Breaking Eggs:
A Collection of Short Fiction

Liz Powers
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When the following collection, *Breaking Eggs*, was first conceptualized, the initial idea was to create stories that focused on the lives of women. But more importantly, I wanted to focus on the struggles women encounter in their modern day roles and societies changing expectations of them. I examined these roles both within the family and in the outside world and tried to incorporate these often conflicting ideals into the lives of the three central characters of my collection.

The stories are centered on the lives of three generations of women in the same family. Miriam, the character whom opens the collection in the present day, is the grandmother figure. Following her are her daughter, Eileen, and her granddaughter, Hailey. These three figures all must grow and mature throughout the collection in order to discover a sense of personal self while still maintaining their connecting to the past.

All of these stories intend to show the character’s conflicts and struggles in some way, whether it is through exploring the nature of love in modern romantic relationships or examining the long term affects of spousal abuse on a family. By closely looking at these trials from a woman’s perspective and allowing for both the downfalls and the triumphs of certain situations, I hope to show the importance of self realization and self worth in modern society while still acknowledging the importance of personal connections, whether they be family or otherwise, to the individual.

While the stories are shown here to be a whole collection and are intended to be interconnected both in plot and characters, they are not to be read strictly as a comprehensive work as one might read chapters in a novel. Rather, each story is intended to be able to stand alone. This form is tricky, to say the least, in that it leaves
plenty of room for error. One may find the order of the collection confusing because the events are not necessarily linear as they generally are in a traditional novel. The temptation to over explain relationships in each individual piece is fierce and is only offset by the fear of loosing a reader of the whole collection by including too much similar character detail. However, I hoped that by giving the collection this more freeing form I would not only be able to explore a variety of incidents and more diverse time periods in the lives of these three women, but also would be able to separate the specific incidents in each work and highlight there singular importance to the lives of the characters.

Many of the incidents that occur within the collection may appear quite ordinary. Often, the subjects are domestic and stereotypically feminine. Gardening, childcare, and baking are only some of the day to day activities that are found on the surface of these stories. However, by looking deeper at each individual work, one can find the importance of individual action and better grasp the overarching theme of the whole collection.

While working on this collection, I examined the works of many modern and contemporary authors in order to prepare myself for the actual writing of the text and to experiment with successful styles and techniques. However, the author whom I found to be the most helpful for my particular project was the Canadian author Alice Munro.

Alice Munro is “considered a master of the short story form” (Gale) and has won a variety of prestigious awards over the last four decades. Most of her stories focus on female characters and examine their lives from the 1960’s onward. Although I read an assortment of her short story collections while conducting research for my project, the
two collections which I found to be the most helpful were *The Love of a Good Woman* and *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose*.

The first of these two collections, *The Love of a Good Woman*, was interesting in conjunction with my project mostly because of the different forms Munro uses in her stories. While in many of her stories Munro takes a straightforward approach by leading her readers through a linear plot line that uses the same characters, some of her works experiment with different ways to tie incidents in a narrative together. The most interesting of these interwoven narratives in this collection, and particularly for the purpose of my project, was the title story, “The Love of a Good Woman.”

In “The Love of a Good Woman,” Munro does in fact work in a linear way. However, the story is told from the shifting viewpoints of different sections which at first seem completely unconnected. The story centers around the death of an optometrist, Mr. Willens, in a small Canadian town. In the first section, a group of three boys discover Mr. Willens body, drowned in “a whole car, down in the pond” (Munro 6). The section leads the reader from the discovery, to the boy’s uncertainty of what to do and the eventual disclosure of the information to a parent. However, from there the next sections shifts and the reader is plunged into the story of a nurse, Enid, and her dieing patient, Mrs. Quinn. Mr. Willens and his death seem to disappear for the length of many pages and the only hint of him occurs when the author is discussing Enid’s life before becoming a nurse and how she took up her deceased “father’s place in the weekly games her mother played with Mr. and Mrs. Willens from next door” (41). It isn’t until the author is ready to divulge the awful “truth” of Mr. Willens demise at the hands of Mrs. Quinn’s husband that the murder mystery is brought back to the focus of the story.
Like Munro’s “The Love of a Good Woman,” I hoped to experiment with narrative forms in my own collection, and attempted a form of this particular style in my story, “Mischief.” In my attempt at this form, the two intertwined stories are not linear and are not put in separate sections in the same way Munro separates her own portions. However, I attempted to take the stories of two seemingly unrelated situations and intertwine them in such a way that would lead to their eventual meeting at the end of the piece. In this way, I hoped to use some of the same mystery and invention that Munro’s “The Love of a Good Woman” uses without creating a situation which was too gothic or unrealistic and might then pull the reader out of the more ordinary, domestic sense my collection hopes to embody.

The second, and largely more influential, collection of Munro’s stories which I used when doing research for my own project was her book The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose. This collection of works, like my own, is a collection of short stories all centered on the same female characters and the events of their lives. The first, Flo, is the stepmother of Rose, the second and main character whose personal story is followed throughout the work.

It has been said of this collection of stories that they “have strong thematic links” (Martin 126) but that the collection is “not a novel” (127). In fact, “eight of the ten stories… were originally published separately” (Carrington 124); however, they still seem to “constitute an organic whole” (124). This can be seen in the collections through stories such as the first story, “Royal Beatings,” and the title story, “The Beggar Maid.”

