset. Colors as vibrant as sound. She dragged her fingers across the surface of the sand rubbing the tiny grains between her fingers then flicking the greasy, limey residue away. Ben had no part in this. The scavenger crabs ran up and down the sand chasing out the waves, then being chased back in turn. She turned toward her hotel.

The gate to Ruths Bar was open. Through the vestibule, a stairwell led down to a broad room facing the bay. The tile-lined walls were pale green and a long bar carved from dark wood was along one side. A solitary patron sat near a window drinking and gesticulating. Frances could hear the soft murmur of his voice in intervals between the sound of wind and surf.

Frances dropped her bag on a stool. Nailed into the plaster wall above the bar was a sketch of a dark skinned woman, bandoleers draped across her chest, the unspent cartridges showing. She was drawn sitting on a boulder, balancing a rifle across the top of her knees, a man's watch on her wrist. Her head turned to the vacant space that ran to the edge of the thick paper, as if she was waiting to see what was coming. Frances could see it was unfinished although it appeared to have been hanging for some time. Maybe she was a Zapatista from Chiapas.

What was missing, Frances wondered. Her horse? A town in the distance with a church? A man?

"Ramon?" a woman's voice called out. It came from an open doorway at the end of the bar. The place was practically deserted; it occurred to Frances that the bar might not be open. She glanced back at the man at the table by the window. He was counting on his fingers.

"I'm sorry," Frances turned toward the voice, "I thought I'd have a beer."

A tall woman with short gray hair looked at Frances. She wiped her hands with a towel then kicked something shut behind her before stepping out into the room. "Oh, I thought you were the ice."

Frances pointed back to the stairway. "No. I thought you were open. Upstairs, they said you had a phone."

The woman examined the grease under her fingernails, swung the towel over her shoulder, and walked behind the bar. "Lost my goddamn freon," she said. "Beer's going to get warm." She popped the tops off two bottles, handed one to Frances and put the other close to her lips, then paused. "Javier, upstairs. He's worried about phones. Sends all the gringos to me. Thinks I'm the cultural liaison." She took a sip. "For long distance," she said, "you'd better use the phones at the post office. I'll spot you a local call or two - if that's what you want."

Frances tasted her beer. It was cold. "Thanks. It's long distance – the call. Thanks, though."

The bartender inclined her head. "Post office can take care of you. Off the zocolo."

Frances nodded. "Are you Ruth?"

The woman smiled at her. "One of them. There are two of us."

Frances recalled the sign. No apostrophe. Ruths, plural. "Are you interchangeable?"

"Not a chance," Ruth said, lifting a tray of glasses out of the cabinet and setting it on the back counter. "Refrigerator doesn't break on the other Ruth. It's an unhealthy relationship those two have," Ruth said over her shoulder as she headed back toward the far doorway, "A coercion of grease and mysticism. She says I just haven't been drinking the water long enough to make an engineer outa me." She disappeared but hollered out, "I've been here six years. Wonder how long it'll take?"

Frances sipped the beer. Patted her hand in the cool condensation that formed on the bar around the bottle. She could hear Ruth on the telephone in the back ordering ice. Frances didn't catch every word of the Spanish, but she was surprised at how much she remembered from watching the soap operas on Univision. She wondered if her pronunciation would resonate with melodrama, an accent that flung the back of its hand to its forehead, drew its lipstick on red.

Ruth returned with a coke and took a bottle of rum off the bar. She left these on the table of the man sitting alone. Back behind the bar she asked Frances if she wanted another beer.

"No," she said. "But I have a question."

"Shoot."

"I want to find the cemetery. My grandmother died here. I want to visit the grave."

"Which cemetery? Old one or new one."

"It was twenty-five years ago."

"El Panteon Viejo," Ruth told her. "That's what it's called. Take a cab. Just ask for that."

A sudden scrambling at the top of the stairs brought Ruth around to the front of the bar. In seconds, two large dogs clambered down the stairs. The first into the room was a gray standard poodle, with a pompadour and apricot nails. The second was a rotweiler, unadorned. They came skittering across the tiles, wagging tails and searching out Ruth.

Ruth knelt down to pet the dogs. She seemed to withhold her affection with each glance up toward the empty doorway.

"I haven't got any pesos!" a female voice shouted down the stair. "Ruth! Mother! Spot me some cash." The red-headed woman from the plane made her

way down the stair, Frances recognized her immediately. Behind her, the taxi driver followed close behind with a pair of suitcases.

“Give me some money, will you?” She smiled at Ruth. The dogs rushed back to her. “I didn’t have time to change anything at the airport. The driver...” she waved at the man behind her.

Ruth stood, facing the young woman.

“Oh, please,” the woman moaned. “Not now Ruthie. Just give me the money and you can lecture me later. Where’s Mother?”

Ruth walked past the young woman to the driver. “Cuantos, Senior?”

He told her the cost of the fare. Ruth took money from her breast pocket, counted some out and thanked the driver. The dogs had settled on the cool tile floor where they lay panting.

The red-headed woman said, “I need to get them some agua,” pointing to the dogs. She went behind the bar and filled two plastic bowls with water. She called the dogs to her. When she looked up, she noticed Frances for the first time. “Hi,” she looked at Ruth then back to Frances. Both dogs put their faces in the bowls and lapped. “You a friend of Ruth’s?”

Frances said, “No. I just got here. We came on the same flight.” Frances laughed, “I heard your dogs barking mid-air.”

The young woman laughed, too, recalling the scene for herself. “I’m Abbey.” She pointed to the rotweiler, “That’s Carlotta, as in ‘the Empress from

Chapultepec,' and that," she looked around for, then pointed at the poodle who had wandered over to join the old man, "that's Frida." Then Abbey recognized the man off by himself and went to talk to him. Frances watched her approach him and sit down, place her hand on the man's hand. He paused as if a thought had come to him, then resumed gesticulating.

Ruth lit a cigarette and held it with her teeth as she washed out two rubber bar mats. The white "Tres Equis" letters were gray and faded. When Abbey returned she climbed up on the barstool next to Frances. "So, who's in town? What's happening?" She addressed the question to Ruth's back.

Ruth shut off the water, shook out the mats and propped them in the drain board. "Your mother's in Houston."

The smile left Abbey's face. "But I thought - " she started.

"Nobody knows how to reach you Abbey. Ruth delayed going back over a week trying to find you. The least you could do is stay in touch."

Abbey was quiet.

Frances stood. "I better run. Thanks for the beer. How much do I owe you?"

Ruth shook her head. "On the house. If you're footloose later, come on back. We'll have music, and if the ice doesn't show, we'll have cheap beer."

Frances climbed the steps to the street. Instead of turning into the hotel lobby, she walked, looking for dinner. It was almost seven and the street was

waking up from siesta. Stores were illuminated from within and people began to gather at street corners choosing the direction of the evening. Frances bought three small tacos from an open window at the back of a sports bar. It was a tiny room with a brazier and the woman within sold food out the window on the street as well as through a doorway into the bar. A big-screen tv blared out football commentary. On the window ledge, the woman offered six different sauces from small molcajetes, bowls made from volcanic rock used for crushing herbs and spices, like a mortar and pestle. Frances put some of each on her tacos, asked the woman to wrap them for her and returned to her hotel.

