This collection of short stories is centered on a small town dynamic in which characters that have been raised on idle gossip and provincial ideas begin to question the values they have grown up with. Set primarily in Southwestern Ohio, the belief systems these characters have been carrying are challenged in unexpected ways. The stories are arranged in the reverse chronological order from which they were written.
THE DIRT ON DOREEN AND OTHER NEWS

A Thesis

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I have entered a road race. It is a 5k and I believe I will win my age group if not the entire race overall. For the women, of course. I am not fast enough to contend with the men.

I believe I will win, because I believe if I believe I will win then it is likely that I will. More likely anyway than if I believe I will not win. So I stand at the starting line telling myself I will win, telling myself I am faster than all the other women here and that I can, without question, win the race.

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I began running a year ago in hopes I would lose weight and I did. The weight-loss was not because I was fat or overweight, but because I thought perhaps it would keep my lover at the time, David, around longer. I sensed he was slipping away, and thought perhaps losing weight would make me more attractive to him, and perhaps it would give me a sense of control over the whole situation. So I started running and I immediately lost a little and a month later David told me he was leaving me. He had been sleeping with someone else. He also said did I know I was beginning to look a bit skeletal?

I entered my first road race after we broke up. The competition was something I was yearning for, though I didn’t know it at the time. I entered at the urging of my friend Lucy and we were going to run together. However, with the firing of the starting gun, I felt I was alone. I propelled myself forward among the throng of runners, as if chasing after something that was leaving me, something I had to catch up with. It was the feeling of being left behind, alone among the masses. The truth was, I had abandoned Lucy and was running at a pace much faster than we’d agreed upon. I set my sights on the runner ahead of me and it seemed to me that if I could just pass this person, David would love me again. This does not make sense in reality, I know, but it kept me going at the time.

After that, I entered every race I could find. My times improved with each race and that success was exactly what I was looking for, even if it would never bring David back. It was something to distract me at the very least. Besides, my arms and legs that had maybe been skeletal when we broke up were filling out with perfectly toned muscles. I haven’t looked this great since high school.

So after shrinking my times down to something I could be proud of, and receiving many second and third place medals, I had decided this would be the race I won. This seems important.
I don’t know why, but I know I have to win. There is something big riding on it. I can tell. Maybe David is here, I think, and I scan the crowd for his face. I don’t see him, but this makes sense to me. I wouldn’t know he was here until the end, when he is standing there by the finish line. Maybe it has nothing to do with David. All I know is I must win this race.

I begin to look around at the other women on the starting line. There are maybe forty or so. This is not a big race. Some of the women are overweight. I cancel them out immediately as if I have a mental list of everyone who has entered. The overweight women will not be tough competition. Some of the women are elderly. I cross them off my mental list as well, though I do so with the utmost respect. The fact that these women are even outdoors on such a hot day impresses me and I believe they should be held in very high esteem. I also cancel out the children, though some of them are faster than you’d think, I always pass them at the end. Children lack endurance. I have about fifteen women remaining on my mental roster. I examine these women more closely. Some look slightly younger than me, but I believe I am in better shape. I go ahead and cross them off too. This helps me mentally. Now I am the only one. None is as likely to win as I. A whistle blows and we are told to be on our mark. Then the gun.

The beginning of a race is always the same. A large group of people all begin running and things get crowded very fast. There are always some slower runners in front and some faster runners behind and we practically trample each other as we try to find our correct positions. I push my way through the crowd, using elbows if I have to, and try to find a pace that is just a tad bit faster than what is comfortable. I pass many of the women I had sized up moments ago and the excitement of the competition begins to build up in my chest. I pick up my pace a bit more.

As the race proceeds the crowd begins to thin. We are no longer running on top of each other, but have separated; finding our paces. The feeling of the group is less manic. We are relaxed. Still the thrill of passing the runners ahead of me builds. Occasionally, I am passed as well, but only by men. This does not bother me. We are not the same and they are not my competition. At least not today.

I check my watch at the first mile and I have run the first mile at a faster pace than I have before. My thighs are already burning, but I push that out of my mind and focus on winning. I try to picture David at the finish line. It seems like maybe if I think about it hard enough it will really happen. As I think about it, try to picture it, I feel the presence of someone behind me.
The other runner comes closer, and soon we are even with one another. I do not look over. I want to remain cool, but I pick up my pace just slightly, though I am not sure if I can maintain it. The other runner passes me slowly. It is a woman. I had not noticed her on the starting line, but I wonder now how I could have missed her. She is about my age, and my shape. More importantly she is wearing a hot pink running outfit. As she passes she breathes out “Good job”. It is barely audible, almost sexy, like the way she would sound right after intercourse. This really irks me.

I fall in place behind her, but we maintain the same pace. I try to speed up, but I do not gain on her at all and she remains about three feet ahead of me, so that I can feel her draft, if she were sweating I would feel this too, but she is not. This is also bothers me.

The pink running outfit is what gets me the most. No one here is wearing “outfits”. The other runners have all donned t-shirts, many of which they were given at other road races. They wear long shorts and the wrong kind of shoes. They are not a fashionable bunch of people. I wear a gray top and blue shorts. I look sensible. I look competitive. Pink is not a competitive color.

What really bothers me about it is that I actually own a running outfit similar to this other runner’s. Mine was purchased on sale and not together as an ensemble. The shorts were purchased from a running store and I only bought them because they were on sale and I was in a strange mood that day. The top was purchased later from a different store because it was also on sale and would go with my shorts. But I never wore this outfit out of the house, only on my treadmill, and certainly not to a road race in front of a hundred people or so.

This runner wears a pink scrunchie. It holds back a long blonde pony tail that swings back and forth like a pendulum as she runs. The ends of her hair are curled and I wonder if she curled her hair this morning before leaving for the race or if it was left over curl from last night’s hair do. I decide she curled it this morning because it makes me dislike her more. Then I decide she probably showered this morning as well. It feels good to hate this woman.

Her waist is definitely smaller and tighter than mine. This realization does not feel good but is clearly true. There is a pothole in the road ahead of us and I hope she will trip in it and sprain her ankle. Then not only will I beat her, but she will have to stop running long enough to recover and will probably gain weight in the process. I feel evil for thinking it, but it feels right at the same time.
I pass the second mile marker and am still ahead of pace, but I don’t care about this because the woman is still ahead of me and I cannot pass her. My eyes blaze into the back of her head. I watch her ponytail swing and do not let it out of my sight. It dawns on me suddenly that this woman must be the woman David left me for. It has to be, and all of a sudden I am so positive I can think of nothing else.

A wave of anger surges inside of me. Our pace is quickening together. She must feel me behind her. That must be how she knows to speed up when I do. I like the idea of being an unseen presence and I hope she is straining as I am to maintain this speed. I wonder if she knows who I am, if David has mentioned me. I think surely he has. She must know. I push harder, my hatred propelling me further. We pass the third mile marker and I know I have about two hundred yards left. I turn on the speed, giving it all the strength I have left. I go beyond that even, I am running on adrenaline only and I pass her with twenty yards to go. I can feel her behind me; I can feel the gap between us grow wider. I cross the finish line and my knees buckle beneath me for a moment, but I do not fall. A sweaty bald man standing beside the chute hands me a Popsicle stick with a one on it. I am the first female finisher. I won the race.

I continue to walk down the chute, lightheaded, near collapse. I feel a tap on my shoulder and turn around. It is the other runner. She clutches the number two Popsicle stick in her left hand. She extends the right to me.

Good race, she says.

I take her hand weakly and nod. I do not know what else to do. A woman who is working the race hands me a paper cup containing a sports drink. I drink it quickly and the red liquid drips off my chin and on to my gray shirt. I lean against a tree nearby to recover. My breathing begins to return to normal, though my heart still races. I have won the race, but I don’t feel better. I don’t see David anywhere but I am not surprised by this. I no longer expect him to be here. The other woman is talking flirtatiously with a male finisher. I notice now that they are both wearing wedding rings. They are all smiles and he is congratulating her on her second place finish.

I push myself away from the tree and head for my car. I do not wish to stay for the award ceremony even though I have won. I get into my car and start it. I do not put it in gear but instead grip the wheel and begin to cry, big heaving sobs and I do not know if I will ever stop.
**THE DIRT ON DOREEN**

Doreen Minor was dying. Everyone in Arbor Valley knew it. We all knew it, and most of us were glad since it seemed like she was finally getting what she had coming. Cancer had riddled her body, starting in the cervix, which some thought ironic, and spread until it was pulsing through her bloodstream. She stayed in a room in St. Elizabeth’s, which her family thought best since none of them could or would take her in. Her sister, Diane, was a realtor and didn’t see any sense in keeping Doreen’s three-story home with a walk out patio over on Westwood Avenue off the market since death was inevitable at this point. Scads of people showed up at the open house eager to see inside the home, but no one appeared to be all that intent on making an offer.

In church at St. John’s, we prayed for her soul, which we believed would need considerable help if it was to get to Heaven. This made us feel good about ourselves, since we all knew where she deserved to go, but having the mercy in our hearts to beg of the Lord to put her in Heaven surely made us finer people all around.

The women of Golden Hills Country Club were finally resting easy about the whereabouts of their husbands, and husbands were looking forward to having their secrets planted firmly in Miss Minor’s grave. Doreen’s own mother, Delores, who was now living over at Woodshire’s Home for Senior Citizens, was eager to get on with her life, and hoped no longer to cower in the shadows of her daughter’s dismal reputation.

In fact, Doreen was the topic of conversation in the Woodshire recreation room, that Saturday morning when Gladys Gentry walked in wearing a smile and a purple kimono.

“No, I just got off the phone with my Bobby, you know he’s Dr. Guthrey’s physician’s assistant,” said Gladys. “And he says Doreen is still holding on just fine. He said they’d thought she’d be gone weeks ago, but she just won’t let go.”

Gladys had a bad case of osteoporosis and a hump had developed on her back — a shame since she used to be a very fine dancer and performed in the Christmas plays and musicals every year when she was young. She lowered herself into a high-back mauve upholstered chair between Susan Jeffers and Marcia Glenn who were feverishly knitting sweaters for the Veteran’s Day Clothing Drive.
“You tell Bobby to keep an eye on his pants then. I wouldn’t trust my son around that woman until she was a cold corpse,” said Evelyn Jansing.

The ladies tittered. Gladys shifted uncomfortably, suddenly suspicious of Doreen’s motives for not dying yet. Susan wondered if her son-in-law, a nurse at St. Elizabeth’s, had been up to Doreen’s floor. She thought she’d better call her daughter and remind her of the need to be concerned. The women talked on about cancer and who had it and who probably should.

No one noticed Delores Minor sitting timidly in the corner with her crosswords. Delores had learned years ago, shortly after rumors surfaced about Doreen and her geography teacher, that her daughter was not a particularly scrupulous girl. Her friends at the time had tried to convince Delores not to blame herself for Doreen’s unspeakable acts, Delores was after all the very definition of piety and good taste, but how could a mother not blame herself when her daughter continued to be the scandal of the town decade after decade? The shame Delores endured was unbearable. She never learned to separate herself from her daughter’s doings and soon found herself withdrawn from the social circles of Arbor Valley. She began to make excuses to her bridge partners and did not show up to Alma Baker’s Fourth of July Red White and Blue Bash. When she gave up her seat in the second pew at St. John’s for the third row from the back, we all understood and were a bit relieved. When she was in social settings such as church, or Woodshire’s recreation room, her body took on a resemblance to a frightened animal in which her shoulders rose up around her ears and her eyes widened and darted about as if terrified of being spotted and whispered about, which is usually what happened. We all felt terrible for her, but what could we do, after all, a mother has only herself to blame. We all believed this, but we didn’t say anything. Even so, the idea that Doreen could let her own mother live in such shame was simply incomprehensible. The girl just never saw past her own sinful pleasure.

Overhearing talk of her daughter was something she’d grown used to, though Doreen’s name never failed to remind her of the source of her disgrace. As the circle of women beside her talked on, Delores told herself to remember to take the bus to the hospital when it came around at two o’clock.

At the church, LaVerne Harris stayed after the Saturday mass to meet with Father Harold. She sat primly in her pew, hands folded in her lap. She waited patiently, facing the altar, and
listened for the familiar clomping of Harold’s awkward gait, as he headed down the aisle after greeting the last of the congregation. LaVerne often waited on Father Harold after the weekly mass. He would begin his ascent back up the aisle, eager to return to his office and pick up the sports page of the *Arbor Valley Tribune*, only to find the back of a fuzzy white head still seated in her pew waiting to speak with him privately. Father Harold had an especially difficult time with these chats due to the mole that protruded from the side of LaVerne’s face. It was large and no darker than her natural pigment, which Father Harold thought made it even weirder than if it had been brown. Three horrid black hairs grew from it. When his oscillating fan blew in her direction, the hairs on her mole caught more breeze than the hair on her head. This so distracted him that he could hardly pay attention to what LaVerne had to say. Usually she was there to present to him parts of the sermon she had found particularly troubling or disagreeable. This morning, however, her concerns lay elsewhere.

“I’ll see you now, LaVerne. You may follow me,” said Father Harold, thinking longingly of the football games certain to be highlighted in his paper.

LaVerne rose and walked behind him out of the chapel and down the corridor to Father Harold’s office, her heels clacking in time with his clomping.

“I want to speak to you about Doreen Minor,” LaVerne said, now seated across from the father at his desk. Doreen had had a brief affair with LaVerne’s son, Thomas, after high school. LaVerne had always thought Thomas would be the perfect fit for Jennifer Parker, the deacon’s daughter, and had never found it in her Christian heart to forgive Doreen for ruining her son’s reputation.

“Oh.” He had expected her concerns had something to do with the contemporary music performed that morning by the youth choir.

“Father, we have been praying for her during the service for three weeks now. I just feel like that is long enough to pray for someone who is not even a member of this church. I’m quite certain God has already made up his mind about where her soul belongs and, if you don’t mind my saying, there are plenty of people out there who need our praying more than she does. We’re wasting words on a lost cause here, Father.”
The father sighed and placed his elbows on the table as if to better support his argument. Today the mole hairs were curling in opposite directions and it almost looked as if a strange spider was resting on the woman’s cheek.