The first story, “Royal Beatings,” tells the tale of a very young Rose being beaten by her father because she has done something to anger her stepmother, Flo. In it, the
reader gets its first glimpse at Hanratty, the imaginary setting of most of the collection where Rose grows up in “the poor part of town” (Munro 5). This story also serves to place the reader in the time of the stories, ending with the information that Rose is now an adult, looking back on the incidents of her childhood after hearing a radio interview conducted with a one hundred and two year old resident of her former town. Although the story opens the collection and sets the reader up for the stories to come, it can still be easily read as a self-contained story of early childhood in a small community.

Similarly, the title story, “The Beggar Maid,” is the story of Rose’s college years and her romance and eventual marriage to a graduate student. While the story takes place at a radically different time than that of “Royal Beatings,” it still has a sense of connection, not only through the characters, but through several incidents within the plot itself. Once Rose becomes engaged, she takes her fiancé, who comes from a wealthy family, back to Hanratty to meet her stepmother, Flo. This reintroduction of Hanratty allows the reader of the whole collection to call back upon the knowledge of the town they have received in the previous stories to form a more complete and distinct picture of the introduction of Rose’s wealthy fiancé into the crumbling, poverty stricken society. However, Munro also gives the reader just enough information about Hanratty within the story of “The Beggar Maid” itself that a reader could easily get enough of a sense of the town to read the story independent of the rest of the collection. She does this seamlessly, throwing in comments such as, “It (going away to college) had destroyed the naturalness, the taken-for-granted background of home. To go back there was quite to go literally into a crude light” (Munro 79) to give hints of the stark contrast between Hanratty and the outside world.
One of the places in the story where this sense of the town comes through in a very vibrant way occurs when Rose describes the trouble Flo has gone through preparing to welcome Rose’s fiancé into their home. “Flo had…cooked a meal of scalloped potatoes, turnips, big country sausage…The centerpiece was new and especially for the occasion. A plastic swan, lime green in color, with slits in the wings in which were stuck folded, colored paper napkins” (Munro 100). Even to a reader who has not read the previous stories in the collection, this passage, along with the knowledge of Rose’s fiancé the reader has been given earlier in the story, shows the utter irony of the “trouble” Flo has gone to over the dinner and the absolute failure her poor touches of “fanciness” have created to generate a sense of what Rose’s childhood in a place such as Hanratty must have been like.

These touches of connection continue throughout the collection and allow for each of the individual tales to be read as either chapters in a whole collection or individual works. Perhaps the best analogy for The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose is that the work as a whole is “perhaps a pendant of amber beads that are similar in shape and colour and strung on the same threads, but also separate and different, gradually increasing in size and scope until reaching a natural climax and conclusion” (Martin 127).

This kind of “pendant” form largely contributed to the way my collection was composed. The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose served not only to set a precedent for the kind of interconnected stories I wished to portray, but also served as an example of how separate stories could be grouped together through slight touches that reminded the reader of the whole collection or gave the reader of an individual story additional
background information. This can be seen in my own work in stories such as “Something with Coconut” in which the character of Hailey implores her fiancé to allow her grandmother, Miriam to bake their wedding cake. If read as an individual story, this moment serves to show Hailey’s connection to a family that is not largely addressed in the story and also as a moment of attempted self decision. However, to the reader of the whole collection, this moment serves as a touchstone to the stories that have come before, asking the reader to recall the importance of food and baking to Hailey’s grandmother and to remind the reader that Hailey’s concept of love is partially wrapped up in this matriarchal importance.

Similarly, the final story of Munro’s *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose* greatly influenced the creation of the final piece of my own work, “More Than One Way.” In Munro’s work, “The final story…offers a wider perspective on the protagonist and a sense of an ending” (Howells 63) while still retaining the quality of completion which allows it, and the other stories of the collection, to stand on their own.

The story in Munro’s collection, “Who Do You Think You Are?” is a story about the main character, Rose, finally returning to her childhood home and realizing how her old home, and her very self, have changed. It begins by Rose reminiscing with her brother, Brian, about Milton Homer, a former resident of Hanratty who served as “the village idiot” (Munro 227) and progresses to memories of Rose’s high school days and a boy, Ralph Gillespie, who used to do impressions of Milton Homer. Rose claims that Ralph and she had, “a family similarity, not in looks but in habits or tendencies” (233). She goes on to discuss a chance meeting she had with Ralph as an adult when she had returned to Hanratty to clean out Flo’s house and put her in a nursing home. Through this
meeting, Rose admits that she was very curious about Ralph, a now army veteran, but she
was afraid to ask him all of the questions she wanted to. Afterward, when the reader
reaches the end of the story and discover’s that Ralph has died, they also feel a strange
sense of loss. The end of the story claims that, “Rose didn’t tell this (the news of Ralph’s
death) to anybody, glad that there was one thing at least she wouldn’t spoil by telling”
(242). However, in delivering this line, Munro has revealed it all. It seems in this final
story that Rose has come full circle, not only in her relationship to all the important
characters of the previous stories, but also in her realizations about herself. The story
serves as a reminder that Rose has gowned from the curious girl of Hanratty to a slightly
eclectic actress and finally to the responsible adult, taking care of her elderly stepmother
and grasping a final piece of certainty about her life through her connection to her
deceased high school acquaintance.