Inside the lobby, the desk was vacant. Frances took the stairs to her room and turned on the light. Seeing Ben's suitcase next to the bed made her feel lost, a reminder that something was missing. She set her food on the dresser and put the case in the closet, unzipped and opened it. Shoes faced heel-to-toe. Shirts folded and stacked. Underwear, after all, and toiletries. Just as she had packed it. Nothing had changed.

Frances ate her tacos on the bed picking out the fiery serranos. Through the open window, she listened to the clattering of palm fronds and the wash of the waves against the sand. Strings and a flute came dimly from below. Ruths? Hours later, she awoke, wadded up the napkin she left beside her on the bed and threw it toward the wastebasket. She reached up to turn out the light and fell back to sleep.

The cemetery was at the conjunction of three quiet streets. The cab let Frances out, made a U-turn and left. She stood in front of the Pantheon, gallery of the illustrious dead.

A high wall surrounded the cemetery. Hulking hinges where gates once hung left a weeping stain of iron oxide down the yellow plaster to the pavement. Wrought iron cupolas decorated the segmented swells of the wall.

Frances was not squeamish about cemeteries. As a child, she had attended family reunions, on her mother's side, and they picnicked at the graveyard where great-grandparents, aunts, uncles, infant children had been buried. She and her cousins played hide and seek around the markers and held conversations with the burly acorns dropped from trees near the graves. They shared a well-developed sense of humor about the macabre. In fact, it was this grandmother's death that prompted the phrase "Someone could be dead and buried three days before we'd even hear they were ill," and it was repeated, without any sense of loss she knew underlay it. Frances felt the heat radiating up from the street and wondered, with all the visits she had made to the graves of relatives, why hadn't her family ever brought her to this one. As far as she knew, no one had ever come.

The flower shop on the street behind her was closed. Nothing stirred. Frances' camera and purse hung on her shoulder like a tourist. Her hands were

empty. She was sorry it had taken her so long to come. She walked through the gate.

She entered the land of the dead. Graves were laid shoulder to shoulder with crosses, crypts and monuments rising up from the ground like the crowded TV antennae and satellite dishes on a downtown building. Narrow pathways for the living tapered out into footpaths and stepping-stones.

Frances brought no water, no hat. An Aztec sun rained down a heat that cracked continents. She turned right, down the first row of graves walking slowly, reading names and dates. She was near if the dead were laid in order. The dates advancing slowly at first, one burial in 1960, two in 1961. Frances tried to conjure her grandmother's face, but couldn't, reproducing instead the smiling old photographs which had replaced her memory. She couldn't recall the smell of her grandmother's skin or the color of her hair, perhaps her eyes had been brown.

The markers on this row were simple and flat, rising out of the ground twelve to sixteen inches, narrow stone beds with crosses at the head. Frances walked slowly, reading the names and the dates. She stopped when she realized how near she must be. The cemetery couldn't have been open more than a few years when her grandmother died.

The next name was English, but not her grandmother's. Katharine Peabody. An October death. Her grandmother had died in December.

She stepped to the next grave and looked.

Beyond the stucco wall of the cemetery, climbing the side of the hill, the patterned rise of neighborhood and street gave out to a steep wildness of palm trees. The wind off the ocean blew up the steep incline, collecting heat from the buildings and pavement and casting it up the mountain. Frances listened to it as it passed through.

Frances turned back to the grave. Here was her family name engraved in metal, a stone bed in a crowded lawn. A Roman cross with the initials R.I.P. rose from it. Tied to its axis with twine was a clutch of withered marigolds. Who could have brought them? She didn't touch them. She couldn't guess how long they'd been there. Weeks or years? Frances scanned the cemetery. Many of the graves were ornately decorated with mausoleums, ironwork, tiny gardens, but none of the graves along the wall showed any sign of attention.

Frances sat on the edge of the tomb. The dirt clung to the side of the stones and dusted her shoes. She should have come earlier in the morning, or later, when it wasn't so hot. She needed a drink. It was just after noon and the light blazed all around her. She couldn't escape it even by closing her eyes.

She had to move. She walked among the graves. Every square yard of space was taken, a village of tombs. A city block of shoulder-to-shoulder dead. The crowded crypts, monuments and tombstones an odd skyline.

Frances discovered a crypt like a playhouse. A tiny garden in front with curtains and a small chair within. Dominating the altar at back, above a shelf holding a bowl of nuts, a small hand mirror and a wrist watch with a shattered crystal, was a photograph of a man with coifed black hair and a trim moustache. Some tombs rose two feet out of the ground decorated in rococo ironwork. A solitary cross marked others.

On one large monument, wrapped around the hand of Jesus raised in benediction was looped a length of black electrical cord strung across a series of random crosses from a source near the entrance, then wrapped around the statue's open palm. From the cord that fell to below Jesus' cloak sleeve, dangled a bald light bulb. Frances looked around to see if anyone would see her take a picture of this. She was reaching for her camera when she heard a dry rattle at her feet. Rattle snake. She leapt up the steps of the monument and up onto its railing, expecting to see it coiled in the dust near where she had stood. Nothing. She knew it was nearby; but she couldn't see it. She couldn't reach anything from where she was – no stick or rock. She dug into her purse for something to throw. She scooped a hand full of coins that had collected in the bottom and tossed them at the tall dry grass, flinging them in an arc. The sound of the coins thudding against the ground evaporated in the heat. There was only stillness. She wrenched open her purse and scooped up the last loose coins and became instantly aware of a man standing not five feet away, watching her.

“Un serpiente!” Frances said, clutching the coins and pointing into the brown grass at the base of the monument. “Un serpiente,” she repeated when he was unmoved.

The man looked from Frances to the ground where the coins had landed. He carried a hoe in his right hand. He wore jeans and was shirtless. A bandana was tied at his throat. Beneath a dirty straw vaquero hat, Frances saw he was old but unwrinkled, the skin on his face taut, his thick eyelashes black.

Frances slid down from the rail and onto the platform, next to Jesus, eye-level to the light bulb. The camera swung against the folds of Jesus’ stone garment. Something cracked, and behind her an audible, subtle slithering, like scales against dried sedge. Frances turned and watched as a large lizard forded the curb and moved slowly into a swath of grass leading toward the back wall, zigzagging around little wrought iron fences which coddled intentional plantings, sometimes infiltrating their design.

“Iguana,” the man said, moving the hoe from his right hand into his left, and walking away.

Frances kicked a coin off the platform.

Frances took a taxi to the zocalo. She sat on a bench and watched the vendors performing tricks with their wares as people strolled home for siesta. There were popcorn carts and candy wheels. Men with ovens on wheels sold roasted white

corn on a stick, smeared with mayonnaise, grated cheese and chili powder. The balloon hawker twirled a large umbrella. He had tied toy soldiers with parachutes to the umbrella's spokes and they soared as the umbrella spun in the heat. A pair of schoolgirls holding hands laughed as a mime hectored the corn seller, pantomiming the dangers of eating hot corn with the fingers. The blue and white of the girls' school uniforms repeated itself in a passing police sedan and further in the blue of the ocean hemmed in by the white heat of the sky.

Frances felt like a child in a fairy tale, following the breadcrumbs of family legend, a confused pilgrim, a tourist.