“Doreen is still a member of this church, even if we haven’t seen her here in a while. We will continue to pray for Doreen until her spirit leaves us because it is the Christian thing to do.” He decided not to mention that Doreen’s membership remained intact was due only to the monthly tithes Delores Minor sent in her daughter’s name, but instead glanced down at the headlines of his paper, sitting atop his desk.

“If you are aware of others who are in need our prayer, please let me know and we will pray over them next week as well.”

LaVerne pulled a list of names from her purse. Next to their names were faults listed needing forgiveness such as gluttony, gossip, and ungratefulness. Father Harold thanked her and she hurried out of the office eager to call Doris Dyer and Annette Childers to tell them about the priest’s reprehensible response to her dutiful complaint.

In the men’s locker room at Golden Hills Country Club, there was no talk about Doreen. She hadn’t been well enough to attend the club for months now. Doug Howard, Randy Allen and Martin Greenwood had invited Doreen into their foursome two years ago when Thomas Harris tore his rotator cuff and they needed an experienced golfer to take his place. Doreen had an excellent swing, but was rarely asked to play by the women in the club, something Doreen attributed to her low handicap rather than her low neckline. The locker room was once merry with off color jokes regarding balls and hole in ones. Now the men were forced to ask Thomas back into their game. He reluctantly acquiesced. He still held a grudge against the guys for not giving Doreen the boot when he had recovered; his grudge was also in part by the fact that Doreen had left him, back in high school, for a hockey player from Denver who was visiting family in Clearwater, one town over from Arbor Valley. The foursome somberly prepared to tee off without any jokes about woods or the rough. It was for the best, they mentally concluded. Perhaps their games could improve without the distraction, and hopefully their wives would have fewer questions for them when they returned from the course. Thomas won the round with a score of eighty-four.
That afternoon at the country club bar, Eleanor Allen and Mary Greenwood sat. They lunched on Cobb salads and drank whiskey sours and spoke loudly of how delightful it was that the club had apparently cleaned up its membership.

“The clientele here really has improved,” said Mary, trying to disassociate her husband’s recent lack of interest in the club with Doreen’s disappearance.

“Yes, it really has,” Eleanor agreed, smiling at a young bartender whose attention she’d been trying to catch for months.

On the third floor of St. Elizabeth’s, Jimmy Gaker began making his rounds as a nurse’s aide in the oncology ward. His father had died of cancer and Jimmy decided becoming an oncologist would be the perfect tribute to his dad. Jimmy was the town hero last fall when he led the Arbor Valley High School Cavaliers to the district final as quarterback of the football team. He thought the scholarship opportunities would come pouring in, but they didn’t, so he was working to save up for the community college over in Clarence thirty miles east.

Jimmy had three patients to care for that Saturday. Bucky Carpenter, who was dying of lung cancer, Kenny Easton, brain cancer, and Doreen. Kenny’s cancer had progressed so far he’d lost his ability to speak. This made him an easy patient, and Jimmy slipped in and out of his room as quickly as possible. He perhaps neglected Kenny more than he should have and his room often smelled of sweat and bile.

Doreen and Bucky were roommates and Jimmy had to wheel Bucky outside every other hour and hold his cigarettes for him while Bucky smoked. Bucky had lost both his hands and feet to diabetes and some of the nurses were placing bets on which disease would kill him first. The head nurse disapproved of Jimmy taking him out every day, but Jimmy knew smoking was the only thing the old man was living for, so he felt obliged to help him out.

Doreen had covered the walls of her side of the room with sketches of wintry landscapes and fall leaves. She told Jimmy that late October was her favorite time of the year; when the lunacy of summer had finally worn off and it was okay to just hide inside all day long. Jimmy decided he agreed and helped Doreen into a chair so he could change her sheets.

Jimmy had been taking care of Doreen for several weeks now and had become quite fond of her.
“You know these doctors keep telling me I’m dying and I keep waking up every morning still alive,” she said when she had settled back into her bed. Jackie took her place in the chair and pulled out the orange soda he had sneaked under his cart.

“I overheard Dr. Ryan saying his mother-in-law has been giving his wife Hell about him working on your floor,” Jimmy said. He’d found Doreen liked hearing what other people had to say about her.

“People sure do like to talk.”

“About you, they do.”

Doreen laughed and shook her head.

“I’m probably not nearly as interesting as the stories they come up with,” she said. “I wonder who they’ll talk about when I’m gone.”

“Why do they talk about you so much?” Jimmy said, before taking a large drink. He swished the sugary soda around his teeth, trying to conceal his bad breath from the cowboy burger he had for lunch.

Doreen just shrugged and continued working on one of her drawings, humming softly as she did.

“My girlfriend says we can’t have sex until we’re married,” Jimmy blurted out, thinking maybe Doreen could be insightful on the predicament.

“A lot of people think you shouldn’t,” she said, and opened her mouth to continue speaking, but was interrupted by Bucky’s sudden hacking from the other side of the curtain that separated their room.

“Yeah, but it’s hard,” Jimmy said. “Especially when she sits on my lap in her bikini and whispers in my ear about how much she wants me. I mean, it’s fucked up, right?”

Doreen sighed. Jimmy took another swig of soda. He knew Doreen must be in considerable pain, despite the steady flow of pain killers pumping into her arm. Her face looked like it had been pretty once; she had big eyes and almost no wrinkles, but it looked tired. Her blonde hair was short, and matted in the back from resting on a pillow all day. Her lips looked dried out and had become the same color as her skin. He knew that if the rumors were true, they’d been kissed many times. Now they were pale and lifeless, as if they’d been used up.

“You’ve got to live while you can,” Doreen finally said. “You can’t let other people’s opinions of you keep you from living.”
“You certainly didn’t,” Jimmy said with a sly smile.

Doreen smiled at him wearily.

“If there is anything to learn from hanging around this place it’s life is too short for all those rules. So tell your girlfriend to get over it.”

He said he would and got up to go; tossing his half-finished pop bottle into the trash can in the corner of the room.

During his break, Jimmy made a call to his girlfriend Cindy, a cheerleader. He had considered the cliché of it, but she was the only girl who really took him seriously. Cindy had a year left of high school and had already been accepted to the state college.

“Well hey there, Jimmy,” she said in a way that let him know she was not alone.

“Hey, where are you?” he breathed into the heavy receiver of the beige hospital phone at the reception desk.

“I’m over at Heavenly Hair getting my roots done,” she said, again in her sing-song “I want everyone to hear how happy we are” voice. “We were just talking about your favorite patient.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes. Cindy blew on the tips of her new acrylic nails, while Sharon Douglas folded tin foil in her hair.

“Listen babe, I gotta go. Are we still on for tonight?”

Jimmy said they were.

Cindy made a big show of telling him she loved him, then flipped her phone shut and carefully shoved it back into her purse so as not to disturb her fresh manicure.

“Jimmy and I are going out after the big game tonight,” she told Sharon, who popped her pink gum in response.

Sharon was Jimmy’s uncle’s second wife, his step-aunt is how she referred to herself. She was also Doreen’s second cousin on her father’s side and didn’t like to hear about Jimmy taking so kindly to her fallen relative.

“Don’t worry about her,” Cindy told Sharon. “I give Jimmy all the loving he can handle.”

Sharon popped another bubble.
That night most of Arbor Valley turned out for the football game, as was typical for a home game. We still hadn’t quite warmed up to the new quarterback who was talented, but lacked Jimmy Gaker’s charisma. We had serious doubts that he would have the spunk to carry us the finals the way Jimmy had last year. The stands were packed. Randy Allen was announcing the game with great enthusiasm. The Cavaliers were up by a field goal in the start of the fourth quarter. Cindy led the cheerleaders out on to the field during a time out. She beamed brightly at Jimmy who was sitting with his mother, too old for the student section. She waved at him and then did three back-hand springs.

Father Harold sat in the press box with Randy Allen. He could occasionally be heard in the background of Randy’s play by plays arguing calls with priestly vehemence. Several women from Woodshire’s had taken the bus over to the game to watch their grandchildren play. Their seats were too near the band and Susan Jeffers complained bitterly to the band director to keep the pep songs to a minimum.

No one noticed the sky in the northern horizon as it lit up with chalky smoke against the dark. Sirens could be heard in the distance, but were hardly paid attention to over the cheers as the Arbor Valley Cavaliers scored a touchdown.

At St. Elizabeth’s, Bucky Carpenter had been frantically punching the call button to the nurse’s station, desperate for his cigarette break. Jimmy, of course, had left for the game and the head nurse refused to answer his call. The old man began to panic and using his teeth and the stubs he had left for hands he succeeded in lighting a match. Of course he was unable to manage both the match and cigarette and the match dropped onto his bed sheet. Doreen slept silently as Bucky began to flail, his flaming bed sheet catching fire to one of the sketches tacked up on the wall.

The paper soon went up in flames and in moments Doreen was surrounded by two walls of fire. The smoke alarms were bleating and Bucky was screaming and hacking while Doreen appeared to remain sleeping soundly. Several fire trucks appeared promptly but the fire was not quickly extinguished. Bucky was killed by suffocation due to smoke and deadly burns, so those betting on diabetes or lung cancer were both wrong. We were sad at the news, but he never contributed much to the community and had no living relations so no one was overly distressed by the loss. Doreen was also found dead and when examined by the coroner it was decided she
had been so for several hours before the fire began. The head nurse was fired for negligent care, which we all thought appropriate. No one ever really liked her anyway.

By the time the game ended, news about the fire had spread. We all showed up at the hospital, loving a good emergency. There were high winds and the smoke was just terrible. Our eyes were burning and we had to cover our mouths to breathe. The firefighters ushered us away from the scene and we watched from beyond the parking lot as teams of firefighters manned the hoses in an attempt to put out the flames above.

Father Harold started a prayer circle that some of us participated in, but many just stood, staring in awe at the scene before us. We coughed and teared, the smoke still burning, and despite the Arbor Valley Police telling us the fire was under control and we should leave the scene and go home, we remained until the last of the trucks drove away.

Doreen’s funeral was three days later. Most of the town was present. Funerals were always major events in Arbor Valley, and Doreen’s was no different. We all thought Father Harold gave a wonderful sermon, and thought all the more highly of him for his ability to put such a lovely spin on so ugly a life.

The oncology ward of the hospital was under major construction and would be for awhile. Everything else was okay and Doreen and Bucky were the only casualties. Bucky’s funeral did not draw as much interest.

After the service, Delores changed out of her black mourning suit and into her favorite cocktail dress. She drug out her old box of makeup and primped girlishly in front of the mirror. She strutted back to the recreation room at Woodshire, ready finally to shed her role as “Doreen’s poor mother” and become darling Delores once again. She walked to the center of the room and took a seat right beside Gladys Gentry, no longer looking like a scared cat, but actually bearing a stronger resemblance to her daughter than anyone had noticed before.

“How lovely you look this evening, Gladys,” she said pulling a half knit scarf from her bag.
Gladys made room for her on the worn sofa and thanked her kindly, blushing a little. She decided to keep her concerns about the high hem of Delores’ skirt to herself and instead brought up the upcoming charity the Women’s Society was putting on.

LaVerne stayed after the service to tell Father Harold he did a fine job and explained to him her relief that he was able to speak so positively of Doreen.

“I hope your sermon has put to rest all the awful gossip that has been going on around here,” she said. “I’m so tired of hearing about everyone else’s dirty laundry.”

She then handed him her weekly list of sinners to be prayed for, this week’s containing no less than twenty members of the church.

Meanwhile, Jimmy drove Cindy back to her house. She invited him up to her room. After making sure no one else was home, she let him go all the way.
SOME OLD GUY LIKE ME

John met Julie at a bar. It was the kind of place country singers might refer to as a honky-tonk. The room was dimmed by cigarette smoke and the jukebox in the back was playing songs selected by a couple in their early twenties. The boy scanned the selection for AC/DC while his date sang into her beer bottle the words to a Shania Twain song. John had been to this bar before, but he did not consider himself a regular. He sat at the end of the bar and ordered a light draft beer. Cool and fresh from the tap, its taste was almost fruity and he took a long drink before settling back on his stool. He slid his quarter back at the bartender, who looked less than grateful. He stayed put in his chair and watched as the place began to fill with college students, home for Thanksgiving break, he guessed. They hugged and high-fived as they ran into high school acquaintances, telling jokes about the bar, about Milltown, how they couldn’t wait to graduate and move away from here and away from Ohio. John moved from his seat at the bar to give the kids more room, feeling grateful he and Becky never had children.

He laid a quarter down on the nearest pool table, stood against the wall and watched the current game while he waited. A surly looking man and a woman who matched the description were in the middle of a game. The man wore a Bengals t-shirt and had a Skoal ring worn into the pocket of his jeans. John thought he recognized the man from work but wasn’t sure enough to say hello, though the odds were they’d worked together. Nearly everyone in town was employed by the steel mill, and lately they’d been moving people around the factory a lot.

John’s eyes burned slightly from the smoky air, but he wasn’t ready to leave yet. The crowds amused him, and home was less inviting.

A man he did recognize walked past him, toward the bar. He remembered him from AA meetings and they exchanged knowing looks of shame and relief. John didn’t consider himself an alcoholic but had attended meetings with his wife. He’d thought they might fulfill him in some way, but had instead seemed hokey. They hadn’t done much for the guy at the bar, he guessed, and hadn’t helped his wife much either.

“It’s all yours,” said the man playing pool when the game was over. The woman he was playing with had won by a lot and was gloating to a friend nearby. 
John set up the table and began to play himself, calling shots in his head. He was on his third beer and felt warm and loose and impressed by how well he was shooting. The force with which he pushed the balls around the table was satisfying, and he sometimes shot unnecessarily hard to achieve the sensation.

After awhile, he felt someone watching him, and glanced up at a group of young women looking at him from a table in the corner.