Likewise, the final story of my own collection attempts to tie up the loose ends of
the previous stories in the return home of one of the main characters. However, unlike
Munro’s Rose, my character, Hailey, is brought home by the need to disclose a secret and
is forced to not only admit the problems of her own life, but deal with the problems of her
family whom she has left behind. This path, like the path of Rose throughout The Beggar
Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose allows for the final instance of self realization for Hailey.
Unlike The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose, however, my collection ends with a
reintroduction of all the significant characters from throughout the works into a single
story in order to give a deeper sense of closure to the work as a whole as well as fleshing
out the final story in a significant way. Through Hailey’s confession of unhappiness with
the current state of her life, the reader is able to get a glimpse of a mature character who
has learned more from her experiences in the previous stories then the reader may originally have been led to believe. Also, Hailey’s decision to change and her reconciliation with her family, particularly her mother, work to give the story, and the whole collection, a sense of clarity.

My collection, Breaking Eggs, is a composition of several short stories that work both separately or together to explore the changing roles of women in today’s society through examining familial and social ideals and expectations. While I read many authors in my preparations for creating the collection, Alice Munro proved to be the most influential on my work, contributing to my use of form and the very structure of the collection itself. I hope that what follows serves not only as a testament to the claims I have made in this literary introduction, but also merely as a collection of interesting stories which are enjoyable for the reader to experience.
Her hands were tired. As Miriam stood at the counter, watching the wad of dough mesh with her own fleshy fingers, she realized the rest of her was tired too. She wiped back the stray hair and beads of sweat that were forming on her forehead with the crook of her arm before letting both hands rest on the countertop to support herself, not caring that bits of batter and specks of flour were falling to the yellow tiled floor. Yes, she was tired, but it was not a new feeling. It seemed like lately, every part of her took a turn aching. If it wasn’t her hands it was her feet. Or her back. Or her head.

Of course, it was the worst when she was baking. Standing over the counter for hours, sifting flour and breaking eggs, it got to be too much on her. She just felt so heavy sometimes, as if some unknown force were weighing her down. It was ironic, she thought, because most people shrank as they aged. She chuckled to herself at this. Her best friend, Josephine, who lived in the apartment above her, seemed to lose an inch every time she toddled down to meet Miriam for their morning coffee.

When Miriam had first moved in to the Parkland Community Apartments for the Aging she had tried to convince Josephine to go out for breakfast with her in the mornings instead of staying cooped up in the rather drab, eggshell apartment.

“We can have a real meal, Jo,” she said, “and not lift a finger. Don’t we deserve that?”

Josephine had eventually agreed, reluctantly following Miriam to her small blue Toyota on a soggy Tuesday morning.
“Pancakes and sausage,” Miriam said as they pulled into a parking space at the restaurant, “or even just eggs Sunnyside up. Runny and with toast, doesn’t that sound good, Jo?”

Josephine had shook her head as they went into the restaurant and listened at the table as Miriam prattled on about good food and good coffee and how they deserved to be served once in a while after all the work they had done over the course of their lives.

“Isn’t that what retirement’s for?” Miriam said.

But when the waiter came, and Miriam ordered her orange juice and French toast and hash brown potatoes, all Josephine ordered was a cup of regular coffee, black.

This routine went on for several days without so much as a drop of cream in Josephine’s black coffee, but Miriam couldn’t quite bring herself to ask. She had only been Jo’s neighbor for a month or so and, as curious as she was, she didn’t want to offend her first new friend. She wondered if that was why Josephine, and so many other people her age, were shrinking at such a fast rate. Was she the only person over 65 who had more than black coffee for breakfast? She knew she was a large woman. She had big bones, and plenty of meat on them, she always had. But she figured, at 68 years old there was nothing wrong with a healthy weight and a healthy appetite.

Finally on a Friday morning as the two sat in their regular green upholstered booth at Finch’s, Miriam watched Josephine sip her coffee from the slightly faded blue cup and sighed.

“Jo,” she said, “if you weren’t going to eat breakfast with me, I don’t see why you agreed to come. You could have that same damn cup of coffee in my apartment every day and I bet it would taste just as good.”
Josephine set her cup down on her saucer with a soft clink and seemed to examine the Formica tabletop for a long while before pushing the sleeves back on her white cardigan sweater and sitting up as straight as she could.

“Miriam,” she said, “you’re a nice lady. I thought you were when I first met you, and I can tell things about people from the start. Then you got so excited about breakfast and going out, that I just couldn’t tell you no. But Miriam, I am 88 years old, and I’ll be damned if I let all the people in this restaurant see me eat the way I do.”

Miriam looked at her for a moment and then finished eating without a word. The next morning Josephine came down and had coffee at Miriam’s kitchen table in her eggshell apartment.

They had continued this tradition for the next four years, only skipping the mornings when Josephine would go to visit one of her sons on the other side of town. In the beginning Miriam would often make banana bread or cheese strudel to share with her friend. Josephine would normally only nibble on a corner of her confection, wrapping the rest in a napkin to take home for later. Miriam would just smile at this and pour them more coffee. We may be old, she thought, but we have our dignity.

It wasn’t often that Miriam made homemade pastry for their mornings anymore, although she would pick up the occasional box of donuts. Getting around was manageable, it was only baking that seemed to weigh her down.

But Miriam has always loved baking, and she couldn’t help thinking of the time before the community apartments, when she had lived in the big yellow house on Sacket Avenue. When her granddaughter, Hailey, had been young and her and her mother were staying with Miriam, Hailey would call it “the big bird house” and invite all the cashiers
at the supermarket over for thanksgiving dinner, promising she would help with her
grandmothers “good cooking.”

Even later, when the two of them had moved into their own home and Hailey had
gone to school, she would love going to her grandmothers until Eileen got home and
helping her grandmother bake. Oh, they would make cookies and pastries and little
gingerbread cakes that Hailey would frost with blue icing and dot with cinnamon hearts
and gum drop eyes.