Above the block of shops and government offices that bordered the square, stood the torso of the city's Catholic church. The tower rose to the glory of the Virgin, topped with an elaborate gray crown in place of a steeple. Frances waited in the heat like a sleeper on the bank of a cool dream, not yet ready for the plunge. She knew the house her grandparents built was behind the church, at the top of a pair of serpentine steps. It was called Tabachin, for the tree which stood in the narrow kitchen courtyard.

"Tell me how Grandmother died," Frances had asked her mother again, not long before leaving. Her mother chastised her kindly, "Frances how is it you can never remember?" Frances wondered, herself. The details never changed. Each time she heard "heart attack," she nodded her head and remembered having heard it all before, in just the same way. Then the scattering of details that

gave Frances the sense of falling through air. That her grandmother had not felt well and stayed home from a party that night. That Grandfather returned to find her still alive, carried her down the serpentine steps to the doctor, but she had died in his arms before they reached the bottom. That she had been buried three days when the phone call from Mexico came for Frances' father. Frances remembered that. She was eight years old at the time. They were in the kitchen. Frances sat at the table, just home from school, her things still piled beside her. Her father answered, listened, then turned his back to her. He bent over the handset, cradling it like a baby. He gulped air like a fish, then held his breath. Her mother went to him. Then it was silent. No one said anything. Frances traced the yellow submarine on her lunchbox. The farther away her parents got from her, the more she wanted to see who was inside that submarine, but the portholes were all filled in with ice blue. Who's there? She pushed the box away from her. It wasn't a real submarine anyway.

Frances rose from the bench and walked across the square, past the government buildings behind the church to the bottom of a pair of serpentine steps.

The two stairs crossed at the center of the rise up the hill where a scalloped fountain and planter box may have at one time offered a moment of quiet reflection. Frances paused. A crumpled sack, some broken bottles and a diaper were the contents of the planter. The fountain was bone dry. To the left

of the steps, across a dry patch of grass, a chain link fence marked off the boundary of a play court. Frances saw the primary school, recognizing the blue and white uniform of a boy in the shade by the court, peeling a tamarind pod and putting the sticky fruit in his mouth.

My grandmother died on these steps, Frances thought, though she felt nothing but the heat. She turned away from the play yard and back to the empty fountain, then looked at the step at her feet. She tried to imagine the scene. The night sky. She imagined her grandmother in a steel blue shirtwaist, with small white flowers woven on the bias. A dress she had seen in a photograph before. Her handsome sleeping face, the sound of the surf drifting up, marking time, intertwining with the cool river air. But of course, her grandmother was dying, not sleeping, and she would have been dressed for bed, not as Frances had imagined, in blue and white of the uniforms of the school children she'd just seen.

Frances continued her climb under the steady rays of the sun and found the house, as she expected she would. She rang the doorbell. It was answered by a boy in a white jacket who asked her to wait while he got the Senora.

She was Mexican. "My family is from Guadalajara, but I spend most my time in California where the kids are in boarding school." Her last name now was Fitzgerald. "We bought the house almost a year ago. A wedding present to ourselves." The house was filled with art. Art on the walls, art on the tabletops. Tapestries and sculptures. The furniture was French provincial. "We've made a

few changes. Updated the kitchen. Added the fireplace.” Above the fireplace was a large painting of Mrs. Fitzgerald. “But the house is marvelous. One of the old ones, so quaint. Perfect for little get-aways. And the maid, who lived in the quarters downstairs, she came with the house. She must have known your grandmother – she said she’d been here since the house was built.”

Frances leaned forward. “She’s here? She’s still here at the house?”

Mrs. Fitzgerald snapped her fingers and the white-coated boy appeared.

“What will you have? Bloody Mary? Chablis?”

Frances said, “Una coca, por favor.”

“And rum?” she looked back to the boy. “Nacho, nos traiga el ron y limon.”

“Is she still here,” Frances repeated. “May I speak with her?”

“Oh, no. No, no, no,” she laughed. “Well, imagine it.” She became serious. “She was ancient. She couldn’t possibly do the work.” Mrs. Fitzgerald lay her hand to her breast. “I didn’t have the heart. So I let her go. I don’t believe in working people that hard.”

Frances knew about a housekeeper and the son who stayed with her. Creepy and Hump Woman. That’s what her father had called them, not to their face, of course, just amongst themselves. The maid had a hunchback, he had said, and her son wasn’t sinister, but he’d just suddenly be there. He never made any noise moving around. Creepy.

Frances looked up. The boy returned carrying a tray with a bottle of rum, cokes, glasses with ice and sliced limes. The two women took their drinks. Mrs. Fitzgerald said, "So. Now, the house is yours." She swept her arm out in front of her. "Look all you want. Have you seen the view?" She led Frances to the patio. The river ran past them, down the mountain to the bay. A small group of women were bent over near the bank, washing out clothes while overhead, vehicles rattled past on the Cardenas Bridge that joined the north side of town with the south. Frances couldn't see her hotel, but could see the taller buildings around it. To the left, the blue waters of the bay spread out and in the distance, beyond its peninsular arms, the pacific lost its color beneath the sun.

"How could your grandparents let this place go?" Mrs. Fitzgerald wondered aloud.

Frances answered, "My grandfather closed up the house immediately after my grandmother died and sold it to the neighbor. I think he even left the furniture behind."

"Your grandmother was the one? So it is true. Someone did die here, I am not superstitious, but sometimes, at night, I wonder if I am in the spot... What happened? Not in my bedroom, I hope!"

"No," Frances told her. "She became ill here, but she didn't die in the house." Mrs. Fitzgerald looked relieved. She brightened up. "Good. It has the best view of all my friends' houses."

"Mrs. Fitzgerald," Frances began

"You must call me Pilar."

Frances smiled at her. "Pilar. I would like to contact the old housekeeper. If she is the one who was here when the house was built, I would like to introduce myself, to remember my grandparents to her."

Pilar bit her top lip, thinking. Red lipstick marked her tooth. "Well, I'm not sure. She's gone. I really don't know. Maybe she had family. Oh! You could telephone the domestic service agency. They handle arrangements for so many of the houses. It is possible they will know where she went." Frances followed her back to the living room. Pilar went to a secretary and wrote the number on a piece of paper.

Frances left the house and walked the narrow sidewalk that followed the cobbled street. Beyond the houses on her right, she could hear the river below. At the entry to most houses, by the bell pull, was a tile giving the name of the house and its builder. Her grandparent's house was called Tabachin, after the orange blossomed tree that grew in the patio. She had heard that special care was taken to build around the tree without disturbing it. It had been lovely. But after the house was completed, it died. The name remained. She wondered if Pilar knew. She was sure it didn't matter.

Three small children walked toward her in the street. Two boys and a girl. They were laughing and talking. Each was barefoot. The youngest, a shirtless

boy in worn shorts swung a plastic grocery sack. The girl addressed Frances, "Hi Lady. Hi." The older boy, around six, asked, "What time it is?"

Frances checked her watch and said, "It is Thursday," smiling at him.

The boy eyed her suspiciously. "No." He said. "You are tricking us."

"Let me check again," said Frances and she brought her watch close to her eyes, almost touching her nose. "Ah. You are right," she said. "It is not Thursday. It is dinner time."