“We want to play, too,” one of them said, leaving John unsure of what she meant. Did they want to play with him or did they want him to give up the table? He couldn’t imagine they wanted an old guy hanging around and felt annoyed at the way young girls thought they could use their looks to get whatever they wanted. Still, he wasn’t going to stand in their way. He was beginning to feel too old for this bar anyway. So he shrugged, feeling a bit selfish for keeping the table to himself, though he hadn’t realized anyone was waiting on it.

He collected the balls and began to put his cue away when the girl moved and stood in his way.

“No, we want to play with you,” she said, smiling coyly at him as she lowered her lashes. She smelled a little too strongly of strawberries, but John didn’t mind. He stepped back from the cue rack and said, “Okay.”

“I’m Julie,” said the strawberry flavored brunette. “That’s Rachel and Holly.” She pointed to the other girls who were laughing at the forwardness of their friend.

The girls were equally terrible at pool, and asked John continually where to aim and how to hold their cues. After making a few shots, Julie began to get cocky. She sat up on the table and missed. On her next turn she scooted him out of her way with her hips, showing him the small of her back as she leaned over the table. Her nails were painted black and he wondered if this was a new style or if this girl had a dark side. He missed his next shot and she winked at him as though she had something to do with it.

After the first game, her friends left to go to the bathroom and get more drinks. Julie stayed and challenged him to another game. He felt as though she was making excuses to touch him, always standing a little too close and leaning against the table in ways that seemed unnatural, but showed off her physique. After sinking an easy shot in the side pocket, she leaned over to John’s ear and whispered, “I’m going to break your heart.”
John beat her in the next turn. He was pleased, but confused by the attention he was getting from this girl, and thought he was probably eight or nine years her senior. He assumed she was trying to make an ex-boyfriend jealous, or maybe she was really drunk, though she seemed okay.

Something about her reminded him of Becky on the night they met. Like Julie, she had approached him. She had worn blue eye shadow painted up to her eyebrows and after only a moment’s conversation had asked him when he was going to offer to buy her a drink. John usually bumbled through conversations with women and was grateful for her instructions on what to do next. After another drink, they’d made out right there on the barstool, and when she invited herself back to his place, he obliged without hesitation.

He watched Julie now, and felt a longing for Becky, for the way they had once been. She didn’t look like Becky, but their spirit was the same. Becky was been blonde when they met, and had pubic hair to match. He’d been both impressed and intimidated, but later learned both were a product of peroxide. It was the first and only time he’d brought a girl home that he wasn’t in a relationship with. Their one night stand had turned into a marriage only a few months later. Becky brought out an impulsiveness he never knew he had.

When Julie’s friends returned, they announced they wanted to go to another bar. She asked if he would go with them, but it was already after midnight and he was tired.

“Well then, why don’t I give you my number?” she asked, with her arms folded across her chest and one hip cocked out to the side.

“Why would you want some old guy like me calling you?” He felt pathetic for asking, but he wanted to know.

“Because you have eyes like Paul Newman,” she whispered, then kissed the side of his neck. She wrote her number down on a napkin and swished her hips back and forth dramatically as she walked with her friends out of the bar.

John drank the last of his warm beer and drove home.

John and Becky had been married thirteen years. They’d thought of each other as soul mates, but things had sort of dried up; now they were more like roommates. Neither complained
about the change in their relationship, there was no talk of divorce or separation. Actually, there was little talk of anything at all.

Becky was asleep when John got home, and already gone when he woke up in the morning. She volunteered Saturdays at a nursing home. It had started out as community service assigned by the judge for an accident she was charged with years ago, but she had liked it there and continued to go every Saturday.

John awoke feeling heavy and slow to recall the details of the night before. He reached over the edge of the bed and felt for the napkin, still tucked in his jeans pocket from the night before. He recalled the scent of strawberries and pulled the covers back over his head.

By the time he finally got out of bed, he had decided not to call Julie, but he planned to return to the bar again that night, and if she was there, well then maybe that meant something. Becky returned home around two and seemed exhausted. She made a pot of coffee and took the newspaper with her into the living room. He watched as she read and watched as she fell asleep on the couch despite the coffee. He saw this as strength of will, the ability to sleep in spite of caffeine. She had hardened over the years, he knew, and it impressed him. She had become someone different, yet he knew her. Her hair was chestnut now and hung only to her shoulders. She looked healthier than he remembered and he wondered when this had happened. When she awoke, she was startled to find him watching her, and yawned as she asked him what his dinner plans were.

“I think I’m going to go out,” he said and for a moment was tempted to ask her to join him, but thoughts of Julie changed his mind.

“All right, well I’m going to eat that leftover pasta then,” she said, and got up to reheat her dinner.

John got up to take a shower. He noticed the bed was still unmade and he carefully pulled the sheets and comforter into place. He felt a pang of guilt for going out, knowing what his intentions were, but reassured himself that nothing would likely happen, and she probably would not show up anyway.
He arrived at the bar just before seven, and felt a little foolish. Julie and her friends had not gotten there until nearly ten thirty the night before, and if they showed up again it probably wouldn’t be any earlier. He ordered a burger at the bar and watched a football game he had little interest in.

By nine, Julie still had not shown up, and John was several beers in. He stood up to leave, but stumbled and sat back down. He’d wait another hour and try to sober up, he thought. Sitting there alone, he conjured up thoughts of Becky. He was partly to blame for the accident, he knew. He thought she probably knew it, too. They’d been leaving a different bar in town. That place was no longer in business, but they had liked it for its selection of draft beers and the band that played once a month. He’d had too much to drink and suggested Becky drive. He knew she’d had too much as well, but he also knew she wouldn’t admit it.

Driving over a hill, they were temporarily blinded by the bright lights of another car, and Becky turned the wheel into the other lane as it passed. The other car swerved to miss her and swung head-on into a telephone pole instead. Becky had gotten out of the car, but John remained inside. She’d found the driver, a young girl, dead with her head hanging limply over the steering wheel. John had stayed in the car, unable to move or to look at his wife. He and Becky were still punishing themselves, he knew, but wondered when it would be enough.

John watched as Julie entered the bar with one of the girls she was with last night and two guys he hadn’t seen before. He thought he caught the girls snickering in his direction, then Julie grabbed one of the guys and began to whisper in his ear. John got up and walked past them to the door.

From the parking lot he called Becky and asked if she’d take him home.

“This is the last time,” he said as he got in the car. She nodded without condemnation and he told himself this time it was true.
I didn’t think much of it when she received the call. I answered, told her it was her mother, and she reached over to take the phone from me. Perhaps I should have been suspicious. As far as I can recollect, her mother had never called before. But then again, I never paid much attention to who called for her or why. I never assumed her mother hadn’t called before. If I’d really thought about it, maybe I would have supposed she normally called during the day, when I was at work. But I didn’t think about it at all. I just handed her the phone, like I always do when people call for her.

We’d moved in together about two years ago. Things were pretty comfortable. Betty was the kinda girl a guy could just relax with. She didn’t hassle you with a bunch of questions, or try to talk about your life together and that kind of thing. Never tried to pull compliments from me like, “Do you think I’m pretty?” or make me tell her I love her.

I guess it should have seemed odd that she had never discussed her mother with me. I knew she had a father who left when she was young. We discussed this when we started dating. I remember I was nervous she might have some neurotic “daddy” issues, but Betty seemed pretty normal. Normal as anybody else, I guess. Either way, I should have known there was something up when I picked up the phone.

She took the phone with her in the other room. I turned up the volume on the TV before I could hear her voice, just in case she started talking loudly. She usually talks loudly. When her girlfriends call, I mean. Lots of giggling and shrieking, so I always turn the TV up when she gets calls, just to avoid the possible annoyance of the situation. You have to do stuff like that in relationships, you know. You have to remember to circumvent certain things just so you can stand the person.

Anyway, Betty didn’t say anything when she got off the phone. Just came back in the room and sat back on the couch. I didn’t say anything either because, at the time, I frankly didn’t care. I was watching the Bruins’ game. They were losing. I flipped off the TV and we got up to go to bed in silence. It’s not that we were hostile or anything. Betty understands that after working all day I’m not really in the mood for small talk, nor am I in the mood for serious conversation like what are my thoughts on marriage, or kids, and all that stuff. She really gets me.
So on this night that her mother calls, we’re standing there by the sink, brushing our teeth, when she looks at me in the mirror and says through her toothpaste that her mother is coming to visit.

When? I say.
In a few days.
Why?
She wants to see me. To see us. You’ve never met her, you know.
Mmph, I say, and spit in the sink and leave the bathroom.
A few days, I thought. I’ll worry about that when the time comes.

Well, the time came quickly. To tell the truth, I had sort of forgotten we’d had the conversation. Things were pretty crazy at work. Some assholes bought our company and kept changing policies. I was pretty annoyed, so when I came home I really didn’t want to talk about anything. But with all these changes going on at work, my girlfriend decides now would be a good time to make some changes at home. I’m not a man who particularly cares for changes, small as they may be.

First thing I noticed was that she had replaced my beige bath towels with blue ones. I didn’t care enough to bring it up. If she wanted to brighten up the house that was okay with me, except that these new towels left little pieces of wet blue lint all over me. Pretty annoying, but I was too tired to mention it. Besides, she’d wiped up all the tooth paste stains off the mirror and sink and counter. That was good of her. She’d also added a bowl full of colored sticks and leaves. This looked a little fruity and I almost mentioned it, but like I said, I was very tired.

Next, I noticed the whole house started smelling like baby powder. I don’t remember how it smelled before, but not like that. She bought coasters and suggested I try using them, as if my beer bottle might hurt the laminate on the coffee table.

It didn’t particularly strike me as odd that stuff was changing around the house. Women do weird stuff sometimes, and it hadn’t really affected me besides the lint from the towels. I should have known it was going to, though. Anytime a woman starts acting strange, you better watch it buddy, because mark my words, it will affect you. And sure enough, pretty soon she started asking me to do stuff. Stuff like pick up my shirts, and take off my shoes because she just shampooed the rug, which is another thing I’ve never heard of.
Then she asks if I can go pick up some meat at the market. As if after a long day at work, I want to go to the market for some damn meat.

Why didn’t you go today? I asked.

I have a job too, you know, she said. As if being a part-time receptionist at the animal shelter is really a job.

And I was busy trying to get the house ready, she said.

Ready for what?

For when my mother comes tomorrow.

I stared at her, sitting there at the kitchen table, making a list of some sort. I stared until it finally dawned on me. Her mother? She had mentioned it, I remembered, but the sneaky bitch hadn’t brought it up again. She knew I’d forget about it. She had used my stressful workdays to her advantage and really put one over on me.

In my mind, I raged. She stared at me now, blinking calmly, waiting for my wrath. My head buzzed with hot anger as I searched for the right words to fix the situation, make her call off the mother and compensate me somehow for the distress she’d just caused. I stammered for a moment trying to articulate my fury.

What kind of meat? I said.

It was all I could utter. It just slipped out, and she called sirloin as I stormed out the door.

I slammed the door of my old Saturn and sped out of the driveway. Suddenly, it was all becoming clear, Betty’s little ploy, just like every other woman. Fixing up the house, making it a home, sending me out for meat, meeting her mother. Meeting her mother!

Was she bringing her mother home to pressure me? That’s what mothers of daughters are for, after all. To lay on the thick aura of marriage. The new towels, the baby powder. Nesting. I’d heard of it. She was ready to settle down, and was calling on her mother for reinforcement.

I tried to picture the woman. Batty, yet pristine, with big glasses that she looked over while staring coldly at you. She’d wear lots of sweaters all at once and probably carry a handkerchief. She’d be just like an old Sunday school teacher that liked to give out swats.

She would comment, ever so subtly about the importance of family, of a stable home, of procreation. She’d mention church and God and eternal damnation for those living in sin like Betty and me. Betty would sit beside her, smiling. She’d offer her some more tea, all the while blinking innocently at me, giving me those “she’s right, you know” looks.
Meanwhile, her mother would push the conversation along, into other couples, all the girls from Betty’s high school, who were already married, maybe some with kids even. She’d bring up the difficulties of getting pregnant after the age of 35, and how Betty’s biological clock was ticking. Then, inevitably, while sitting so proudly on the sofa that I paid for, she would ask me what plans I have for her daughter. And she’d do it all so politely, so seamlessly and subtly, with Betty still blinking and smiling right beside her. And with four deathly intent mascara-lashed eyes staring through me, I’d have no choice but to claim I had every intent on marrying Betty. That the reason for my hesitation is only to save money for a big wedding. That I love her daughter and have every desire to make her my wife. Her mother will nod at me approvingly at last, and Betty will be beaming, thrilled her little plan had worked and she’d soon have me roped in for life.

I’d made it nearly four years without uttering those words, and certainly had no intention of being tricked into saying them now.

I drove recklessly through the neighborhood trying to think of what I could do to stop it. I thought of going to the bar downtown, or over to my buddy Sam’s apartment, my last single friend. We could go to the strip club one town over. We could get drunk the way we used to.

I began to realize how domesticated Betty already had me. I almost never went out. We spent Saturday nights sitting by the television. I never went anywhere without her. She even came with me to the bar or the bowling alley on the rare occasion I did leave.

I would go over to Sam’s, that’s what I would do. We would go out. Instead, I found myself driving through the parking lot of the supermarket searching for a spot.

Betty was in bed when I got home. I’d taken my time driving back, going by my old high school, the football stadium, the box factory I’d worked at in the tenth grade, the bar where Betty and I had first met. I got in to bed beside her and watched her back move with her breath. She was an attractive girl. Her hair was short and brown like her eyes. I always thought she looked a little bit like Ally Sheedy from “The Breakfast Club.” She was wearing the silky nightgown I like, probably hoping I’d forgive her if I got a little action. Wrong. I turned my back away from hers. Then changed my mind and pulled her toward me. She smiled; she’d been waiting for it. That smile pissed me off so I said never mind and turned my back again. I fell asleep with a dull ache inside.
I got home from work at five the next day and there was a note taped to the fridge saying she’d be back from the airport with her mother at six, and could I please turn the oven down to warm at 5:15. I tore the note from the fridge, balled it up, shot at and missed the trash can. I roughly turned the dial on the stove to warm, as though not turning it gently would somehow hurt the potatoes. Then I grabbed a can of beer from the fridge. I thought about shot-gunning it the way we drank them in high school where you poke a hole in the side of the can and drink through it as you open the top allowing you to gulp the beer down faster. I’d just be drunk when Betty and her mother showed up. That would show them.