“What’s his name?” Miriam would ask, lining all of the creations up in a row and
pointing to the one that was the most “unique.”

“Grandma!” the five year old would squeal. “They don’t have names!” And then
she would promptly grab an unsuspecting man off the rack and bite off his head,
revealing a grin of cookie crumbs.

But now it had to be a special occasion for Miriam to bake, which was why when
her daughter had called her yesterday she had immediately headed for the flour container.

Miriam was used to her daughter calling in the mornings. It had become as much
a part of her routine as brewing coffee and gossiping with Jo. Eileen’s timing was
impeccable, and she would normally call just as Jo was going home from breakfast and
Miriam was contemplating what needed to get done for the day.

“Mom, I’m heading to Milner’s, I used the last of the bread on the kids’
sandwiches this morning, do you need anything?”

“Oh hello dear,” Miriam always replied before hemming and hawing over the
question at hand. “Well,” she would say, “I suppose I do need a few things, maybe eggs
and some milk. Oh, and dear, did I tell you about old Mrs. Jones’ down the hall?”
And then, half an hour later, after Eileen had been told all about old Mrs. Jones’ ship, the nosy janitors that didn’t like to mop the entranceway, and, if she was lucky, the fight that Mr. and Mrs. Clancy had the night before, Miriam would finally remember what Eileen had called about in the first place.

“But you know, dear,” she would say, “there’s so much that I need at the store, and I don’t want to be a bother. Oh, why don’t I just go with you?”

The rest of the day would be spent at Milner’s with a stop at the meat market, and a trip to Miriam’s favorite lunch counter for broccoli and cheddar soup when she could manage it. Sometimes she would feel guilty for running her daughter all over town. She knew how lucky she was to have Eileen, but she couldn’t help her need to get out of the house. Not that I couldn’t go alone, she thought, but then she had to admit to herself that going without Eileen was becoming more and more of a challenge. It seemed that even when she was out shopping, pushing a cart through the grocery store, looking for ripe bananas or the right brand of margarine, the weight would find her and start to do its work.

As she thought about the weight and the constancy of the gravity that seemed to be tugging at her she set down the old rolling pin she had been using to flatten the dough, wiped her hands with a towel, and pulled over the stool she kept within reach of her workspace. It seemed as if the fatigue was spreading and she knew she would never finish her baking without a short break. As she settled against the back of the stool she examined the work she still had ahead of her. The dough was almost done and within the hour the cookies would be in the oven baking nicely, crisp and brown. After they cooled,
she would sprinkle them with powdered sugar, fix a small plate for Josephine, and then wrap the rest up so they would be ready.

The phone call from Eileen had been different yesterday morning. It was early, Josephine was still finishing her coffee, and Miriam could tell by her diction, the very tone with which she spoke that something was peculiar. She knew, of course, that her shopping plans would have to be cancelled for the day, but she had a feeling what Eileen had to say would be worth it.

“Mom,” Eileen said when she answered the phone, “I just talked to Hailey.”

“Oh darling, how is she?” Miriam said, a wide smile evident in her voice. “It seems like I haven’t spoken to her in ages!”

“She’s good mom, she sounds like she doing well. But listen, she’s coming in to visit. She says she’ll be in tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, my goodness! She doesn’t give much notice does she?” Miriam replied, trying her best to sound agitated.

“And,” Eileen continued, “she says she has news.”

“Well now, isn’t that nice,” Miriam said. “Darling I have to go now, tell me when she gets in.”

“Who was it?” Josephine had asked when Miriam hung up the phone and started toward the kitchen.

“Eileen.” Miriam was already reaching into the pantry.

“Well, what did she want? And what’s the hurry? You’re coffee’s going to get cold.”

“Hlie cumm tmrreerow.”
“What? Miriam, get out of the cupboard. I can’t understand a word–”

“Hailey, Joe. Hailey is coming in tomorrow.”

“Oh, well, isn’t that nice. You haven’t seen her for a while, have you?”

“No, I haven’t. Not a long while.”

And she’s coming with news! Miriam had thought to herself. She tried to contain her excitement in front of Joe and reminded herself how convincingly composed she had been on the phone. It could be nothing, she had kept reminding herself. It could be nothing, and then where will you be? Disappointed.

“Well I’m sure she’ll be glad to see you,” Joe had said, standing up and heading toward the door, a yellowed napkin in her hand. “I hope you don’t mind, I’m going to take the rest of this donut home for later.”

But now, as she kneaded the ingredients and rolled out the dough in her small eggshell apartment and looked at the work in front of her and thought about cooking and babies and love she felt the weight and the pain float away into nothingness.

“News,” she said to herself as she clucked her tongue and shook her head and stood up once more to finish her dough.
Mischief

Every day Miriam walked out to the garden on the other side of the low, stone wall and checked to make sure her carrots were still growing. She did this in the midmorning, after her daughter Eileen had gone to work but before the dry summer sun reached its full potential in the sky. At first, Hailey had only watched. She followed her grandmother as far as the kitchen, then ducked underneath the table and popped up on the opposite side, standing on an old chair and peering at her from behind the frilly, key lime curtains. From her place behind the glass, Hailey watched Miriam trot down the creaky back stairs and across the worn dirt path followed by Lady, her black, shaggy mutt. When she reached the wall, her thin, flowered duster would vanish behind the brick along with the dog, and Hailey watched as her whole grandmother seemed to be swallowed up. Miriam dipped down low and disappeared, then came back up, just as quickly, wiped the sweat from her forehead, and bent low again. Hailey watched in awe from behind the kitchen curtains and wondered, every time the figure went down, what she was doing in that unknown place.