The boy laughed and translated what Frances had said to his siblings. They smiled, enjoying the joke. "Give her one," he instructed the little boy. "Give the lady one." The little boy concentrated carefully undoing the string that held the bag closed, then reached in and withdrew a red flower, a hibiscus. It seemed to Frances the bag had a dozen or more inside.

Frances bent down to receive the flower. "Gracias," she told the boy. She held the flower carefully and reached into her purse with the other hand. She scooped up some loose coins, as she had yesterday. She held her hand in a fist, palm up, then slowly brought it down as if she had caught something from the sky. The children pried her fingers open and took the coins she offered. The girl took two coins and walked around Frances, touching her hair and smiling. "Pretty lady," the girl said.

Frances stood and bowed to the children. In Spanish she told them, "I go. Dinner time is over," she checked her watch, "and now it is winter." The children laughed at her and waved and moved on.

The walk back to the hotel wouldn't take long. Frances had seen where it would be from the patio of Casa Tabachin. She would follow the river to a bridge, cross over, then it couldn't be more than five blocks. Frances wanted to get to Ruths and ask about using the telephone. She read the slip of paper Pilar had given her as she descended the cobblestone stairs leading to the river. These were wide and not as steep as the ones she had climbed from behind the Cathedral. They passed between the grand and simple houses and led to the market that was a destination for locals and tourists alike. Frances looked up river and saw that the houses only went back only ten blocks or so, clinging to the hills on either side. Beyond that, in the dimming light, she could see the construction premise of the houses alter from one of aesthetics to stark practicality. Cinder blocks with rebar protruding from the top in case a second floor is ever needed. Small trash fires burned on the barren hillside like campfires, and mongrel dogs made the scene appear medieval and incongruous where, just beyond, was the highway to Tepic and the bleating diesel trucks hemming in the thinning civilization before the inhospitable mountain took over.

Frances followed the river through town, crossed the bridge then walked along the beach past her hotel and stopped in front of the windows at Ruths.

There was a small crowd inside. Frances thought she would ask to use the phone to call the employment agency, to see if she could find the old housekeeper. In the sand in front of the windows was a sign: "If you are squeamish, don't prod the beach rubble." It was attributed to Sappho, sixth century B.C. Beside it sat a man, sleeping, sweat glistening on his face, and seeping through his shirt. He had a pale red moustache barely visible from beneath the straw hat tilted forward on his head. The hat band was a florescent green and strongly suggested dining at an establishment called "Senior Frog's." The man was horribly sunburned.

Frances walked through the sand to the sidewalk, then trudged up the street to the entrance to Ruth's. Inside, she saw Ruth sitting at a large table, two half filled bottles of tequila in front of her. Knives and limes and salt cellars within everybody's reach. Abbey sat at a separate table, across the room. The dogs lay sprawled at the foot of an upright bookshelf, and an enormous cat peered down on them from the third shelf. Frances took a stool at the bar and asked the bartender for a margarita.

Frances felt a hand on her back and turned to find Ruth.

"Noe taking care of you?" she asked. The bartender looked up, nodding briefly to Ruth. "How's the vacation?" she asked. "Did you find the cemetery?"

Frances said "Yes. And I found their old house. The new owner let me come in and have a look around. I wasn't sure what to expect. I was a stranger, knocking on the door, asking to come in. She was very gracious."

"It's a tight community up there," Ruth said "they figure you're one of them." Ruth smiled, not unkindly. "Hell, you could probably get invited to some interesting parties." She looked at Noe and they exchanged a quick glance. He nodded and set a glass in front of Frances.

Ruth turned to go, but Frances stopped her. "The owner told me she had let the housekeeper go when she bought the place, about 9 months ago. She said the housekeeper had been there since the house was built. Could I use your phone to call the agency? She would have known my grandmother."

Ruth led Frances to an office in the back. She cleared some papers from the desk chair and pointed to the phone. "Just turn off the light when you are through," she said.

The office was spartan. There were ledgers and order sheets. Boxes against the wall were labeled by year. Frances counted back fifteen years. The only items of a personal nature were on the desk: a single framed photograph of Ruth and another woman, a redheaded woman with an intense gaze and laughing mouth. Next to the photo was a bronzed baby shoe with a faded blue ribbon laced through it.

Frances dialed. The conversation went badly. The woman on the other end of the line couldn't understand what Frances was saying, though Frances thought she was being as plain spoken as possible. In Spanish, she asked for \_\_\_\_\_, the name Pilar Fitzgerald had given her. She explained that \_\_\_\_\_ had recently left Casa Tabachin. The woman at the employment agency replied so rapidly, Frances couldn't comprehend. She wanted to hear a telephone number or an address, she couldn't understand explanations. Suddenly, the woman was gone, but the line wasn't dead. Frances waited. She could hear nothing in the background. This was a long shot, anyway. She had come to Mexico in a sense, to avoid reflection, to avoid prescriptions about who she was and what she would do. Frances wished she had brought her drink with her from the bar. She had found her grandmother's grave. Full stop. She should stop there. But, now she was looking for her grandmother in it. A box of bones. Frances looked at the photograph in front of her. Ruth was gazing at the redheaded woman. The redheaded woman looked out of the photograph at Frances. She must be Abbey's mother, the resemblance was there. In the bone structure, in the exuberance. Frances realized she was desperate to discover if she resembled her grandmother, if the bones left behind resembled her.

"Bueno?" another woman said on the phone. Frances began the explanation again. The woman interrupted her in English. "I no longer have anything for her, for \_\_\_\_\_, the woman explained. "But I have her

granddaughter. I have only that. There is a number.” The woman on the phone said the numbers slowly then repeated them even slower. Frances copied them down and rang off. The communication would be impossible, she thought, but lifted the heavy receiver and dialed. The phone rang. Frances counted in Spanish, on alternating rings imagining a phone ringing somewhere in an empty room, then in a sprawling home, footsteps hurrying to answer it. Siete... Ocho...

“Bueno?”

Frances used the Spanish from the dialogues she practiced at school. “I would like to speak with Consuela Diaz, please.”

“Quien habla?” the speaker asked.

“I am Frances \_\_\_\_\_.”

“Hold the line.”

In a moment, a woman came to the phone and identified herself as Consuela Diaz. Frances had the distinct impression that she was prodding the beach rubble. She swallowed, and began,

“My name is Frances \_\_\_\_\_. I was given this number by the employment agency. I am hoping to find \_\_\_\_\_ who once worked for my grandmother \_\_\_\_\_, at Casa Tabachin almost 25 years ago. I am hoping she would meet me at a convenient time.” Frances held her breath.

“Momento,” the woman set the phone down. Frances could hear nothing in the background. No footsteps, no baby crying, no cars passing. The woman

returned to the phone and asked when and where they should meet. Frances was not sure if she had made it clear that she wanted the grandmother, not Ms. Diaz, but there was no way to reiterate it without sounding rude.

“Tomorrow? Is tomorrow all right?” Frances said.

“Donde?” the woman asked.

Frances began to explain where her hotel was, then reconsidered. “Do you know the bar, Ruths? Next to the hotel?”

“Si, lo conozco.” the woman answered.

“Could we meet there, at ten o’clock?”

“Tomorrow at ten, then,” the woman said. “Until then.”