I decided to drink the beer the normal way. I guess I was more of an adult than I wanted to admit, then I went upstairs to change my shirt, but left my grease-stained jeans on. It was a small gesture, but one I knew Betty would notice. I had to do all I could to make it clear to her and her mother I was not the “I love you” saying, marrying and fathering children kind of guy. I went back downstairs and turned on the TV searching for something that screamed bachelor. I was still flipping through channels when Betty and her mother walked in.

Mom, this is Daniel, I heard Betty say, and fought hard against the urge to turn and greet her meddlesome mother. I tried to muster up a good burp instead; however it wasn’t in me to be that rude.

She was not at all what I expected, as far as appearances go. She was enormous. Her giant shirt was purple with some kind of shiny gold thread woven into it. It was cut very low for a woman her age and I could see the tanned wrinkly crevice of what must have once been considered cleavage. Her brown hair was ratted to stand up on her head, but looked a little purple too. She probably dyed her grays; Betty just yanked hers out.

It’s nice to meet you, I heard myself saying, and as my hand acted on a will of its own, I reached to shake hers. It was tiny and manicured and surprisingly soft. I noticed she wore lots of gold rings and bracelets.

My, I hadn’t expected you to be so good looking, her mother said.

Confused, I looked up at Betty who shrugged at me apologetically and turned to check on dinner.

It’s just that Betty’s last boyfriend was so fat, she continued.

I wondered how she felt the right to criticize the weight of others as she tipped over into the chair across from the couch, and instead of continuing her comparison of me and Betty’s ex,
she turned in the direction of the TV. I had stopped flipping channels at the Food Network and cursed myself silently for not stopping it at some Howard Stern rerun or something. To show I wasn’t interested, I offered her the remote. She took it and turned on *Entertainment Tonight*.

She had her feet strapped into sandals and they swelled out the sides of the shoes creating red indentions around each of the straps. This looked incredibly painful and I almost asked her if she’d like to take them off, but quickly remembered we were mortal enemies and decided to leave the hospitalities to Betty.

I could hear Betty clanging around in the kitchen, as I tried to lose myself in the celebrity gossip. I considered trying to come up with some sort of game plan, but this woman had already surprised me. I decided it would be best to wing it. So, I pulled my boot donned feet up on the couch and finally got the burp out that I’d been hoping for. Her mother hardly glanced in my direction and I thought I heard Betty snicker from the kitchen.

I glanced suspiciously at this mother. Her mouth was slightly open as she stared at the television. Her lips were wrinkled and pink lipstick had found its way into the cracks. The program was covering some charity event Oprah had sponsored. Her mother must have been a fan. I decided to check things out in the kitchen. Betty’s top was a little conservative for her style. Not the way to win my heart, babe, I thought as I watched her pour a glass of pinkish wine, down it in one go, then refill it and place it by her seat at the table. Finally looking up, she noticed me watching her and smiled sort of playful like. I tried to give her an “I know what you’re up to” smile back, but she’d already turned away.

Okay, dinner is ready, she said.

Her mother grunted as she hefted herself out of the chair, and then sighed heavily as her bottom hit the hard seat of one in the kitchen. She fanned herself with her hand for a moment as though the journey from the living room to the kitchen had taken a heavy toll on her. I accidentally gave her a smile.

Betty brought out the steaks and set the tray in the center of the table where she had a space cleared. She took her seat and smiled at me a bit sloppily, from the wine I supposed. Betty had a way of saying exactly what was on her mind whenever she got a little tipsy and I felt myself beginning to lose ground already.

Her mother was loading spoonfuls of potato casserole into her mouth when it occurred to me I’d never asked how long she was staying.
I looked back at Betty who was now frowning at a carrot that she was having trouble keeping on her fork.

How long will you be in town? I asked Betty’s mother.

We’ll discuss that after dinner, dear, Betty said. She sounded surprisingly firm considering her state.

Her mother smiled at me, eagerly anticipating the conversation it seemed. But I knew what they had planned and was ready to tell them exactly what I thought of their little conspiracy, when instead, I heard myself saying, Well, we’re both very happy to have you here.

I nearly covered my mouth with my hands, scoffing in my head at my own strange behavior. My mouth had abandoned me again; my vocal chords were siding with the enemy. Bewildered, I wished I had a muzzle.

The women were silent. Betty’s mother was concentrating on her plate, and Betty on her glass of wine. The tension was unbearable.

Looking at the woman, the sheer weight of her, I imagined the chair was bowing beneath her. My eyes darted back and forth between them, I began making genetic matches, catching similarities in their lips, their hairlines. I noticed for the first time that Betty’s jaw had a slight sag in it, a trait undoubtedly inherited from her mother whose whole face seemed to sink into her neck which folded over onto her chest almost as if her body was made up entirely of layers.

This steak is overcooked, the mother said as she shoveled her last bite into her fat trap. If I were Betty I would have said something about it appearing not to have slowed her down any, but I suppose they were playing for the same side here. Maybe I should have said it.

If you were my man I’d make sure you got a proper steak. Betty is always overcooking her meat, the mother said and I thought I detected a wink from her in my direction.

Betty didn’t say anything. She was now folding her napkin, unfolding it then refolding it again. It was something she did when she was nervous. I first noticed it two years ago when we discussed moving in together. She hadn’t been exactly thrilled about the idea and kept stumbling over words when telling me why, all the while folding and refolding that stupid napkin. It all made sense now. She’d wanted to get married first. Of course. Why hadn’t I seen?

Her mother was happily tilting her head from side to side as she cleaned the remaining food off of her plate. I watched her jowls flap against her face and pushed my plate away.
Betty picked up my plate and her own and brought them over to the sink, ignoring her mother who was still eating. She must be eager for the after dinner conversation, I thought, and wondered if I couldn’t just claim a headache and go to bed.

Betty poured another glass of wine and I decided I better get myself another beer. I opened it and followed her into the living room. I sat on the couch and Betty sat beside me. I watched her as I set my beer down on the coffee table without a coaster. She didn’t seem to notice. I sat back and ran my hand through my hair touching the bald spot I was developing in the back. The skin there was smooth and new feeling, except for a mole that I fingered mindlessly. Why was she attracted to me anyway? I was hardly a catch.

Her mother finally pushed away from the table and I felt myself surrendering again into the dreaded discussion that would determine the future of my relationship. I sunk into the couch and prepared for the worse. Her mother waddled into the living room, looking down her nose at the furniture and walls, as though hunger had previously impaired her judgment and she was seeing the room clearly for the first time. I immediately planned to place any blame she aimed at me for its décor on Betty. That would be legitimate. She had picked everything out. However, I no longer trusted myself to say anything correctly and could practically feel “I’d like to marry your daughter” rolling off my tongue. The women were slowly controlling me. I had been bending to their will all night. I slunk down into the couch and began to surrender to their plan. As long as her mother was here, I knew I would be forced to act in accordance with her will and against my own. Maybe the damages would not be irreparable and I could set things straight once she was gone.

This is a nice place you two have here, she said. I watched her carefully, waiting for the trap.

Seems like a nice town, too. The mother lowered herself back into the chair and made a deep sigh.

It’s a small town, Betty said. There isn’t room for many more people.

I was confused about where this conversation was going. It reminded me of the classic western scene in movies “Thar ain’t room in this town fer the both of us.” I turned back to the TV. Entertainment Tonight had gone off and the evening news was on. They were covering some story about a class of third graders who were writing letters to prisoners. The teacher was being sued or getting an award or something, I really couldn’t focus.
Mother, why don’t you tell us, how long do you plan to stay, Betty was saying as I snapped my attention back to their conversation.

Well, I don’t know, Betty, I would expect a mother could feel welcome in her own daughter’s home, she said. I’m sure Daniel would enjoy having me around.

This time I knew it was a wink. I tried to stammer out an appropriate response but this was beyond me.

Maybe if you were a normal mother you could feel welcome. But you… Why do you always do this?

Betty, her mother said. It was the voice of the betrayed. It began to dawn on me that maybe this visit had nothing to do with my intentions toward Betty.

No, Mother. Don’t, Betty said. I will not get dragged into this again. Every few years it’s the same thing. One of your boyfriends kicks you out and you try to shack up with me. Maybe if you’d try to do something with your life like, I don’t know, find a job, this wouldn’t always happen.

The mother’s bottom lip was quivering. I was beginning to feel like an intruder in my own living room. I tried going back to the news but there was a commercial on, and how could I possibly pull my attention away from the drama unfolding in my living room?

There was a stare down going on between the two women.

Well, what am I supposed to do now?

I don’t know and I don’t care. Why don’t you try your sister? Doesn’t she have some obligation to take care of you? Betty’s voice was growing manic. I’d never heard her talk that way.

Oh excuse me for thinking I could count on my own daughter. After all I’ve done for you.

What have you done? Betty was screaming now. Moving me from place to place when I was a kid. Never providing any kind of stability and then using me for money or a place to crash as soon as I was out on my own, and don’t think you’re fooling Dan, either.

My ears perked up even more at the sound of my name. I hadn’t expected to be brought into this.

It was like a television drama unfolding before me as I turned back and forth between both women wondering what role I had in this, if any.
Daniel doesn’t want you here, either, Betty said. I raised my eyes at her in surprise.
You can stay here tonight, but you have to call Aunt Bethany in the morning.
They were both looking at me now. The mother with betrayal and Betty pleading with her eyes for me to take her side.
Yes, that’s right. I said. You can’t stay here. You’ll have to be out in the morning.
Her mother hmphed and folded her arms across her chest. Betty smiled at me with relief and moved across the room to drag her mother’s things down the hall to the spare room.

Betty whispered as she passed me that she’d meet me upstairs. I needed no further direction, and as I scampered up the steps I heard her directing her mother to the nearest bathroom.

Up in bed, I lay with my arms folded behind my head. Betty came in looking haggard and apologetic.

I’m sorry about tonight, she said. I hope that wasn’t too awkward. We don’t really get along.

Maybe the biggest understatement ever, I thought, but I nodded at her, hoping to appear sympathetic.

I’m sorry I had to drag you into all this. I didn’t know how else to make her leave. I was hoping she really just wanted to visit this time, but when I saw all her bags at the airport I knew that wasn’t true.

That’s okay, I said.

She’s just so dependent on other people. It’s like she doesn’t know how to survive without a man to take care of her.

I nodded again.

It just makes me sick. I swear I’m never going to be like that. You know she actually had a job before she married my father and he convinced her to quit working and have a baby. Then he left and look what happened. That’s why I’m never getting married.

I stared at her, my girlfriend of almost three years, and it dawned on me that I could not have been more wrong about what would happen that evening.

So why did you fix up the apartment? I asked.
I wanted to show her I was doing well on my own, and that there was no reason for her to interfere with our lives.

But you really don’t want to get married? I said, not fully believing it yet.

No, it’s not worth the effort, or the pain.

Not even to me? I said, though I wasn’t sure why.

Daniel, I like things the way they are. Why change them and risk losing what we have?

It had never occurred to me that Betty might feel this way. I’d always thought I was the one keeping things grounded where they were. I felt betrayed somehow, and as I turned my gaze back to the ceiling, my mouth spoke on its own accord once more.

But, I love you, it said.
THE HUMPS

I swung open the door of my dad’s old truck. It creaked from the rust and dipped slightly with my weight as I stepped up to the driver’s seat. The glue holding the rearview mirror to the windshield had melted off in the heat, so I turned around in my seat and watched the gravel driveway as I backed out. A couple of barn cats jetted across the drive, but I didn’t slow down. They know to get out of the way.

Once on the road, I gunned the engine a little. This was the first weekend in months that I didn’t have a ball game and, to tell the truth, I was a bit relieved when we were knocked out at sectionals. Besides, I’d already gotten my scholarship to Bowling Green. I didn’t need to prove myself further.

The truck screeched to a halt as the light turned red. An empty Mountain Dew bottle rolled off the passenger seat and onto the floor. I made a mental note to tell my dad the truck needed new tires. Whenever the roads got just a little damp it was hard to stop without sliding.

The light turned green and I crossed the intersection, then turned left onto Katie’s street. I saw her standing outside waiting in her driveway and was pretty shocked she’d actually gotten ready on time. Usually she was still upstairs doing her hair when I arrived, even though I’d told her I’d be there ten minutes ago, and I’d have to sit in the living room and talk to her older brother, who always gives me shit about being a jock. Katie’s brother is a total waste of life. He graduated two years ago, but he still lives with their parents. He works at the Citgo, which is where all the pot smokers work, and then they go drink by the river. It pisses me off because they leave all their Budweiser and Jim Beam bottles down there. I’m kind of an environmentalist and think littering is for morons too lazy to walk over to a trash can. But what could you expect from a bunch of pot heads?

Katie skipped over to the truck and climbed in. “How ya doin’, Jackie?” she said, as she slid across the seat to kiss my cheek.

“Fine,” I said.

“Fine.” Katie said back in a low voice that I guess was supposed to sound like mine.

“So what do you want to do?” I said backing out of her driveway.

“Umm, I don’t know, what do you want to do?” Katie twirled bits of her blonde hair around her fingers.
“I don’t know. You’re the one who wanted to hang out today.” I was trying to sound aloof, that was one of my SAT words. Really, I was thrilled to have the whole day to spend with Katie, but I couldn’t let her know that. I had to play it cool.

“Let’s just drive around awhile,” she said.

I knew what she meant and my heart rate quickened as I gently pressed harder on the gas and headed toward Rt. 123.