This ritual went on well into the first month of summer that Hailey spent with her grandmother. Hailey would sit with her in the mornings, eating Frosted Mini-Wheats from her pink plastic bowl and watching re-runs of “I Love Lucy” on the only television station Miriam’s antenna could pick up. Miriam laughed and laughed, sitting on her brown recliner with her hair up in soft, foamy curlers from the night before.

“Oh, that Lucy,” she’d say, and shake her head, “she’s always into mischief.”

Sometimes, if an especially good episode was on, Miriam would ask Hailey if she wanted to hear a story.
“Your grandfather,” she said, “was a good man. But your grandma was a lot like Lucy. She always got into mischief.”

Then Miriam would go on to tell Hailey about her childhood. She’d tell the story of being twelve years old and visiting her brother and his new wife at their farm.

“Lloyd loved that farm,” she’d always throw in when the farm was mentioned. But Miriam and her younger sister did not love the farm, and while her parents and brother were visiting, Miriam and her sister snuck out to the barn to see the animals and “get into a bit of mischief.”

“My sister, Kay, loved the goats,” Miriam said, clucking her tongue. “She loved those goats, and we’d go out to the barn to see them. Kay always thought it would be fun to ride one of them; we were little then, Hailey, not much bigger then you, and a goat seemed an excellent thing to ride. Well, one day when we went to find the goats, my brother had left the gate open to one of the pens and Kay and I climbed right in. Kay was so excited. We had petted the goats before through the metal bars that held the pen closed, but she knew that now would be her best chance to really get a hold of that goat. But when we got in the pen, wasn’t that silly old billy goat lying down in the hay? Well, Kay was determined, and so was I. We pushed and prodded that goat till we couldn’t push no more. Then Kay got an idea. Surely that goat would move if he were on fire? And so, your grandma and Aunt Kay set fire to that poor goats rear-end. Oh, your great grandpa and Uncle Lloyd were sore at us, that’s for sure. We cost ‘em a whole goat!”

Miriam started laughing again and Hailey, who had crawled up on her knee, bounced along with her grandmother’s hearty chuckle. Most time’s Hailey didn’t
understand the stories, or what made them funny, but she laughed along with her grandmother, not wanting to ruin the happy mood.

When the stories were over Miriam stood up, a bit out of breath, and deposit Hailey back on the floor to watch another episode of Lucy while she went to her upstairs bedroom. Hailey watched the television, but not as intently as when her grandmother was present. Instead, she turned one ear toward the back hallway, listening for Miriam to descend the stairs and watching for the large, floppy, yellow hat.

The hat intrigued Hailey, because in the time before she and her mother had stayed with Miriam she had never seen anything like it. It was made of straw and the edges seemed to droop down along the side of Miriam’s head, reminding Hailey of her old beagle whose ears used to droop sadly in just the same way. This hat, though, could never be sad. Besides being the most bright, vibrant yellow, the hat had a cluster of bleach white daisies right at its center and a wide purple ribbon around its band. Yes, it was a spectacular hat, and Hailey knew that when her grandmother placed it on her head, it was time to go out past the wall.

On one particularly muggy morning in July, the yellow hat came down the stairs on top of Miriam’s silver-haired head just as Lucy’s credits were rolling. Hailey jumped up expectantly and ran to her, a wide grin on her face.

“Why look at you!” Miriam said. “Did you get dressed all by yourself?”

Hailey nodded and Miriam examined the blue-jean overalls, purple t-shirt, and green toe-socks jammed in sandals that Hailey must have pulled out of her dresser drawer and thrown on haphazardly. The shirt was on backward and it appeared that Hailey’s left foot had lost its fifth toe.
“Well, you look lovely. Listen, I have an idea. Since you’re already dressed, why don’t you come out and help me with the garden today?”

Hailey beamed, taking Miriam’s outstretched hand, and they both headed out the kitchen door.

“You know, your grandfather built that wall,” Miriam said once they had started down the path. “Your mother and uncle loved to play outside when they were young, and he would always be yelling at them for stomping on his tomato plants. Of course, it wasn’t their fault that the tomatoes didn’t grow.

The truth is, your grandfather was a terrible gardener. I don’t think anything back here would have grown if I hadn’t kept an eye on it when he went off to work. But he believed his garden was his baby, so he built the wall, to keep it safe.”

Miriam brushed her hand against the top of the stone before she turned them down the path into the garden. Hailey’s eyes grew large as they turned the corner. Bushy tufts of carrot tops made rows and rows down along the wall and only ended when they got to the chain link fence that marked the end of Miriam’s property and the beginning of a back alleyway.

“All I could ever manage to grow were the carrots,” Miriam said. “And your grandfather didn’t even like carrots, in the beginning. He would stand right there, in that corner, and shake his head at the stunted tomato plants, wondering what went wrong. I never had the heart to tell him that tomatoes just don’t grow well in Ohio. He learned to love the carrots though. I’d make pot-roast with carrots, broiled carrots, and your grandpa’s favorite, carrot cake. There were always more than enough. One year, he entered the biggest one in the county fair. Won first prize. He was so proud, he hung
that blue ribbon up on the dining room wall and whenever the children would complain about the garden and not having enough room to play kickball he would just point to the wall and grin. ‘Sacrifice children,’ he would say, ‘sacrifice. Because of those carrots, you’ll never go hungry.’ Then he would go right outside to the garden and just stare at them, sometimes for near an hour.

I miss him, Hailey. You would have loved your grandpa.”