Frances hung up the phone. She felt hot. Maybe feverish. She turned off the light and went back to the bar. Her drink was untouched and watery, a pool of condensation forming around it. Before she reached her chair, however, she saw Noe take the drink away and replace it with a fresh one. Frances drank it quickly feeling the sting of the salt, tequila and lime and the rush of the cold.

Frances woke early feeling swallowed by the artificial light of her room. Out the window, a light rain fell, casting a halo around the lights on the municipal pier just down the beach. Dawn was changing the sand from black to gray to tan. The water underwent an even more complex transformation. Undeterred by the rain, a clutch of brown pelicans flew in formation, their wings just inches off the glassy surface of the water. Shallow motorized fiberglass boats called “lanchas”

were anchored to buoys about 10 yards out, facing into the rain, lined up like the sea gulls on the beach.

Stretches of beach in front of hotels or restaurants were being raked for trash, and despite the rain, arm chairs and loungers were being dragged out to the pampas. Perhaps the rain would burn off.

Frances had breakfast at a restaurant about three blocks away knowing that Ruths wouldn't open until almost ten. She drank the fresh grapefruit juice quickly and stirred the evaporated milk into her coffee. As expected, the clouds quickly dissipated and by the time she left the restaurant, there was nothing left of the dawn rain except a few shallow puddles in the culverts.

Frances arrived at Ruths just before ten. Neither Ruth nor Abbey was around, but Noe was at the bar and a Mexican woman waited on the few breakfast patrons. Frances ordered another grapefruit juice and waited nervously. By ten-twenty, they had not arrived. Frances went to the bookcase and read the titles. A hand written sign was tacked to the middle shelf, "Take One – Leave One." The cat Frances had seen the other day was curled up on an old towel on the bottom shelf.

Frances turned to find two women waiting at the base of the stairs. There was no doubt who they were. A young Mexican woman held the arm of a tiny old woman. The old woman was bent over, a rebozo wrapped around her shoulders even in the heat. She wore house slippers and appeared blind, staring fixedly in

front of her. Frances hurried to them. She invited them to her table. Consuela ordered a coffee from the waitress but Lucia asked for nothing. The three women looked at each other.

Frances felt at once the overpowering sensation of looking into the face of an aged woman. Lucia looked back at her. Frances began speaking, afraid of being rude and aware of the awkwardness of this meeting. Lucia's eyes were clouded. Her hair was pulled into a bun at the back of her neck, a few black strands among the grey stood out.

Frances began in Spanish, "Please forgive my Spanish, I have had little practice."

The old woman continued staring. Frances turned to Consuela. "Thank you for coming and for answering my request." Consuela smiled and nodded. Frances felt encouraged.

"My grandmother worked for the Sinclairs. She was the first one in the house. To get the scorpions out." Consuelo smiled. "There were fewer North Americans then." she said.

Frances nodded. She turned to Lucia and asked, "Did you know my grandmother?"

The old woman said, "You are the first to come back."

"Yes," Frances answered her, "it is far." Frances looked at Consuela, unsure of her understanding. "It is far, and it is a sad trip for my family." Frances

offered the explanations she felt would have been offered her had she ever wondered aloud why they had never made at least one trip here. At least one trip out of courtesy or respect or something. "I do not know why we did not come back," Frances said to her at last.

The waitress brought the coffee and more juice. Frances asked Lucía again, if she cared for anything. She didn't.

Frances said as clearly as she could, looking from one woman to the other, "I went to the cemetery yesterday. It was very hot. I found the grave of my grandmother. There were flowers there." Frances looked at them. "I did not put the flowers there. The flowers were already there. Do you know who put them there?"

Lucia watched Frances. It was not a belligerent stare, but this tiny old woman was scrutinizing her. Frances turned to Consuela. "I am wondering who left the flowers."

The old woman interrupted, "You do not look like her. You do not look like the Senora."

Frances felt hot again, like a fever was coming. "No," she said. She didn't know how to be understood. "I am dark," she said. "She was blonde. I know. I just wanted to know about the flowers." The scene at the cemetery came to mind. The grave next to her grandmother's. Frances leaned forward and asked Consuela, "Did my grandmother know Katherine Peabody?"

“She was her friend, the Senora Peabody. Your grandmother waited with the body for many days before the family came to bury it. She waited a long time.”

Frances stopped her. “She waited with the body? But there was a law, the bodies had to be buried within twenty-four hours. Right? There was a law, because of the heat. That’s why – “ Frances looked at Consuela then back to Lucia.

“The Senora waited. There were generators for electricity. This was not a problem.”

The old woman waved her hand in the air in front of her eyes. “I do not know about the flowers you talk about.”

Frances asked, “Were you there when my grandmother died?”

The old woman nodded.

“How did she die? Will you tell me how it happened?”

The old woman began, “She was found in bed. My son carried her out – “

Frances asked, “But my grandfather, where was he?”

“He was calling the doctor. Later he followed.”

“Your son carried her out? And then? Then what?”

A diner at the next table turned to look at Frances, omelet cooling on his fork.

Lucia said, “And then she died.”

“She just died?”

Lucia nodded. Frances watched Lucia touch each corner of her eyes then raise her hand aloft as if she were sending tears to the sky, but though there was sadness in Lucia’s face, there were no tears in her eyes. Frances sat in silence for some time. Consuela and Lucia waiting patiently as if it were an art they were adept at. A grace given to the silence and to the moments that passed.

Frances spoke slowly, “Did my grandmother know she was going to die?”

Lucia said, “Yes.”

Frances’ mother had suggested once, once, that Frances’ grandmother had been drinking and may have made a mistake when she took her sleeping pill. Or mistook a sleeping pill for antibiotics. She may have been drinking, her mother had said, there is the possibility she had become confused. “How do you know this?” Frances asked.

Lucia said, “La pastillas.”

Pastillas? Frances wondered frantically, “Pastillas? The cake?” She looked at Consuela.

Consuela cupped her hand and pretended to daintily pick out a crumb or a speck of something and place it on her tongue. “Pastillas,” she said. “Medicina.”

She was not saying “cake,” she was saying “pills.” Pastillas. Frances thought of the yellow submarine, of the tiny blue portholes, like pills. “But how do

you know," she insisted. "She was confused, wasn't she? How do you know she knew it would kill her? That the pills would kill her?"

Lucia nodded her head to Frances. She gathered time around her, like her rebozo. She rocked almost imperceptibly, as if she were listening for the telephone, for a footfall, for the swinging open of a door. She looked at Frances at last and said, "Well, she took them all."

Frances returned to her room, burning up with fever. She ate two pink bismuth tablets and drank the end of a bottle of water. Though she knew she would need to go out for more water soon, she took her jeans off and crawled into bed. Her skin hurt. She was sure it was just the fever. She was out of cash. She had given Consuela and Lucia her last fifty dollars for a two dollar cab ride home. She needed to walk to the zocolo. The bank was there. A money machine. She closed her eyes.

When Frances awoke, she didn't know what time it was. She was freezing. Her eyes burned. She stumbled out of bed and shut off the air conditioner. Out the window, the sun was dipping low and she flinched at the light. On the way to the bathroom, she pulled off her shirt and her underwear. She turned the shower on high and let the steaming water strike her face and throat. She couldn't get warm. She stepped back to put her feet in the stream of

water and felt the cold on her back. Each time she turned, instead of being conscious of the warmth of the water, the exposed part of her body ached.