“I can’t believe your CDs got stolen,” she said.

“I know, it sucks.” I’d left the window open in the truck while it was parked at school. People at the high school are such fucks. In some ways though, I was kind of glad they were gone. Like I could scrub off all the old memories associated with those songs, and just worry about making new ones. And I wouldn’t have to try to explain the Paula Abdul CD I just hadn’t been able to part with.

“Well, I guess you’ll just have to listen to me sing without the music.” Katie put her seat back and stuck her bare feet out the window.

“Baby, baby. Please believe me…”

I rolled my eyes as Katie drifted in and out of tune.

“Baby, baby. Say you need me.”

“You know my radio still works.”

“Oh, Jackie. I know you like my singing.”

I shook my head, then reached down and threw the Mountain Dew bottle at her. Katie squealed like it was a bug or something.

“Jackie,” she said after a moment. “When we get married can we live in a house like in one of those neighborhoods?”

She pointed out the window at a new subdivision that had been built in like a week. The houses were pretty close together and all looked the same, but I knew what she meant. We both lived in old houses with window box air conditioning and leaky ceilings.

“Ha, like I’d marry you!” I said.

“Oh whatever, Jack. You know you can’t do any better than me.” She gave me her sassy smile, usually reserved for when I said something stupid. Katie was way smarter than me. There was no doubt about that. Still, it’s not a fact I liked to recognize. She leaned over and put her head on my shoulder, but only for a moment. We’d reached the road we drove out here for.
“Put your seat up,” I said, trying to sound protective, but I knew that was bullshit since I was the one putting her at risk. I felt kind of guilty, but she liked it and who was I to tell her what she can and can’t do.

I gunned the engine hard and worked the truck harder until its body started to shake. I reached 85 mph as we skipped over the first hill.

“Wheeeeeeeeeeee!” Katie said as the truck tires thudded back onto the pavement. I pressed down on the pedal again and reached ninety on the second hump. That’s what everyone called them: the Humps. I maintained control of the truck as the road winded then gunned it again up hump three. We coasted over the third hill and got some pretty good air. Then we hit the road hard. The truck thudded with the sound of crunching metal and sagged down hard on the right side. We started to spin. I gripped the wheel tightly with both hands and just held on waiting to stop. I could hear Katie screaming but didn’t look over. All I could do was watch as the world spun in front of me.

We slid off the road, jumping the trench that ran alongside and slammed into an electric pole. All of my weight was thrown forward, then back into my seat where my head knocked against the headrest.

Katie was crying. She said my name a few times, and then got out of the car. She screamed for help and eventually someone in a blue Oldsmobile pulled over. A man and probably his wife got out. The woman was already calling 911. She looked like the type that could get things done. The man was totally pissed, and he looked at Katie like she was a moron for getting in an accident.

“My boyfriend’s knocked out. He’s still in the car. He won’t wake up,” she sounded hysterical, screaming at this guy like he’d done something bad to her. The guy motioned to his car.

“Go sit down,” he said, and she obeyed.

“We better not try to move him,” he said, like he knew anything about medicine.

He walked around the truck examining the damage. Hands in his pockets, he inspected it like he would a neighbor’s new mower. He shook his head as he did and muttered under his breath about damn kids.

“Axle’s broken. You kids been joy riding?” he asked Katie.

Katie shook her head. She tried to go back to me, but the woman was off the phone.
“Police are on their way. Here, you should call your parents.”

Katie took the woman’s phone and her hand trembled as she dialed. Meanwhile, the man reached into the totaled car and grabbed my wallet from the dash. He rifled through the various IDs and video store membership cards, still muttering and finally pulled out a health insurance card.

“Guess he’ll probably need this,” he said.

Sirens came a little while later and Katie was sent back to the car after standing and motioning to them from the road, as though they couldn’t see the truck crumpled around the leaning pole or the Oldsmobile with its hazards on. A police officer sent Katie back to the couple’s car while the paramedics gathered around me. The officer interviewed the man with the Oldsmobile and the woman who might be his wife. The paramedics started to load me on a stretcher into the back of the ambulance. Katie tried to break through them and see me, but her mother had just gotten there and ran to her, pulling her away.

“Oh, Mom.” She began crying again. Katie’s dad found out what hospital they were taking me to, and then led the women back to their van. Her mother thought to call my father, but there wasn’t any answer at the house.

I was declared dead by the time they arrived at the emergency room. The doctor told them that they think I probably died on impact, which means I would have felt little pain. It was true.

Katie dropped to her knees screaming, “No, no, no!” like they do in movies. Her parents tried to comfort her, but they didn’t know anything about her and my relationship. How could they know what she was going through? So they just patted her back and said it’s all right even though it isn’t. I felt bad about it, so bad, since it was my fault and everything. But Katie was young and I knew she’d get over me. I mean, it would be hard, I was a catch and all, but eventually she’d get past it.

It was weird, but I didn’t really feel sad about how we wouldn’t be together anymore, or how I wouldn’t do anything I used to anymore. I kind of just felt nothing, like I was sedated or something. It was honestly kind of cool.
My dad didn’t react much when he got the news. He arrived at the hospital just after everyone else found out, still wearing coveralls from the auto shop where he worked. He just said “okay” and that he’d let them know once he made all the arrangements. He already had whiskey breath, so he must have consulted the bottle he kept in the glove compartment of his car that he thought no one knew about. He nodded to Katie, and then went to find the doctor. That’s like my dad though. His only son dies and he can’t spare a little fucking emotion. I wouldn’t have expected it, but it might have been nice.

Katie didn’t come out of her room for two days. She lay in bed for hours at a time, then got up and took down all her pictures of her and me together. She lay in bed awhile longer, then put them all back up again, whispering it’s too soon. She was allowed to miss school, which was probably nice. The kids were probably all talking about how stupid she and I were for hill hopping, like they don’t all do it too. Homeroom teachers probably lectured their classes about the dangers of reckless driving and said things to one another like “what a shame” while they toasted bagels in the teacher’s lounge.

A lot of kids came to the funeral. Even ones I never knew. They sat in the back rows of the Methodist Church and whispered to one another about Katie as she walked by. Katie wore a black skirt that is short and kind of sexy. She used to wear it when I took her out on dates to Olive Garden. She held it together pretty well during the service. Which she should, she’d been crying nonstop for two days. Not that that’s saying much. She cried all the time; sometimes over really stupid stuff like diamond ring commercials and country songs.

When the service was over she drove down to my house, or my dad’s house now. She brought a casserole her mom made. He opened the door disheveled, and waved her in while he looked past her head, maybe for more visitors. Once he seemed satisfied that no one else was coming, he let the screen door slam and followed Katie to the kitchen. She shifted her weight back and forth when she explained the casserole to my dad who had not made it to the funeral.

“Well, that sounds all right,” my dad said. “You know, Jackie really did seem to like you.”

“We were going to get married.”

“That so?” He nodded as if to say he would have approved.
Katie set the casserole on the kitchen table and looked around the house. My school bag was in a chair at the table. My baseball cleats were by the back door with mud still on them. There was a pile of papers, mine from school, on the table. Maybe it was my stuff out everywhere made her ask: “So he had this hat,” she tapped her toe, spasm-like, on the floor. She usually tapped when she was nervous. I could always call her on it, and would ask her what was up. “I was wondering if I could have it. I always liked it when he wore it,” she said.

“Sure, go on in,” my father said pointing to my old room, as if she didn’t know where to go.

Katie walked down the hall toward my room and held her breath when she reached it, as if the smell of me would set her off again. She grabbed the hat off my dresser and left the room without pausing to look around, like maybe she had seen enough in the other room.

She pulled on my hat and ran out the front door, calling out “Thanks” to my dad. Once in her old Sunfire, she sped down the driveway and up the road. She didn’t turn left after the intersection. Instead, she headed straight out toward the country. She laughed a little as she did, pumping the window down. The breeze flowed through the car making it chilly, but she didn’t seem to care.

She drove faster toward The Humps, her body swinging in the seat as she hugged the twists and turns of the road. When she approached the first hill, she pushed her body into the back of the seat and tightened her grip on the wheel. Her eyes were set between the yellow and white lines on the crackly road. Her smile was a little sassy like she knew I was watching, knew she knew better, but didn’t care. She moved with the car and bobbed her head over the hills. She rode over the third hump and landed safely on the ground. Recklessly, she continued past the fourth and fifth, maybe out to the river to find her brother, or maybe she’ll just kept driving. I couldn’t stick around to find out.
Mayfield Hollow is known to outsiders for one reason only: The Biennial Gun and Knife Convention. How they hear about it, I can’t be sure, but it all started when Jackson McKinney came to town about thirty years ago. Jackson grew up here, and then went off to make his fortune building rifles. He came home when his mother caught pneumonia. Jackson brought a wife and three sons home with him. Now they own a store and sponsor the statewide convention. The town had to open a Travelodge just to hold everybody coming specifically for the gun show, and it fills up every year with people from all over.

My parents own a bed and breakfast. Our rates are higher than they are over at the Travelodge and we’re not as fancy, but we’re right across the street from Uncle Bill’s Barbeque, where the folks who drink like to get their fill. The rest of Mayfield is dry as a desert and Bill aims to keep it that way. So people drink up across the street, and toddle over to our bed and breakfast for a place to sleep it off before going home to their wives and families.

My mother chose the name Wilson Family House of Hospitality because she thought it sounded like the name of a place where you could really take a load off. The house had been in the family for years and when Daddy was laid off, back when I was just a kid, my mother decided we should open the place up and try to make some money off of it until Daddy got back on his feet. Unfortunately, Daddy started spending most of his time across the street and the House of Hospitality became a permanent arrangement.

My mother had read about bed and breakfasts in her Country Living magazines. She started trying fancy breakfast recipes and named each of the bedrooms after a president, even though no presidents had ever been to the house, or even to Mayfield as far as I know, and I don’t expect they ever will. She had high hopes for turning our home into a classy establishment, but since none of us had much of a head for business and no one ever came to Mayfield except every other year for the convention, the bed and breakfast never turned into anything more than that place that houses drunks across the street from Bill’s.

It didn’t take long for Mama’s good reputation to dismantle on her. The other ladies in town didn’t care much for the thought of my mother seeing their husbands in the compromising positions she’d gotten used to seeing them in, and pretty soon her name was taken off the guest lists of everybody’s Mary Kay parties and baby showers. She noticed the stares she was given by
the women in the grocery store. She knew their whispers were about her. She blamed my father for what she called the embarrassment of the family. After a few months of running the bed and breakfast she began sleeping in the Madison Suite. Then after about a year or so she gave up with appearances all together and showed up at Bill’s herself. She and Daddy rekindled the old flame, as they say, after putting away a bottle and a half of Jack Daniel’s and it’s been happily ever after ever since. At least it has been from their point of view, but somebody has to be around to put things in perspective. That’s where I come in.

I took over most of the work at the bed and breakfast when I was fourteen. By then it was evident that if someone didn’t take control we were all three going to starve. Mom and Daddy were not overly concerned with the food situation as long as there was enough money for booze, so I had to learn to do a few things on my own. I got strong, having to break up fights and help drunk folks up across the street and up the stairs. I mean I’m not a big girl but I bet I could bench more than any of the linebackers on the high school football team. I was mean too. Drunk people tend to lose all their common sense to the point that they don’t understand anything but yelling and cursing, so that’s what I’d do. Freakishly strong and mean, I didn’t exactly have gentlemen lining up outside the door waiting to take me out. My only kiss had been from Mr. Irving who planted one on me one time when I was helping him in to the House. Then he told me I tasted like pizza. Then he threw up on my shoes. It was not exactly a Cinderella moment.

I ran the House of Hospitality for seven years, until the summer I turned twenty-one. It was a gun convention year and the inn was just starting to fill up. That’s the summer Henry McEwan came strolling in to my life. After that, things were never the same.

By this time, Mom and Daddy were staying over at Bill’s almost full time. He was kind enough to run a tab for them so they never worried much about the financing little habit. Bill sent me a bill once a month and I covered the check with money from our patrons which were the same as his.

I was working the front desk at the House, which means I was sitting on the couch. I was trying to learn how to knit and that wasn’t working out so well. A part of me really wanted to learn all those domestic things that girls are supposed to know how to do, even though I knew by then that a husband probably was not in the stars for me. I refused to believe I was really the kind
of girl everybody thought I was. People had their sayings and “the apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree” is the one they liked to use on me. I suppose doing things like knitting and baking was my way of showing them this wasn’t true, even if I did end up an old maid. Years of seeing the ugly side of gentlemen had me feeling okay with that.

I wrapped the yarn around the needles the way it was illustrated in the magazine I was using, but I got nothing but knots and the yarn was wrapped around the needles so tightly they wouldn’t move any more. I began to think maybe I was using the wrong kind of yarn.

It was mid-afternoon, which is long before we ever have business, when the door bells jingled, and I expected it to be the wife of some drunk coming over to chew us out for housing her husband for the night. I braced myself for some screaming, when in walked the smallest little man I’d ever seen.

“Is this the Wilson Family House of Hospitality?” he asked.

“Yes, sir it is. Something I can help you with?” I said, laying my hideous attempt at a scarf down on the couch beside me.

“Do you have any rooms available?” he said, taking off his bowler cap and holding it in front of him like an earnest young boy.

“We sure do,” I said. I got up and went to the front desk, pulled out our check-in sheet and tried not to stare at the boy in front of me. He was very odd to look at.

“What’s your name?”

“I’m Henry McEwan,” he said. “I’m a well-read traveler combing the countryside on a search for truer meaning and experience in this grand world.”

I wrote “Henry McEwan” on the bottom of the sheet, beneath the drunken scrawl of last nights’ visitors. Since he gave such a lovely introduction, I thought I’d better share mine as well.

“I’m Rainer Wilson,” I said. “Folks call me Rain. Ma and Pa Wilson are my parents, and I work here at the house.”

“Rye-ner,” he pronounced. “Fascinating! Named for the great poet, I suppose. We have more in common than I might have first thought.”