* * *

George kept birds. He had a whole room in his house devoted just to his parakeets, and at night the neighbors complained they could hear them whistling. Eventually Mrs. Gorpet, who lived next door, called the police and reported a disturbance. From then on, George had to keep the bird in cages at night and make sure the room was dark. He told the policemen the birds needed freedom.

“Let ‘em go then,” the policemen had said, handing George the signed citation and touching his cap.

The birds were many different colors. Sky blue, neon green, pale yellow. Some had a small regalia of black feathers around their necks and others were very plain. If asked, George would tell you that he loved all of his birds equally. Normally though, a person didn’t even have to ask. If you were in front of George in the grocery store, you would hear about his birds. He had exactly 128 of them, at the present time, and each of them had their own names and birthdays, which he knew by heart. He could recite their names alphabetically, backwards or forwards, and could tell you their birthdays in
calendar order. His favorite thing to tell was that he had a green bird that he had named shamrock. His birthday was March 17.

“Isn’t that clever?” he’d say. Then he’d laugh. A sort of “gaguk”, followed by a snort, and push up his thick framed glasses that had inevitably slid down his small nose. The workers all knew to avoid George, and so did the people who shopped at the store regularly. The cashiers would turn off their overhead lights when his cart full of birdseed and newspapers made its way toward the front of the store and the shoppers who were headed to the check out counters would suddenly remember they needed milk or eggs or butter. But there always seemed to be a new cashier or a mother of twins who didn’t know any better, to listen to George tell stories about his birds.

Besides his room of parakeets, George had a room in his house that he used as a library. It was covered on all sides by deep, plywood shelves, but even these weren’t enough to hold all of the books he had collected. So in addition, books were piled all around the room on chairs that were missing one or more rungs and old birdcages that had cracked wires or broken latches. All of the books were about parakeets. No one could figure out where he found so many books about the birds. Many speculated that they couldn’t possibly all be different books and that there had to be repeats among the piles, but those who had the misfortune of seeing the room swore that they all were different. They had looked. It was said that when he wasn’t sitting with his birds he was reading the books, cover to cover, over and over again.

“Parakeets are very intelligent,” George said. “I was reading a book just the other day, ‘Parakeet Pandemonium: Inside the Mind of Your Bird’, and it said that Parakeets
have much bigger brains than most people give them credit for. It said Parakeets can really understand what you say!”

After that, the rumors started spreading.

“You know, that George talks to his birds,” one woman would whisper.

“Yes, well why wouldn’t he? They’re his whole life, aren’t they?” said another.

“Well, that Corrigan boy, Johnny, told me he had heard George telling his birds bedtime stories,” said a third. “But only things like Little Bo Peep and Old Mother Hubbard, he’s afraid anything with wolves or cats would give them nightmares.”

* * *

Every morning, Hailey followed the big yellow hat out to the garden and sunk her knees into the soft earth.

“You have to make sure you only pull the weeds,” Miriam told Hailey on the first day. “The carrots are underground, so it’s tricky.” She held up a stalk. “But you can tell by the leaves. See? The longer, bushy clumps are carrots, and these pokey, stubbly ones are the weeds.”

Miriam bobbed up and down the rows, individually checking each carrot stalk for the little green bugs that liked to nibble holes through them.

“It’s too hard for me to stay down on the dirt, but you’re just the right size.”

Hailey scooted her knees across the dark dirt and inspected each leaf individually. The weeds poked at her tiny fingers, but she tugged at each of them till their roots emerged and she threw them into the garbage pile at the end of the row. Compared to the
weeds, the carrots seemed soft and inviting, and some days Hailey would brush the stalks against her nose and bury her face into their leaves.

“Just like a blanket,” Miriam said. “Your grandfather always said, ‘carrots could save the world if we let ‘em.’”

* * *

From 11a.m. to 3p.m., George would let the parakeets have free range of the house. He opened the cage doors one by one and then, once the birds flew out, he’d get fresh water and change the cage lining.

“It’s my favorite time of the day,” he said. “Just me and my birds.”

George had set up swings and stands for the birds throughout the house, and sometimes they would twitter and perch on the neon plastic bars, but mostly they just flew, back and forth across the open rooms. After George had finished his cleaning, he’d take a book from the library and sit in the living room, birds flying overhead. He’d try to read about new bird inventions or cleaning tips, but inevitably, one of the parakeets would land on his shoulder and nibble his ear. So, instead of reading, George spent most of his afternoons playing with his birds.

Most of them whistled, and he had taught some of them to talk. Ruby, a light blue parakeet, could say, “love me,” and would nuzzle up to George’s neck. Another bird, named Ronald, could dance and bobbed along to the music the other parakeets whistled. Snowflake was George’s newest bird, and she had not yet warmed up to the others. When George opened the cages, she waited in her corner till all the other birds had soared
across the room and George had finished his cleaning. Only then would she timidly fly out and find an unused perch. While he loved all of his birds, he had been spending more time with Snowflake over the last few weeks, trying to perk her up. She still didn’t fly through the house with the others, but George thought she was finally starting to accept him. She no longer scurried to the back of her cage when he entered the room and she had started eating her food with less hesitation. The man at the pet shop had warned George that she might be skittish. She was a rare bird, the rarest George owned. Except for the small black stripes on her neck, Snowflakes feathers were the purest white.

“She’s not albino,” the pet store owner had said. “But I’ve never seen anything like her.”