Out of the shower, Frances struggled to get her jeans back on. They stuck to her wet body. She dug through her suitcase for a skirt then pulled on one shirt over another. Even so, she wanted a blanket. Frances went to the lobby, her hair dripping, mascara marking her eyes. Javier was at the desk.

"I would like a blanket, please."

Javier looked at her. "Please, a what?"

"A blanket," she said, "una cobija."

He left the lobby and returned a few moments later with a clean sheet.

Frances blinked at it. "No. This is a sabana. I need cobija. Blanket.

Cobija. I'm cold." She wrapped her arms around her. "Cold."

Javier shook his head. In Spanish, he told her it was not cold. It was hot.

Frances glared, "I want a blanket!"

"There are no blankets."

Frances took the sheet off the desk and went back upstairs. She put two more ibuprofen in her mouth and looked for the water bottle. She found it where she left it. Empty. On the counter. She couldn't swallow them. They stuck lightly to her tongue. She left them on the bedside table, the brown coating marking her fingers. Frances tried to sleep. An hour passed slowly.

There was a knock at the door.

“What?” Frances started to get up. The door opened and Ruth took a step in. “Javier said you were ill.”

Frances lay back into her pillow. “I’ve got a fever. I’m out of water. It’s nothing. It’s just – I’m out of water.”

Ruth opened the window and drew the curtain across it. Voices wafted up from the beach. The hollow sound of the ocean, pulling, pulling.

“Do you have diarrhea?” she asked.

“No.”

“Have you eaten anything?”

“Breakfast.”

“I’ll send something up. Do you want to see a doctor?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

Ruth stood there a moment watching Frances. “Okay. Sleep. I’ll send Abbey or Noe with a tray.” She paused. “Do you want me to call anyone for you?”

Frances kicked off the sheets and coverlet she had piled on earlier. Now she was hot again. “No. Thank you,” she said. Now she felt her skin burning, raw, as if she were flayed and she were walking out over deep water that couldn’t quench the fire.

Abbey came up later with a tray of soup and bread.

“The soup is chicken broth, lime juice and bits of cilantro floating on the top,” she told Frances. “I’ve been instructed by Ruth to see you eat something before I can leave. I’ll come back later for the tray.”

Frances sat up, sipped some soup. “It’s good, thanks,” she told Abbey.

“Yeah,” Abbey nodded, “I drink it for hangovers.”

“Where are your dogs?”

“They’re at Ruths. Always at Ruths.” Abbey said. She sat on the side of the bed. “Paco, the cat who lives on the bookshelf, had kittens.”

Frances asked, “Is the poodle named after Frida Kahlo?”

“Of course,” says Abbey.

“Then who is Carlotta?”

“Another manic wife. Everybody loved Frida, you know. Poor tortured Frida.” Abbey stretched, put her feet up on the bed. “She was just a doormat for Diego. How she got to be the darling of feminists, I’ll never know.”

“And Carlotta? Another painter?”

“Maximilian and Carlotta ruled Mexico for the French, I can’t remember when. Eighteen hundreds sometime. He was actually Emperor of Mexico.”

Abbey shook her head. “They came over and played dress up and ate the Indian’s chocolate. You can go visit Chapultepec Palace in Mexico City and see all their stuff. Carlotta was mad for Max. She wrote to a cousin in Austria telling how the Mexican sun lit up the buttons on Max’s uniform. She liked watching him

march around with his little army. Anyway, Benito Juarez executed him and Carlotta went promptly mad and was put in a convent Poor thing lived another sixty years." Abbey took a piece of bread from the tray. "I should have brought a couple of beers up for us."

"So why'd you name your dogs them? I'm not sure I follow."

"Oh, to rile Mother," Abbey said crossing her legs taylor fashion. "Ever since she decided to become a dyke..." She stopped. "Oh, god," she said and fell over like she'd been shot. She looked at Frances. "I'm an idiot. You're probably a dyke, too. Right? Shit."

"I'm married," Frances told her.

"Yeah, to what?"

"To a Ben."

"Well, Mother was married, too. To my dad."

"Did she leave him for Ruth?" Frances remembered the photograph on Ruth's desk, the little shoe next to it.

"It didn't really work that way, I guess. She and Dad are still friends."

Abbey chewed the bread. "He's helping her out now, too. She has cancer."

Frances finished the soup. She slid the tray off her lap on to the bed beside her. "Is that why she's in Houston?"

"She stays at Dad's. She won't let Ruth go. Last time, I thought they were getting back together, but they aren't. Mother refuses to let Ruth go with her."

"That must be pretty hard for Ruth."

Abbey rolled her eyes. "Who knows about Ruth. She lets it happen."

After a minute, she said, "Ruth is set for life. She had a kid once, a boy. We would have been the same age. He died when he was about ten years old. A car accident. He was all mangled and Ruth held him together until the ambulance got there, but he was dead. She wouldn't let him go."

Frances watched the way Abbey spoke. Quiet and angry.

Abbey said, "How would you like that? Imagine to have lost everything, everything. And nothing could ever touch you or hurt you again."

The next morning the fever was gone. Frances wondered if she should see a doctor, but the air from the open window pulled her to the beach. She returned to find a message from Ruth taped to door. There was a telephone call from Consuela. Frances was invited to visit Lucia at her home. Consuela would meet her at the zocolo at 3pm, tomorrow, to take her there. Frances was glad someone had taken the message and done the translating for her.

Frances rinsed the sand from her legs in the shower. She put on jeans and a cotton shirt, the silver earrings she had bought on the beach that morning and the beaded necklace Ben had given her after a trip to Canada two years before. It was an unlikely combination of small crystal beads and an ammonite, a kind of fossil from western Canada about the size of a dime, with a pearly sheen.

Ben had laughed when he gave it to her. He had said that the fossil was 37 million years old, but the crystals were antique.

Frances left early deciding to walk the 10 blocks to the zocolo and stop somewhere along the way for something to eat. She had eaten a late breakfast and skipped lunch.

She knew the beach would take her to the river and from there, it was a short distance to the bridge. Once across the bridge, the square was only three blocks.

There was a concrete pathway along the beach, running in front of the hotels and grand houses like a sidewalk. In Spanish, it was called the malecon. There was a constant flow, dwindling sometimes to only a trickle, up and down the malecon in daylight. Vendors strolled, tourists sat on its bank to have colored yarns braided into their hair. Every now and then, there was a shady spot where acquaintances would pause to escape the sun for a moment. On the way to the river, Frances passed small apartment houses, hotels and the infrequent mansion. The hotels were generous, with sun chairs, palapas and refreshment service extending beyond their walls, into the sand and down to the surf. The mansions, weekend get-aways for the nephews of past presidents, Frances thought, were guarded and gated, jealous of their glazed tiles and lush bouganvilla. Sun glinted off the broken glass cemented into the tops of the stuccoed walls surrounding the grounds.

Where the river met the bay was a kind of no-man's land, or rather, an everyman's land. Frances sat where the malecon ended, in the shade of the wild vegetation of a boarded-up home and watched as a man led three tethered burros across the last thirty feet of malecon to where it ended, then into the sand. On the bank of the river, where the beach sand was fine and dry, the man looped the tethers around a stone and began shoveling sand into the large sisal bags hung on the burro's backs. The man worked quickly, tying each bag shut, then moved on to the next. The burros rocked forward and back, panting in the hot sun. The man never paused to wipe the sweat from his face.