I was pretty sure I was named for the way it rained every day the month I was born, though I could be wrong. I wasn’t used to talking to sober men, if that’s what he was, and I let him think what he wanted. I liked that he seemed to like me.

“Rilke. Extraordinary man. Now there’s someone who understood the world.”
I stared at Henry for a moment, not knowing what to say. He was so small. He wore glasses with wire frames and freckles the color of cinnamon splashed across his cheek bones and the bridge of his nose. His fair skin had softness to it that men over sixteen had usually lost, and a blonde bowl cut that said he hadn’t changed his hairstyle in many years. He sounded like a man and was traveling alone, but all other evidence pointed toward him being no more than thirteen.

“How old are you?” I finally asked.

“Twenty-five. Quarter of a century.” I was skeptical, but I handed him his room key anyway. The Eisenhower Suite. He must have known I was wary of him because next he said, “I hope what I’m wearing is okay. I haven’t really had time to do much shopping in the last few years. I wouldn’t want to show up to dinner wearing improper attire.”

There is no such thing as improper attire around here, except maybe a suit on a Wednesday. Nobody dresses up except to go to church, and even then most men only wear their cleanest jeans and tuck in their shirts. That’s when I noticed Henry’s clothes. He had on navy slacks that stopped about four inches above his ankles. His shirt sleeves were rolled up to disguise their short length and the buttons were working hard to stay fastened. I didn’t understand how someone as small as Henry could outgrow his clothes.

“Well, I shared my timeline. Won’t you divulge your own?”

“Urm,” I started. It was weird. I knew he was speaking English, but I had no idea what he was saying.

“That’s okay. A woman never tells, right?” Henry beamed at me from across the desk. He had clean, straight teeth like a freshly painted picket fence running along the inside of his lip.

“Why don’t I show you to your room?” I said.

We went upstairs, and I led him to the first door on the left. One with a twin bed, since I figured that’s all he’d need. I opened the door and he said, “This room is understated to perfection. What a quaint little bed. What an elegant armoire.” He spun around the way a child might when moving into their very own room for the first time.

I wasn’t sure if he was making fun of it or not so I just said, “dinner is at six,” and shut the door.

I spent the next hour or so trying alternative casts, but nothing worked so I gave up on the knitting and began embroidering, which was much easier, you just followed a pattern. Mine was
of a heart that had the words “Home Sweet Home” written on it. I was going to sew it on to a pillow.

At four the gun and knife convention kicked off with its traditional firing of fifteen gunshots. The number of shots correlated with the number of conventions. This was the fifteenth convention year. As the thundering of rifles shook the town, I heard Henry scream from upstairs.

“Oh, wretched ends, don’t waste us now!” he ran down the stairs and turned to me, panting. “Rainer, hurry.”

Henry was dressed in black from head to toe. These clothes fit him a little better, but not much. Over his bowl cut he had on a red beret.

“What’s wrong? And what are you wearing?” I said, getting up off the couch to fully taken in his ensemble. I couldn’t help myself.

“That noise.”

“The Gun Show. It just started. I hope you’re not planning on wearing that?”

“Gun show,” Henry said, as if he’d never heard the words before and was trying them out for the very first time.

“You know, the big convention? Isn’t that why you’re here?”

Henry just stared at me blankly.

“Well,” I said. “Why else would you come to Mayfield?”

“I was staying in Belton last week and I heard the inn here was almost full. I figured any place booking up hotels must be exciting.” He seemed disappointed, but I really didn’t know how to cheer him up.

“People come to Mayfield for one reason, and that’s this convention. You should have stayed in Belton, there’s much more to do there. But since you’re here we might as well go over. I’ll show you what the fuss is all about.”

“Don’t you have to work?” Henry asked, glancing at the spread of yarn and thread and magazines that was cluttering the front room.

“Nah, no one comes in ‘til later anyway. We’ll be all right. You’d better change.”

“I was studying the beat poets.”

“Well, someone will beat you if you try to go around town looking like that,” I said. He ran upstairs and I went to check my face in the mirror hanging in the hall. Something in me wanted to impress Henry. Despite looking young, he had a worldly quality to him, unlike
anyone I’d ever met, and he knew nothing of my history like the people in Mayfield did. I thought maybe if he liked me I must not be that bad. I quickly combed my fingers through my hair, licked my lips, and then wiped them off, all the while wondering what on Earth was a beet poet. Henry ran back down the stairs and we made our way toward McKinney Park.

The Gun and Knife Convention had changed over the years. It used to be all about the guns. They’d be spread out on tables and men would come check them out and shoot at targets that were set up in a field. Now whole families came and tarps were set up all over the place with barbecues and games for the kids. It was more like a festival than anything. I could tell Henry was nervous. He held onto his elbows and tried to look in all directions all at once.

“You want a sno-cone?” I asked him.

“No, I’m all right,” he said quickly, unconvincingly.

“There’s a rifle show starting in a few minutes. You want to go to that?”

Henry shook his head.

We walked past a tarp with a game where you shoot BBs at a pyramid of tin cans. If you shot down all the cans in order, without making them fall, you won a giant sawdust-stuffed pistol. A couple of boys were playing and Henry looked horrified.

“They let children handle arms?” he said.

“Guns? Yeah, they’re just BB guns, they’re toys.”

It was too much for him, I guess. He started swaying like he might pass out. I led him over to a bench and told him to sit still while I got him a drink. When I came back he was still freaking out.

“Look, Henry, nobody shoots anybody. No one gets hurt. It’s all just for show. These folks just like the way holding a dangerous weapon makes them feel. Haven’t you ever held one before?”

He shook his head.

“Oh, come on.” I grabbed his skinny wrist and dragged him over to the booth with the BB guns.

“We want to play,” I told Reverend Miller, who was working the booth. He handed me a gun and I put it in Henry’s hands, which were trembling so much I was afraid to let go of the gun.
“Even if you did shoot somebody, they’re just BBs. They don’t even hurt that bad.”
I showed him how to pump the gun and take aim.
“Just pull the trigger back when you’ve got the ‘X’ on the top can.”
Henry fired a shot and the first can flew off the top of the pyramid.
“Good shot! That was perfect!” I said, and the Reverend agreed. Henry was beaming. He pumped the gun and got ready for his next shot.

Henry let me keep the stuffed pistol he won, and the squirt gun set and the plastic Swiss Army knife. He said he liked to travel light and all his winnings might weigh him down. After we got back to the house, he went out again. He said he wanted to explore Mayfield Hollow, see what it had to offer. I figured that wouldn’t take very long, but he wasn’t back in time for dinner.

I started getting antsy when it started getting dark and Henry still wasn’t home. I’d given up on the embroidery for the time and started on baking. I decided to bring some peach cobbler I’d attempted to Uncle Bill’s to see how the folks there liked it. Folks there like it when I bring food, but they’re not the best judges since everything tastes better when you are drunk.

When I walked in, I was shocked to see Henry sitting among my mother and the drinking men, laughing like one of them.
“What’s going on!?” I asked.
“Oh, hey, Rain, have you met Henry?” said Mr. Meade. Mrs. Meade was one of the worst wives to deal with in the morning.
Yeah, he’s staying with us. What’s he doing here?”
“Oh don’t worry, we’re not corrupting him none. He’s just interviewing us.”
“For what?”
The answers to my existential questions,” Henry said, finally noticing me. He had a notebook, and apparently had been recording the conversations of the men.
“You’re asking drunks to answer your questions?”
“Hey!” one of the drunk guys yelled.
“These men have lived very full lives. They know a lot I can learn from,” Henry said.
I slid the cobbler across the bar. “See how you like the cobbler, guys. It’s peach. I’m going home.”
The men gathered around the pan and I slipped out the door. I don’t know why I was mad at Henry. I guess I just wanted him to myself.

I don’t know what time I fell asleep, but I woke up in the middle of the night to the sounds of voices coming across the street. I came down the stairs and saw Mr. Mead and Uncle Bill helping Henry to stand upright. His notebook was sticking out the front of his pants.

“This guy got a little carried away in his research,” Bill said, and Henry giggled.

“It’s all right guys, I can take it from here,” I said. Henry’s small frame would be easy to carry.

“Okay, Rain. We’ll see you later.” Mr. Mead set the cobbler pan down on the desk while Bill sat Henry on the sofa.

“I guess you had a good time then,” I said to Henry once the men were gone.

“I’m one rowdy cowboy,” Henry slurried back.

“Let’s get you upstairs.”

I took Henry by his hands and helped him stand up. He could walk a bit better than I thought, and while his knees seemed to bump into each other with each step he took, he made it up the stairs with little support from me.

I followed him into the bedroom to make sure he was okay. He flopped down on his bed and I felt comfortable enough to flop down beside him.

“You probably don’t want to sleep in those clothes,” I told him, and he just laughed, so I started unbuttoning his shirt for him. His eyes began to fall closed. I pulled his shirt off, then I undid the button on his pants. I’d never done this before, and I felt a bit like I was undressing a child. Henry just lay there, perhaps passed out already. I pulled off his slacks, revealing pale legs covered in golden curly hair. His legs had more muscular tone than I’d expected. Just then, Henry let out another giggle. He looked up at me, lips halfway parted into a smile. Then collapsed and closed his eyes. A minute later he emitted a slight snore. Something in me wanted to reach over him and kiss those lips. I felt uninhibited as if I were the drunken one.

I had never been with a man before, but I’d heard enough stories to give me some idea of how to do it. As I climbed on top of him, kissing his sleeping lips, things sort of fell into place.

I worked myself back and forth, reveling triumphantly at the thing I was doing, unsure if it was even really happening. Suddenly Henry appeared to jolt out of intoxication and into
consciousness. He sat up halfway and blurted out, as if still in dream, “Blessed union of the gods, holy art thou, Celestial Being!”

I panicked and rolled off of him, leaving the room as quickly as I could.

I woke up in my own room the next morning unsure of what had really happened. I came downstairs, hoping for some clues, and found a note from Henry’s notebook on the desk next to his room key.

Rainer,

Thank you for all the hospitality I was shown at the House of Hospitality. I just may have fallen in love with you during my visit here. Alas, I suppose I’ll never know. My search for meaning leaves me no choice but to continue on my journey of enlightenment. Please don’t forget me and remember in the words of your namesake “you must change your life.”

Love,

Henry McEwan:
The Well-Read Traveler

I folded up the note and stuck it in my back pocket. I started back up the stairs just as the gun fire began. Day two of the Biennial Gun and Knife Convention.

I certainly never forgot Henry, though if not for that note I believe I could have convinced myself I’d only imagined him. Everything about his visit seemed mystical to me, like the appearance of Rumpelstiltzkin. I don’t believe he made me change my life, though I did go to the library and look up the Rilke person he kept talking about. Poems don’t make a whole lot of sense to me.

Instead, I married Ted Blankenship, one of the regulars at Bill’s. He fell in love with my pies and cobblers and soon he was eating so much he could hardly get drunk. We sold the Wilson Family House of Hospitality, which was bulldozed and replaced with a gas station, and opened a bakery which turned out to be much more profitable. I think about Henry on occasion. I think maybe his visit changed me more than I give it credit. It may not be the kind of change Henry had in mind, but we can’t all travel from town to town searching like Henry, just like we can’t all be drunks like my parents, some people in this world have to run the bars and the inns and the bakeries and I guess that’s my purpose.
HOW TO BOIL A HOUSEWIFE

It was only a few months after marrying Joe that Marcy became a lady who lunched. Joyce, whose husband worked with Joe at the firm, invited her to eat when they met at a company picnic. She said that she admired the way Marcy seemed to be showing Joe off to everyone there, when usually it is the husbands leading their wives. Joyce’s husband is bald, fat, and a named partner at the firm, the thought of her showing off her own husband made Marcy giggle. She guessed Joyce had married his name, not his face.

Anyway, it was the shocking adoration Marcy showed for her Joe that got her invited to Joyce’s exclusive circle of lunching ladies. The unacknowledged group of women married well, dressed well, ate well, and complained endlessly about all of it. They perhaps saw Marcy as an innocent, naïve and in need of their guidance as to how marriage was supposed to work. Marcy usually just listened. Unlike the other women, she loved Joe dearly, and after three years of marriage they still had a good relationship.

Her friends complained the most about their husband’s weekly golf games, and how no matter what night of the week there always seemed to be an important game on that would change the history of sports forever. Marcy told them about the way she and Joe would alternate between watching his favorite teams play and her nighttime soaps. The ladies would shake their heads in jealousy or disbelief, all the while glancing at one another, as if to say “well, it won’t last long.”

But Joe did more than just compromise a few games. He loved doing things for Marcy. Whether it was cooking her dinner or taking her out, he was always doing something he knew she’d appreciate.

When she got home from lunch on Tuesday she was feeling especially good about herself. Carolyn Rivers’s husband had forgotten her birthday last Saturday and spent the whole day watching football in their basement. When she finally confronted him, he ran out and bought her a tennis bracelet from Tiffany & Co. The same bracelet Joe had given Marcy a few months ago for no occasion other than to show he loved her.
She decided she would take a long shower and then dress up and make him a big dinner to show her appreciation. She stepped into the hot water and began to lather up in lavender body wash. As she circled her loofah around her body, she examined herself and tried to determine what it was that kept Joe excited every night. Her legs were slender and strong, but her hips had an odd shape, and despite four workouts a week, she couldn’t keep the cellulite off her backside. Her breasts were droopy despite being small and she’d been using push up bras to keep them up since before she was married. Joe didn’t like all the padding and said she was beautiful the way she was, but she knew he was full of shit. Tube socks is what an ex-boyfriend had called them after they broke up. She hated that she could see the resemblance and thought she’d have them filled out surgically if only Joe would let her.

She began to wonder if other men found her attractive. They had before she was married, though she’d only had two lovers before Joe, and he had been the best by far. She smiled again at how lucky she was, then picked up her breasts and held them where she thought they belonged. She continued to wonder if she could still attract a man.

She blew her hair dry, curling it under as she did. It was short and thick and cut to frame her face. She had it colored regularly with highlights. She fingered her bangs into place then sprayed it all down with holding spray.