* * *

On Sundays, Eileen didn’t have to go to work in the turquoise and pink diner downtown. So, instead of going to the garden with Miriam, Hailey would go with her mother to the supermarket or take walks along the back alleys to the park. Eileen never said much on these walks, but squeezed Hailey’s hand tightly within her own, her eyes always scanning the streets, her thoughts elsewhere. At the park, she pushed Hailey on the swings or rode the teeter-totter with her, but she never let her play on the jungle gym.

“It’s too dangerous, Hailey,” she said when her young daughter started in that direction. “And I won’t let anything happen to you.”

One Sunday Hailey and Eileen were heading home from the park, taking their normal route. They cut down the same back alleys and side streets till they reached a
wide, dirt lane that brought them straight back behind Miriam’s house. When they got to
the alley, Hailey watched for the chain linked fence and the bright yellow hat that was
normally still bobbing over the carrot leaves.

“They’ll be ready to pick soon.” Miriam had told her the day before and now
Hailey was getting anxious, looking forward to pulling the orange tubers from the
ground. But as they neared the house, Hailey half expecting a basket of carrots to be
slung across Miriam’s arm, she realized something was different. There was Miriam,
moving along the rows. There was Lady, lounging on a sunny patch of grass. There was
the floppy yellow hat. And that was it. The hat was wrong. Besides the purple ribbon
and the bleached white daisies, there was a bleached white bird perched on the hat’s top.
At first, Hailey thought it wasn’t real. She wondered how she had never noticed this
extra trimming or whether Miriam had added it while they were away. But then, the bird
moved its head and blinked at the garish bright light.

Hailey let go of her mother’s hand and raced inside the metal gate. The bird
looked at her as she approached, uncertain whether or not it should fly away. It slightly
spread its wings but then turned its head back, and instead of taking off, nibbled at the
underside of its feathers. In one fluid motion Hailey reached out to the hat and held the
bird gently in her closed fingers.

“Bird,” she said softly.

Miriam got up out of the dirt and exchanged a look with Eileen.

“What was that sweetheart?” Miriam said, touching the girl on the shoulder.

“It’s a bird,” said Hailey again, opening her palm and revealing the parakeet. The
bird stood up on her hand and looked around.
“That’s right, Hailey,” said Miriam, “that’s a bird. In fact, it’s a parakeet. Those are special birds, and if you’re patient, and treat them well, sometimes they can learn to talk.”


* * *

It wasn’t long before the posters started appearing.

Lost Bird!

White Parakeet, Black Neckline

Answers to the Name of Snowflake

If Found, Please Call 349-5555

At first, Eileen felt guilty.

“Mom,” she’d say to Miriam, “we can’t just keep that bird. It has an owner, a home.”

But the damage had already been done. Hailey loved the bird. That very night they had rummaged through Miriam’s garage and found an old birdcage. The door was slightly bent and the metal around the edges was rusting, but the bird seemed to have no complaints. It whistled when Hailey entered the room and would sit on her shoulder in the mornings to watch the television.

“Good bird,” said Hailey. “You don’t get into mischief like Lucy and Grandma.”
Then, one afternoon in early September, the doorbell rang. When Miriam opened it, she found a picture of the precious Snowflake thrust in her face.

“Have you seen this bird?” a nasally voice asked her. The man who stood in front of her was short and plump, with greasy black hair. He was wearing a suit that appeared to be corduroy and he smelled of newsprint and granola.

“Why no,” Miriam replied. “I’m afraid I’ve never seen that bird before.”

“I lost her about a month ago, she’s all white, her name is Snowflake?”

“No, I’m afraid not. A month ago, you say? Well, that bird could be anywhere by now, couldn’t it? I mean, it flies. It could have left the state.”

“No,” the man said, “not my snowflake. She wouldn’t leave me.”

Just then, a whistle came from the living room and Hailey could be heard laughing.

“I Love Lucy,” squawked a voice.

“You have a parakeet,” the man said. “I could recognize that sound anywhere.”

“Well yes, we do,” Miriam started, but the man had already slipped passed her and was now waddling toward the voices in the other room. Miriam hurried after him, but found him stopped just inside the door. Over his shoulder, Miriam could make out the shape of her granddaughter; the small bird was perched on her shoulder.

“You see sir,” Miriam said, “we have a bird, but I’m afraid she’s orange.”

And it was true; the parakeet was no longer white, but now a vibrant, bright orange.

“Isn’t she pretty,” Hailey said, stroking the bird’s feathers.

The little man looked perplexed.
“Wherever did you find her?” he asked. “I know parakeets, and I’ve never seen a
bird with coloring like that.”

“Well, I suppose it has to do with her diet,” Miriam said. “You see, she eats a lot
of carrots. We have a garden, so they’re plentiful at this time of year.”

The man squinted his eyes and looked at Hailey and the bird.

“Snowflake,” he called. “Snowflake, come to your papa, come to George.”

The bird did not flinch, but stayed where it was on Hailey’s shoulder.

“Her name’s Pumpkin,” Hailey said. “I named her, because she was orange, and
Carrot seemed like a funny name for a bird.”

George turned to Miriam, his face changing to shades of red.

“You stole my bird.”

“Mischief! Mischief!” the bird called happily, nuzzling closer to Hailey. “I Love
Lucy.”
Stained Glass

Hailey didn’t really mind the wedding–she got to wear a pretty blue bridesmaids dress and have her hair done up in curls–but once she and her mother moved into David’s house and she found herself sleeping in a canopy bed under a fluffy white comforter, she started writing to her father. Simple lines at first.