"Senora," Frances heard a voice whisper from inside the fence next to her. She turned and saw no one. In the sand beyond, the man was bent over, rolling away the stone from the burro's leads.

"Senora!"

Frances turned. Next to her, inside the iron fence, a boy stared out at her. He was surrounded by greenery and shade and looked like a nymph.

"Lady, what time is it?" he said.

It was the boy she had met on the street the other day.

"Hola," Frances said. "Que haces?" She stood and walked a few paces back to see where he was. The place looked as if it had been abandoned. The windows were boarded up, and the kidney shaped pool was empty with the

exception of about two feet of brown sludge in the bottom. The satellite dish had fallen over. "What are you doing in there?"

"Wait for me here," he told her and disappeared in the bushes.

Frances walked the few steps back to the end of the malecon and looked around the side of the fenced garden. The wrought iron fence became a solid wall ten feet back. Up the river, the man led his burros through the sand.

Frances watched him pass under the bridge. She wondered why he didn't bring them back on the malecon and through the street, the way he had come.

Frances went back to the malecon and saw the boy round the corner from the street. He wore an Oakland Raiders tee shirt and the same short pants he had on the other day. A canvas sack was slung over his back; he held it by a rope handle.

"How are you lady?" he asked her in English.

"I am fine. And how are you?" Frances responded in text book English. They stood a moment. Frances asked him, "How did you get in there," nodding toward the locked gates of the house behind her.

The boy grinned. "Oh," he said. "Do you like my house? I keep that way for a reason. I owe the government so much money," he wove his hand in the air indicating the sky, "I don't want them to know where to find me." The sack moved on his back.

"What's in there?" she asked.

“You should see, Lady,” he said, squatting to the pavement. This end of the malecon, as it led nowhere, remained quiet, all the foot traffic turned off a block back, where the sidewalk led to the thoroughfare. The boy set the sack between his legs and untied it. He brought out a large green lizard. Frances remembered what the man at the cemetery had called it. Iguana. But unlike the brown one she had seen there, this one was green. It glistened. The boy set the iguanas foreclaws on his shoulder and lay out the body down the length of his arm, the thick tail wrapped in his grip. There was a grace to this creature just been pulled from the darkness of a sack. The animal lifted a foreleg and repositioned itself. Its skin was a smooth network of verdant scales with the quality of liquid, so smoothly they overlapped. Frances felt caught in the iguana’s calm yellow-eyed gaze.

“He’s beautiful,” Frances told the boy.

“You can feed him,” he said, nodding toward the sack.

Frances picked up the sack and looked inside.

“Go on,” the boy said. “Give him a flower.”

Frances folded the sides of the sack down, reluctant to reach into the darkness. In the bottom were several well bruised hibiscus blossoms. “One of these?” Frances asked, holding one out.

“Si,” the boy said, “damelo.”

Frances handed the flower to the boy. He rearranged the lizard in his lap and tied the flower to a string, letting it dangle in front of the iguana. The iguana ignored it.

A man rounded the corner in the sand and stepped up on the malecón. The lizard startled and almost dashed away. The boy pressed the lizard to the pavement, holding it in place. The man paused. On his back was an insulated box.

“Buy me a refreshment,” the boy asked Frances. “Compra me una refresco.” He began stuffing the iguana back into the sack. The man spoke rapidly to the boy. The boy answered back without looking up at the man. Frances couldn’t understand what they were saying. The man looked down at the boy, then at Frances. He sniffed and walked past. Condensation dripped from the box he carried, marking his path down the malecón.

Frances looked at the boy, then she asked, “What are you going to do with the iguana?”

“You want to buy him?” he asked her.

“Oh, no,” she said making a face. The boy laughed at her. He looked out over the water of the bay, then up at the sun. He shrugged his shoulders as if all the business of the day was taken care of and closed the bag.

Frances repeated, “What are you going to do with him?”

"Make him for soup." He finished tying the bag and slung it over his shoulder.

Frances thought he was joking. She laughed. "You are tricking me," she said, wagging her finger at him. The boy looked up at her and she saw he was not kidding. "You are going to kill it?" She spoke more fiercely than she intended. She was not sure whether she was more disturbed by the thought of the boy eating a lizard or of the lizard being killed. She remembered the jewel green, the crystal eye. Inadvertently, she reached for the sack.

"You can buy it," he told her casually.

"How much?" She had every intention of setting the thing free and providing the boy with enough money to buy something else for dinner.

He considered. Turned down the corners of his mouth, then nodded. "For you, forty-five pesos."

That translated to about five dollars. Frances paid him. He put the money in his pocket and began opening the sack. "No," Frances said, having no idea of what she might do with an iguana. "Sack included." They were negotiating strictly on business terms now. The boy shook his head and rolled his eyes. Stared hard at the sack. Frances remembered the gated garden and immediately felt mean about the sack. "Okay," she said. "No sack."

The boy watched her. "Okay," he said.

“Here,” Frances directed him. “Put the iguana here.” She pointed to the black dirt shade at the edge of the mansion’s wild vegetation.

“Okay,” he said. He set the iguana against the dirt and held it until Frances knelt down and put her hands on it. She watched it a moment. The iguana lay still, serene. It struck Frances as wise and knowing, conscious of its beauty and dignity. She relaxed the pressure of her hand a fraction and the lizard twisted out of her grasp and was gone, darted into the undergrowth, only a brief shifting in the dust where it had been. Frances looked up. The boy was standing over her.

“Tomorrow,” he informed her, “it will cost you seventy-five pesos.”

Consuela was sitting on one of the white iron benches when Frances arrived at the zocolo. She stood when she saw Frances approach. Frances asked if they should take a cab.

“It is more or less far,” Consuela answered.

Frances hailed a cab. Inside, Consuela gave the directions to the driver.

After exhausting her Spanish on inquiring about Lucia’s health, remarking on the heat and thanking her once again for the invitation to visit, Frances let the rest of the cab ride pass in silence. They had set out in a direction opposite to the river and slowly turned away from the bay and climbed into the

neighborhoods above the town center. Frances expected to pass the area of the cemetery, but finally figured they had passed it or gone above it. She wasn't sure where she was. All she could tell was that down hill would eventually take her back to the Pacific.

The cab halted. Frances offered to pay, but Consuela shook her head and asked her to wait. When she finished with the driver, she pointed up hill and said, "Here we must walk." They followed the pavement a short distance until it turned to dirt, then into a narrow path that ran between the houses. It took them across back yards and into an open space where a small stream flowed.

Consuela greeted a woman who was using a tin can to fill the jug beside her.

Frances was surprised at how cool it was here, away from the pavement.

Houses and lean-tos were tucked in beneath the trees, covered with vegetation, blended into the scenery. Every now and then, the hot wind would reach

Frances's face, but it was quickly replaced by the cool heaving of the earth below her feet. Frances was out of breath but not tired.

Just past a cinderblock wall, Consuela turned and they were there. Lucia sat outside in a ladder back chair. Bird cages were mounted on the wall and hung in trees. Parakeets, cockateils and canaries sang and chirped, the color of their plastic bottomed cages in competition with their colorful wings. A lopy-eared Doberman lay in a shallow depression in the bare ground, chewing a spot

on its tail. It stopped when it sensed Frances, cocked an eye at Lucia then through the open doorway, and went back to its grooming.