She carefully applied her eye make-up, brushing on layer upon layer of mascara. She hoped she looked “old Hollywood” with all the glamour of Elizabeth Taylor, before all the husbands and weight gain. The mirror failed to reflect this image and instead she looked like Marcy with lots of mascara on. Her hair did look nice though.

She strapped on a push up bra and matching panties and then selected a dress that was casual enough for staying in, but still made a statement she thought.

Staring back in the mirror she felt foolish. The dress was not as casual as she thought and she knew Joe would not understand her being dressed up for nothing. She pulled on some slacks and a tank top instead. She’d tell him she was still made up from lunch with the girls.

Marcy was setting the table when Joe came home. Timed perfectly, she thought. He saw her making an effort without seeing the disaster she’d made of the kitchen while trying to goop layers of ingredients onto the lasagna without dripping any onto herself, the floor or the kitchen counter, where much of it had ended up. She’d barely had time to scrub down the kitchen and change before Joe got home.
“What’s cooking, hot stuff?”

Marcy smiled and tucked a loose piece of hair behind her ear.

“Lasagna is almost done and there’s a bottle of wine on the counter you can open.” She still couldn’t figure out how to use the high-tech corkscrew he’d been so proud of purchasing.

They sat down to dinner and he told her about a new client he’d been assigned to, some insurance case that would make the firm a lot of money and land him a nice bonus.

“So where should we go for vacation this Christmas?” he asked. “I was thinking Europe.”

“Well that would be different,” Marcy said. They usually spent their vacations in the Caribbean. Marcy thought about how much she loved lying on the beach, letting the sun cook her from the outside in. Her friends stayed white as snow all year round, worrying about wrinkles more than cancer. Marcy didn’t care. She liked the way the sun seemed to melt right through her, leaving her warm even after they arrived back in Ohio. She’d have to convince Joe this Europe thing was a bad idea.

After dinner Joe did the dishes while she flipped through pages of a magazine. She was too old to wear most of the clothes being modeled, and not built well enough to pull them off anyway. That night when they made love she didn’t come. Instead she watched his face trying to see what attracted him to her. When he was finished he seemed hurt and asked what was wrong.

“I don’t want to go to Europe,” she said.

He laughed, “Is that what’s bothering you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, we can go wherever you want.” He wrapped his arm around her and nuzzled his face in her hair. “I love you,” he said.

“Love you too.”

Marcy sat in her nightgown long after Joe left for work that day. Her hair was mussed around her face and her eye makeup was slightly smeared since she hadn’t bothered taking it off the night before. She thought she looked like one of the teenage girls she saw at the mall posing like baby whores in knee high boots and miniskirts. Somehow this made her feel sexy and she decided to put off showering.
She sat at the kitchen table unsure of what to do that day. The malls were full of sales as the end of the season approached, though she did not feel like battling shoppers over leftover trends. Instead, she attempted a crossword in the paper Joe had left sitting on the table. Normally, the puzzle made her feel stupid and today was no different. How was she supposed to know the name of a river in Turkey? She felt better when she thought of a four letter word for “chore” but then couldn’t think of a bean that started with “Y”.

Marcy stared out the sliding glass door that led to her patio. Across the yard she saw a man, a boy really; working on her neighbor’s sprinkling system. The man-boy had on a white undershirt and cargo shorts. She guessed he was about twenty-two. He was too skinny and had a goatee that made him look a little like a rough neck. Marcy watched as he turned knobs on the back of the house and made the sprinklers crank on and off.

Marcy wasn’t sure why but she felt herself get up and walk out on her lawn. The man-boy waved to her and she waved back, and realized suddenly she was still in her nightgown.

“Hey,” she said. “I was wondering if you’re the one who works on our system too.” Joe handled all the lawn care.

“Yeah, I turned it on last week. Is something wrong?”

“The front ones aren’t working.” She said, unable to think of why she might be talking to him.

“Well I’ve got a full schedule this morning, but maybe I can come by this afternoon and take a look.”

“That’d be great.”

She went back into the house and watched him again from her window, this time peering around the corner so he wouldn’t see her.

As soon as he left, Marcy ran upstairs to shower. She began to sing to herself as she shampooed her hair and continued to sing as she blew it dry. It was not until she was standing naked in her closet that she began to contemplate what it was she was trying to do. Was she trying to seduce this boy? Did she want to have an affair with him? Marcy had always thought affairs seemed so romantic and forbidden. Now the thought of one put an odd taste in her mouth. She grabbed a low cut top from her closet and a pair of tan pants; then exchanged the pants for boot-cut jeans thinking they looked more youthful.
As she was slipping on her pumps she suddenly remembered the sprinklers in the front yard. They were working fine. She had lied. She ran outside frantically and stopped short when she saw all the different knobs and switches on the house. They had numbers and letters next to them, but none of them seemed to make any sense. Not knowing what else to do Marcy grabbed a shovel out of the garage and went out to the front yard. She found a spigot by the flowerbed next to the drive way and began to thrust the shovel into it over and over, hoping to dismantle it somehow.

Finally it came loose and a shot of water just missed Marcy’s head. She felt one broken spigot was enough to convince him of her lie, and she ran back to the garage to replace the shovel.

When she got back inside she checked the clock on the microwave. It was only 12:30. He had said he’d be back sometime in the afternoon, but what time was that? Had he said later this afternoon or had he meant right after lunch?

She went in the living room and sat on the couch in front of the TV and flipped through the channels trying not to think about what she was doing. She was halfway through a rerun of “The Nanny” when the door bell rang. She took a deep breath, fluffed her hair, and then quickly changed the station to CNN, not wanting to be caught watching something so silly.

She answered the door and the sprinkler boy smiled at her.

She took him out to show him the sprinkler that wasn’t working.

“Oh yeah, we see this a lot.” He said, bending to look closer at the broken spigot. “People run over them with their cars when they’re pulling into the drive way.”

“Oh right. Well that’s probably what happened.” Marcy felt herself redden a little and exhaled with relief that he didn’t say it looked like it had been broken with a shovel.

“Well, I’ll need to replace that little sucker and I’ll tell ya, they can be expensive.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about that.” Marcy smiled at him and tried to think of a cunning way to find out if he was attracted to her. It was as if she’d completely forgotten how to flirt.

“Do you want to come in for a minute?” she blurted out. “For a drink, I mean. I mean it’s awfully hot out here and I thought you might be thirsty.” Marcy felt suddenly dizzy and thought maybe she was going to faint.

“Well ma’am, I suppose I could use a little something,” he said lifting his shirt to wipe the sweat from his eyes.
Then Marcy began to panic. She decided his accepting her offer for a drink was enough of an acceptance for her, and decided she was not ready to take things further, especially not with this less than attractive child.

“No, no you can’t.” Marcy said. “I, I just forgot I have to go somewhere.”

Marcy turned slowly, then rushed into the house and locked the door. She ran all the way upstairs and flopped down on the bed to catch her breath. After a few minutes she sat up and peered out the window to make sure the sprinkler boy was gone.

That night when Joe got home he found her still upstairs.

“Hey honey, what’s going on?” he said when he saw her sitting there, smoothing out the case on his pillow.

Seeing him there filled her with a sudden rush of guilt.

“Oh my God, I forgot to make dinner!” she said when she saw him.

“It’s okay. I’ve had a craving for Chinese food all day. Are you all right?”

“I accidentally ran over the sprinkler spigot by the driveway and they are expensive to replace and I forgot to call the company to see when they can come put in a new one, and I’ve been thinking about vacation and I really want to go to Europe with you,” she said suddenly all in one breath.

Joe laughed and sat down beside her.

“Well I’m sure we can buy a new sprinkler and still afford Europe,” he said.

Marcy rolled her head down into his lap.

“I’m sorry I forgot about dinner,” she said.

Marcy closed her eyes and smiled. The guilt slipped away in knowing she wouldn’t be caught. Her little adventure had left her strangely excited, and getting away with it was even better. She thought of all the places she could go, and men she could attract while he was gone. She’d be careful, she thought. It wouldn’t become a habit or anything. It might be okay to get her feet wet in that pool of other men though. As long as she didn’t go in all the way, as long as Joe never found out.

The next week at her lunch with the ladies, Marcy couldn’t keep from smiling. She smiled at their server, who smiled back, and smiled at the women, who had let themselves go
considerably, Marcy began to notice. She had thought before it was only because they were older, but noticed now they seemed softer, lazier, about their appearances. Eyeliner had been swiftly and unevenly brushed across their eyelids, eye brows had gone unplucked, and their hair was flat. She decided she, the youngest of the lot, had discovered the secret to keeping young and satisfied, and so she dipped her toes in wherever she could.
I doubt that as long as I live I will ever forget the summer Clint Parker came home to Hunnyborough. It happened a few years ago, but folks still talk like it was yesterday. I think everybody blames themselves a little. Like they could have known what was going to happen. Like they could have fixed things somehow. Really the only one to blame is me, but I’m keeping that information to myself.

Folks were saying it was the hottest summer the town had seen for fifty years. It was certainly the hottest one I’d ever lived through and seeing how I had a broken arm and couldn’t swim, I’d say I felt the worst of that insufferable summer. All the mammas and children in town spent their days in the public swimming pool while the daddies were at work. The children played Marco-Polo and Sharks and Minnows while their mammas leaned against the edge of the pool gossiping like a bunch of cows in a pond and I had to sit and watch, hoping the heat would just melt me into the pavement.

My casted arm was Bobby Henry’s fault. It was the first day of summer, after a long school year of spelling bees and multiplication tables. We were up in our climbing tree outside the Methodist church. Everyone was jumping off a large branch and it was my turn to go.

“Mabel won’t jump. She’s too chicken!” Bobby said.

“I am not! I just gotta get ready,” I said. I wasn’t chicken either. I just wanted to make sure I landed right, not on a root or anything.

Then Bobby pushed me right out of the tree. I didn’t land on a root, but on my arm instead. Broke it in two places. I still got the scar to prove it.

So while my Mamma and my kid sister, Jess Ann, went swimming like everyone else, I hung out in the park trying to scratch my arm by jamming twigs down my cast until it was time to leave. I had to stay nearby, so Mamma could see me through the fence, though she hardly ever looked for me. I found myself a big tree, too high to climb, and I sat underneath it. That’s where I liked to spend most of my time, squatted down by the dirt looking for holes in the bottom of the tree. This one had lots of holes. I read in a book once that gnomes live inside tree holes, so I was going to catch one and show it off to everyone else. I was doing my gnome watching the day I first saw him.
He was walking really slowly around the fence, looking in at all the swimmers. He had a golden brown mustache and a wad of tobacco in his lip. His clothes were so dirty he looked like he’d just walked through a dust storm. When he walked past me, I found out he smelled dirty too. I mean he smelled something so foul you’d think he never had a bath in his life. He looked down at me and spit tobacco right by my feet, so I stuck my tongue out at him. Then he smiled. His teeth were yellow and lined with grit from what he was chewing on. He kept right on walking, straight into town.

That night, when my daddy came home from work, we all sat down to supper.

“What’d ya’ll do today,” he asked us between bites of potatoes.

“I went swimming, and one of those big boys took my raft!” Jess Ann said. Jess Ann thinks she’s above bullies, because everyone says she’s so cute. She’ll learn one day though.

“Jessie, that raft wasn’t yours,” Momma reminded her. “It belongs to the pool, so anyone can use it. It isn’t nice not to share.” My momma was nibbling slowly on a salad, trying to make it last through dinner. With her new diet, she didn’t get to eat very much.

“But I had it first and it isn’t fair,” she said, pouting out her bottom lip, which made me laugh because she looked like a fish. My daddy smiled at both of us, then said to clear our plates and go get ready for bed.

After my sister had gone to sleep, I sat on the floor in the living room and played myself in a game of jacks. I heard Mamma and Daddy talking in the kitchen.

“Someone said they saw Clint Parker in town today,” Daddy said.

“Clint Parker!” Momma screeched. “What’s he doing back here? Are they gonna let him stay in town?”

“Well I don’t see how anybody has the right to make him leave. He was born and raised here after all.”

I picked up my ball and scooted up toward the kitchen so I could hear them better. It sounded like Momma was getting into the ice cream.

“After what that boy did to his poor mother I just don’t see how he can be allowed to stay here.”

“Martha Parker died of natural causes, dear,” Daddy said.
“Harold, you know just as well as everybody, that boy sent his mother to an early grave.” I could hear Momma pacing around the room.

“Well darling, if you could have proved that, I’m sure the judge would have kept him locked up forever, but seeing how the boy was already in jail the night his mother died, I don’t think anyone can prove he’s guilty of killing her.”

Momma made all sorts of worried noises, and then walked into the living room, ice cream bowl in hand. Surprised to see me sitting there, she sent me up to my room.

The next morning, Momma and Jess Ann wanted to go swimming again. So I snuck raisins in my pocket and brought them with me to my tree, supposing maybe I could use them to lure out some gnomes. I lined them up around all the holes, and then sat real still waiting for one to come out and eat them. After a while, I looked up and saw the dirty man coming toward me again. I stood up to show him I wasn’t scared of him, but also so I could run away faster if I had to.

He tipped his leather hat at me and asked “How do you do?”

“Fine,” I said.

He kept walking, and when I saw that he was not going to grab me I asked him where he was going.

“The zoo,” he said. “I’m going to free the lion.”

“Hunnyborough don’t got a zoo.” I said back.

“You’re right. But I’m going to catch the train to Washington. I’m going to meet the President there, and feed him to the lion.” He walked over and crouched down to my height, breathing his nasty breath on me.

“You’re a liar,” I told him.

“Maybe I am.” I could see tobacco juice spilling out between his nasty teeth.

“Lying is bad. It’s a sin,” I told him.

“Not if you don’t believe in sins,” he said, and I considered this.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Mabel Jeffries. You’re Clint Parker, aren’t you?” Somehow I had a hunch.

He raised his eyes at this. “Matter of fact I am.”