Frances went to Lucia and took her hand. She thanked her for the invitation to her home. Lucia held her hand and spoke to her, but Frances understood little but the intent. She felt welcome.

Consuela motioned Frances to one of two empty chairs under a rubber tree and asked her if she would like a coke then went through the doorway.

Frances and Lucia sat in the cool air. The town below was a distant rumble. A brick stair ran up the far wall and at each step, a coffee can was nailed, overflowing with flowers or herbs. Bouganvilla entwined the steps and clung to the window ledges, tabachin and almond trees bloomed. Consuela returned and sat next to Frances. "My uncle is bringing your coke," she said and lifted an orange cat into her lap. "Lita," she called to her grandmother in Spanish, "Maria-Carmen said Jorge will bring the milk tonight." She turned to Frances, "My nephew, upstairs, must have goat's milk. Cow milk makes him throw up."

Frances said, "Oh? – " and looked up the stairs, realizing the house was large, with several levels.

A man emerged from the doorway carrying four cokes. The first one, he offered to Lucia, the second to Frances. She took it without taking her eyes off

him. He looked at her and nodded. He was the man from the cemetery. The third bottle, he handed to Consuela.

Consuela spoke, "This is my uncle, Esteban \_\_\_\_\_. The son of Lucia."

"Hello," Frances said. She was certain he recognized her. How many days ago was that, Frances wondered.

Lucia stood. "I am going to feed the birds," she said. "Hito, bring me the seed."

Esteban set his coke down on a porcelain topped table and went inside. He came out with a box of seed and a small bowl of lard which he gave to his mother. She pressed her finger in the soft lard then rolled it in the bird seed. She opened a cage with a green budgie in it. It hopped to her finger and pecked gently at the seed. Esteban stood beside his mother, holding her elbow. She took the budgie back with her to her seat.

"You work at the cemetery," Frances said. Lucia looked briefly at Frances then her son, then back at the little bird she held in her hand, murmuring to it, and making clucking noises.

Esteban said, "Si."

"I saw you there."

"Yes," he said in English, "I saw you there."

A young man carrying a little boy came down the stairs. Consuela called to the boy and he grinned and kicked his bare foot against his father's side. He didn't stop to meet Frances but spoke to Esteban as he passed, calling him Tio, Uncle, and saying the boy was feeling better. When he was gone, Frances realized Esteban was looking at her. She was being studied. She tried to meet his gaze, not sure whether it was friendly or hostile.

"Do you like rocks?" he asked her.

"Rocks?" Frances was surprised at the question. She thought a moment. "Sure, I like rocks."

"I ask," Esteban said, "because you are wearing one." He pointed to her necklace.

It was the ammonite Ben had given to her. She put her hand to it. "Yes," Frances said again, "I do like rocks."

Esteban got up and went into the house.

"This crazy cat," Consuela said, pushing the cat from her lap and standing up. "He was taken from his mother too soon," she said to Frances as she brushed the cat hair from her skirt. "I'm wet. He got my shirt." She held out a corner of her shirt.

Lucia returned the bird to its cage and walked to the others, filling the feeders with seed. Frances took a last sip of the coke. It was warm and fizzed in her mouth.

Esteban returned and handed Frances a baby food jar. There were three rocks inside. It was filled with water. Frances looked at it. "They are opals. From the river."

"Oh, yes." Frances said. She tilted the jar slightly and the rocks tumbled against the glass.

"Thank you."

Esteban took the jar from her hand. "No," he said. He opened the jar and set the lid on the porcelain table. He took Frances's wrist and turned her palm to the sky. Defensively, Frances made a fist. She wanted to stand, but Esteban was too close to her. He held her gently in his grip, but he held her. Slowly, she opened her fingers. Sunlight and shadow played across it. He overturned the jar into her hand.

"Do you see?" he asked her slowly in heavily accented English.

The water seeped through her fingers until she held the three rocks. Then suddenly, in the sunlight, the stones turned to fire.

"Do you see?" he asked her again.

Orange and blue and red. They glistened in her palm. There was movement in them, like a life, like fire, like a city burning.

"I see," Frances told him. She looked up.

Esteban took the stones from her and returned them to the jar. At the side of the house, he filled the jar from a hose and closed the lid. He wiped the jar

with a bandana he took from his pocket then gave the jar back to Frances.

"They should be kept in water," he told her. "They are river rocks."

"All right."

Consuela guided Frances back down the path to the streets below.

Frances asked Consuela if she lived there, with her grandmother.

"No," she said. "I live in town with my husband. There are too many people there at Uncle's house. Always another apartment going up for another cousin." She shrugged. "I prefer the town. We go dancing."

"I thought it was your grandmother's house," Frances said. "But didn't she just move there from a house in town, where she worked?"

"She had a house in town, but of course, she had this house too. For each person who marries, Uncle builds another part of the house. But abuelita, Grandmother, was first. He took care of her, first."

"He has no children of his own?" Frances asked.

"No. He did not marry. He just takes care of us. He is a proud man. He says we will not pay rent. Imagine my husband living with a man like that,"

Consuela laughed.

"How long has your uncle worked at the cemetery?"

Consuela shrugged. "For many years. I am twenty-five and he has always been there." They walked along quietly for a while, then Consuela said, "I know

his secret, though.” Frances looked at her. “He has always wanted to go to California. He wants to live there. There is a cousin who has invited him, but he cannot leave Lucia. Not until her death could he ever go, and then, who knows.”

“Is she old?”

“Well, yes. Grandmother will be seventy this year, and Uncle, he will be,” Consuela thought, “he will be fifty-two.”

The sun hung low in the sky. Frances knew that on the beach, people would be gathering with a drink in hand to watch the sun set. Out across the vast reaches of space between the earth and the sun, Frances recognized that the passion that streaked the sky violet, burning gold and red, was only a tumbling mass of dust, trapped between here and there. In the purse that swung at Frances’s side, she imagined the sloshing of water in the baby food jar. She thought of the rocks inside and of the black eyes of the man who made her look at them. Frances did the math. Her grandmother had been dead twenty-five years. The man who carried her dying grandmother down the serpentine steps was twenty-seven. Her grandmother had been forty-eight.

When they made their way back to the pavement, Consuela stopped. “I’m going back,” she said. “You will find your way if you continue down this street. Before long, you will find a cab. Okay?”

Frances left Consuela and walked down the pavement until it turned to cobblestone, then followed the cobblestone to the bay. She walked into the

lobby of a Holiday Inn Crowne Plaze and between the white coated attendants. She walked past tables of celebrating vacationers who were toasting each other and the end of another day. She walked past the pool down the patio steps to the sand. She took off her shoes and carried them in her hands. The sun had set, but the light lingered, bathing everything in a warm glow, like candlelight, from the the brassy Mariachi bands serenading the hotel strip to the drunken sunbathers fallen asleep on their towels. A woman sat braiding her daughter's long black hair in the sand. As Frances passed, the woman called out softly to her, "Earrings? bracelets?" Frances kept pace with the pull of the surf and its answering crash, and every step of the way, she felt the tumbling of rocks on fire encased in a watery womb.