I was nervous now, but I figured I better ask him anyway.
“Is it true you sent your mother to an early grave?”

“Nope.” he said, standing up a little. “It was an early grave, but I didn’t put her there.”

“Cuz you were in jail, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

“Stole fifty dollars from a gas station.”

Stealing is a sin too, but I figured he wasn’t worried about that so I didn’t bother telling him. Instead, I just tried to look him in the eye to make sure he was telling me the truth.

“So you never killed anybody then?”

“No yet,” he said.

With that he stood up straight and spun around on his way. I looked around the tree to make sure my raisins were all still there, and that I didn’t miss any gnomes on account of Clint Parker. They were, and I wondered if maybe gnomes were nocturnal.

Then I started thinking about Martha Parker. She died before I was born, but I knew her husband was still alive. He lived on the south end of town and rarely left his house. I remember seeing him once at the strawberry festival. He sat at a picnic table all by himself and seemed to glare at everyone that walked by.

“Momma, why’s that man look so mean?” I had asked.

“He’s not mean, Mabel. He’s just sad. Sometimes they look the same.”

I guessed he just missed his wife. I wondered if he missed Clint too. I wouldn’t have missed him. Their house probably smelled better when he wasn’t there.

After a few minutes of just sitting there, I got bored and went back to the pool to sit with Momma. She and all the ladies started fussing over me soon as I got there.

“Oh, look at the poor dear,” Mrs. Mabrey said. She leaned over to look at my cast and her stomach rolled over her swimsuit like bread dough.

“I just don’t know what I’m gonna do with you all summer, not being able to swim,” Momma said, which was a lie. She knew exactly what she was gonna do. She was gonna sit me out by that tree while she and Jess Ann spent every day swimming. I couldn’t say that though, because it would be smarting off. She used to worry about me all the time when I was younger.
Now that she had Jess Ann to fuss over I guess I wasn’t her problem anymore. That’s all right though. In fact it made my life a whole lot easier. Besides, I knew how to take care of myself.

The ladies forgot about me after a few minutes and went back to gossiping about the new minister. He was young, and some people had heard he was liberal. I didn’t know what that was so I quit listening and went and dipped my legs in the pool.

I sat there for a while, guarding my arm from the splashes kids were making. Then I heard mamma bring up Clint Parker and my ears perked right up.

“So what do you all think about that Parker boy being back in town,” she said.

“Now you know he’s not up to any good,” Mrs. Henry said. “He’s probably just come to ask his poor father for money.”

“Oh, that poor old man. I don’t know how he stands it.”

“He doesn’t,” Mrs. Mabrey said. “Why as soon as that boy got out of jail, his father sent him away. Had his suitcase packed and waiting on the porch is what I heard.”

“Now Debbie, you never told me that.”

“Well I say here, here! That’s exactly what I would have done.”

I wanted to tell them that I agreed with my Daddy, he couldn’t have killed her if he was in jail. Besides, he told me he didn’t do it. Then again, he had lied about going to the zoo. I just sat quiet so I wouldn’t get into trouble for talking to strangers. Especially a stranger everybody thought was a killer.

The next day was Sunday, so we had to go to church before we could go to the pool. There’s a lot of things I don’t like about going to church. You gotta get all dressed up in dresses and panty hose. I hate panty hose. They take forever to pull on, and then you gotta do it all over again every time you gotta go to the bathroom. And my momma always has to curl my hair. She almost always burns my forehead when she tries to curl my bangs. Plus, I gotta listen to Jess Ann. She’s such a baby, she cries before Momma even starts brushing her hair. Then when you finally get to service you gotta sit on the big hard pews and just be quiet for what feels like a day. I usually draw pictures on the offering cards. Sometimes I drop them in the offering dishes when they come by, but Momma says that’s rude.

This Sunday I was determined to be good. That way when Jess Ann was bad they would say “why can’t you just be good like your sister?” I sat up straight in my pew and watched all the
other families walk in. I wanted to look well-behaved to them too. When just about everybody had walked in the new minister stood up and said “Good Morning!”

“Good Morning,” we all said back.

He started talking about what a beautiful day it was, and everything we should be thankful for. I got bored real quick and started looking around again. That’s when I saw him. He slipped in to the last pew really quietly. I guess so no one would know he was late. Clint Parker in a church, I couldn’t believe it. I nudged my Momma and she told me “Stop it.” I nudged her again, and whispered “look.” I nodded my head in his toward him. Momma gasped, and nudged my father. Pretty soon everyone in the whole church was whispering and looking. No one could believe it. I was glad. Maybe they wouldn’t all think he was a murderer if he went to church.

After church Momma couldn’t stop talking about Clint. It took us forever just to go home because she had to stop everybody she saw and say “Did you see who was here?” Jess Ann and I had to get ready to go to the pool all by ourselves because she couldn’t get off the phone long enough to help us. When we finally got there she practically ran to go talk to all the other mommas about it. I went over to my tree to look for the raisins, but they were all gone. I thought the least the gnomes could do would be to come out and thank me for them, but they didn’t, so I watched for Clint to come by.

After awhile, he did. This time he sat down next to me. I didn’t like this much because I could smell him better. I squeezed my nose and went, “Shooooowwweee, you sure do stink!”

He laughed and said he was thinking about getting in that pool to rinse off. I told him he might need his bathing suit for that and he seemed to think that was funny too. Then he asked why I wasn’t swimming. I raised my arm to show him.

“How’d you do that?” he asked.

I told him about Bobby Henry and the climbing tree.

“Well I hope you slugged him good for that.”

“I would have but my arm was broken.”

“How come you’re sitting around talking to me?” I asked. “Don’t you have a job?”

“I need your help,” he said.

“With what?” I asked, unsure that I wanted to help him.
“I’m trying to find my father,” he said. He picked at a stain on his jeans as he spoke and I watched, seriously wondering when was the last time he had washed them.

“You don’t know where your own father lives,” I said. I know some families have problems but this one seemed really screwy.

“After my mom died, we sort of lost touch.” He spat on his jeans where the stain was and started rubbing it in. “I tried the old house but it’s abandoned. You know where he moved to?”

Of course I knew. Charlie Parker was the meanest man in Hunnyborough. You got to look out for folks like that. They’re liable to shoot you for trespassing just for chasing a ball into their yard. Something rolled on to his property you just had to let it go.

I knew where he lived, but something was telling me not to tell Clint. It just seemed a little fishy to me that he didn’t know where his own old man lived.

“Did you try the phone book?”

“He’s unlisted.” Now Clint was just staring out past the pool into space somewhere. “I sure would like to get in touch with him,” he said.

I tried to look out at whatever he was staring at; as if that might help me make up my mind as to whether or not I ought to tell him. Everyone seemed to think Clint Parker was such a bad guy, and he looked like a bad guy and he had been in jail, but at the same time he’d kept me company under this tree the past few days and seemed nice enough, and he’d been at church, which is a place I’m pretty sure most bad guys try to avoid. Besides my daddy had said Martha Parker died of natural causes.

“What do you want to see him for, anyway?” I asked.

“I haven’t seen him for a long time. Wouldn’t you want to see your daddy if you hadn’t in a while?”

I shrugged and supposed so.

“He lives in the blue house on Hickory, just past the railroad tracks,” I said, because for some reason I felt I ought to, like I was trusting my instincts or something, which maybe isn’t always a such a good idea, because what happened next I really wish hadn’t.

Clint got up and said thank you. His face changed a little, but I couldn’t tell you exactly how. He just looked a lot more serious than he had seemed before. He started to walk away
toward Hickory, which was only a block or two away, and I watched him go, clomping in his
ing boots like each step was carefully thought through.

He was a far ways down the road when I remembered that Charlie Parker’s house not
blue at all. The one next to it was. The Parker house was half tan and half brick and had lots of
windows where you could easily be seen if you were trespassing.

I wanted to call out to Clint but he was way too far away. I looked over at my mother
who was sipping iced tea and popping grapes into her mouth one after another while listening to
something Mrs. Mabrey was saying. Her back was turned and I figured if I ran really fast I could
catch up with Clint before she would even notice I was gone.

By the time I started running he was already out of my sight, but I knew where he was
going so I ran that way. After a few yards my legs started burning but I kept going. When I got to
Hickory I turned and went past the railroad tracks. There was still no sign of Clint and I slowed
down a little as I thought my legs might fall off if I kept going.

I stopped between the two houses as Clint must have done. I walked around the blue one,
but saw no sign of Clint. I guessed he must have figured out which one was his father’s, but
decided to go over and peek in the window just in case. I figured as long as he was reacquainted
with his son, Charlie Parker might not notice the trespassing of a little girl.

When I peeked through the first window I came to, which was at the side of the house, I
saw the thing that I keep seeing every time I think I’m starting to forget about it. I close my eyes
and there it is in front of me again like it just keeps happening over and over.

Clint had found the right house, all right. He was there with his father in that room with
the window I was staring through. They were yelling at each other. Clint said something about to
his father like what did you do to her, and his father said some bad words people sometimes say
about women. They were faced off, circling the room the way cats do before a fight. It kept
going like this, with yelling and swearing and circling the room. I knew I should get back to my
tree by the pool, but I couldn’t bring myself to look away. Then Clint grabbed a lamp. It looked
heavy by the way he lifted it, but he brought it up over his head anyway. Charlie backed away
from him, and his voice switched from screaming to pleading, and then to laughing, which I still
don’t understand. Clint wasn’t listening though. He stepped up to his father and brought the lamp
crashing down on the old man’s head.
Charlie crumpled to the floor like a fly that’s just been swat by a newspaper. He didn’t move at all, but his eyes were wide open. They stared at me like he was trying to tell me something.

“What?” I wanted to say, but I couldn’t speak because Clint would hear me and he’d know that I’d followed him, that I’d seen what he had just done.

I backed away slowly from the window. I could hear Clint inside, moving things around. I turned and ran back toward the park. I must of ran to the park faster than I’d run away from it earlier, but my legs didn’t burn this time and I don’t even remember being out of breath. I quickly arranged myself beneath my tree like nothing had happened and immediately looked at my mother to make sure I hadn’t been caught. She was still popping her grapes and I knew I was safe. I wanted desperately to tell her I wanted to go home, but the sun was still high and she definitely wouldn’t want to leave yet. Besides my wanting to leave might raise suspicions and I thought it best to just sit there like nothing had just happened.

I tried with all my might to not think about what I had just seen. I thought for a moment about the gnomes, but they seemed unimportant now, and probably weren’t real anyway. I picked at my cast and tried to count how many days until it would come off but I couldn’t concentrate. It seems like the harder you try to avoid something, the harder it tries to slap you right in the face. And sure enough as I was still counting up the days since the day I broke my arm Clint Parker came strolling by the same as he always had as if nothing new was going on.

“Thanks for the directions, Hon,” he said. “I got in touch with the old man, all right,” and he patted me on the head.

I wanted to get up and scream, to tackle him to the ground punch and kick him until I didn’t have the strength to anymore. I wanted to yell “Murderer” and have someone call the police. But the truth was I had helped him, so the murder was my fault too. All I could do was sit there and play dumb, like I thought everything was hunky-dory and I though Clint’s daddy was still alive, sitting there thinking how nice of my son to have just stopped by.

“Mabel, I’ve got a question for you,” he said then still standing over me so I had to look way up to see him. I looked but I couldn’t speak.

“Is it a sin to kill someone?” he asked.

He needed a lot more church if he didn’t know the answer to that one.
“It’s a mortal sin,” I said, just barely a whisper because I was just realizing the gravity of it myself.

He crouched down closer to me to hear my answer and it was all I could do to hide my repulsion.

“But what about when David killed Goliath?”

“That’s different,” I said. “Goliath was a murderer.”

“Well then it isn’t always a sin, is it?” He straightened up, as if that settled everything and headed on his way back out of town.

I went into the pool area and sat down beside my mother. I felt like I ought to tell somebody about what the scene I’d just witnessed. I didn’t say anything to anybody, though; because my head was so full of confusion I didn’t know how to say anything. Besides, I didn’t know how to tell what I knew without getting myself into trouble as well.

I just sat there, not saying a word. My mother felt my forehead like I might be sick and stuck me in a chair under an umbrella to keep me out of the sun. I lay there like that, unable to think about anything until we went home.

I still had not spoken up the next night after dinner when I heard my mother and father talking in the kitchen. I was feeling pretty weird about everything that had happened and was actually just doing my best not to think about it at all. Then I heard my father mention Charlie Parker. I ran to the doorway to listen up.

“Dead! He’s dead! But how did he die?” My mother shrieked.

“They think he had a bad fall. The body was found at the bottom of the staircase with fatal wounds to the head.”

“Well he was pushed is more like it.”

“There was no evidence of anyone else in the house,” I heard my father say.

“It just seems like more than a coincidence to me,” My mamma said. One day he’s fine, then that boy shows up and three days later Charlie Parker dies. And where is the boy anyway? He’s disappeared again.”

“I admit that it is odd, but we shouldn’t go around saying things unless we know they’re true.” My father was wasting his words on my mother as I knew she must be making a mental list of people to call and tell as soon as my father left the room. I listened further, waiting for
them to mention something about how Clint had found out where Charlie Parker lived, but my father was sticking to the fact that Clint had had nothing to do with it.

I crept up to my room, not wanting to be caught listening in. Lying in bed that night, I knew sleeping would be an impossibility. My head was too busy replaying the events of the past few days. I had assisted in a murder and I couldn’t get that thought out of my head, but I had other thoughts too. For the first time I began to realize my parents didn’t know everything. I began to think maybe I could keep a secret too. This idea was pretty appealing given that not telling would be a sure way to keep out of trouble. But somehow the bad thing I’d seen Clint do, didn’t feel as bad. It was more like a game. I thought instead of being like momma and telling everybody everything I know about everybody else, I could keep my secrets to myself. I started thinking about the other folks in town and began to imagine what sort of things they might be hiding. Slowly, I started to drift off to sleep, my mind full of ideas about the private lives of others just waiting to be discovered.