*Thanks for the gift, the locket is lovely. I’m going to Girl Scout camp in June.*

The longer she wrote, though, the more complicated things became. He never actually responded to her news of camp or math test scores, but a week or so after she slipped an envelope in the mail she would get one of her own. He always wrote the same thing,

*Thanks for the news. Love Dad.*

But it seemed to be enough. She wondered somehow if the need to see him now, when she was 15 and just finishing her first year of high school, had anything to do with the transition of writing to him when her mother and David had married.

She mulled over the idea of seeing her father for about a week before she actually brought it up. She had hoped to ask her mother first, alone, before bringing the subject up to David. However, on a Tuesday night as they sat eating a dinner of pork roast and mash potatoes, forks and knives clinking against the china, the perfect opportunity arose.
“You got a letter today from your father, Hailey,” her mother said. “Oh, and I bought you a new sweater for school down at the mother house, they have to have a special emblem on them, the school crest I think, but really it’s not so bad.”

“I’ve been thinking about it,” Hailey replied.

“It only comes in navy or forest green, so I went with the navy; I hope that’s ok.”

“No, I’ve been thinking about my father,” she said. The room got very still as all silverware stopped and found itself lying on the table.

“Well, what about him?” her mother said.

“I think,” she said, “that I would like to meet him.”

“Darling, you don’t just meet your father,” her mother replied. “You’ve known him since you were born.”

“That’s not what I meant. I meant, I want to go visit him. I don’t really know what he’s like. He has a house now, a job. It’s not the same as it was.”

“Hailey, I understand your curiosity, I do. But you can’t just leave now. School’s still in session, you’re still settling in, and I’m not sure I would be comfortable.”

“What about this summer? New Mexico isn’t that far away.”

“I don’t know, Hailey. I don’t like it.”

“But Eileen, she may have a point,” David interjected. Hailey and her mother both turned toward him, a bit stunned. In his three years as part of their family, he had never really interfered as far as Hailey was concerned, except to offer to pay for the new school.
“I mean, doesn’t she have a right to at least meet the man? He is her father. I know that things weren’t exactly good the last time you saw him. But he has shown a bit of maturity in the last few years. It might really be good for the both of them.”

That night, Hailey listened at the top of the steps as her mother and David argued about her. By the next morning, it had been settled. Hailey was going. She would leave after school was out on the 13th of June. Her mother wrote her father a letter, asking him how he felt about a summer guest. A few weeks later, Hailey heard her father’s voice through the phone. She had expected the call to be emotional, frightening perhaps. She thought she might cry and was mortified that the sound of a sob would be the first thing her father would hear from her after ten years of silence. However, she had not quite been ready for,

“Hello Hailey. I can’t wait for your visit. I’ve told your mother all the details in my letter; I’ll meet you at the baggage claim. You’ve seen my picture, but I’ll wear that same hat just to help you pick me out.”

“Oh, ok, well thanks.”

“Alright then, I’ll see you in a few weeks.”

And then silence before the tone clicked on. After that she worried, for the first time, that maybe she had made a mistake.

“Your ticket is for a week’s stay,” David told her at the airport. “But you know that anytime you want to come home, if you ever feel, uncomfortable, you just let us know.”

“I will I promise,” she said. She leaned in and gave David a hug. “Thank you,” she whispered into his shoulder.
Her mother’s goodbye did not seem as warm.

“I love you,” she told Hailey, her arms seemed stiff as she wrapped them around her. “Be careful.”

When the plane took off she leaned back in the too small blue chairs and watched the green horizon fade farther and farther away. Just a few hours, she thought, and closed her lids to dreams.

The Albuquerque airport seemed to have dust in the air. It was clean, but somehow just being there made Hailey feel as if the desert had nestled itself into her tongue. She watched as the luggage went around and around baggage claim C until her small baby blue suitcase appeared. She picked it up off the ramp and turned just in time to see a beige cowboy hat making its way toward her, the face below it sporting a nose similar to her own. Back home, anyone spotting this desert man would have laughed, a want-to-be cowboy on Cleveland soil. But here, in this gray airport, he seemed to fit. Here, he seemed real.

They bounced down the Albuquerque streets in her father’s red Ford truck, Hailey’s luggage at her feet. Their meeting had been dry, a bit tense, and his suggestion to “head home” had been a welcome one. They left the city, heading east. Office buildings and busy streets gave way to lonely roads and dusty, red horizons. Sweat beaded on Hailey’s forehead as they went and her father apologized repeatedly for the broken air-conditioning.

“Went last week,” he said. “I know it gets mighty hot in here, but I just didn’t have the time to fix it. Don’t have central air in the house, either, I’m afraid. But I have a unit in the room where you’ll be staying, so at least you’ll get some sleep.”
The rest of the trip passed silently. Hailey fanned herself with a copy of *Seventeen* that she had flipped through on the plane and watched as cactuses and leveled off mountains passed her by. She had learned about the formations in geography class. She thought they were called plateaus or mesas, but she couldn’t remember which. Finally they pulled off the highway and down a dead-end street, coming to a stop at a peeling, ranch style house with camel paint and olive shutters.

Inside, the ceilings seemed low and the décor was drab. Walls of brown, khaki, tan: variations on a theme. The living room was bare, an old southwestern couch, wood rocker, and TV stood alone in the vast space, seeming to sink down into the soft, tufted carpeting. A dirty fireplace leaned against the far wall. A 3 year old Hailey beaming out from a frame atop its mantel and an old, wooden cross hanging above it were the only other ornaments in the room.

“You’ll sleep here,” her father said carrying her luggage down the hallway and into the bedroom at its end. “I’ll be on the couch. It pulls out, you know, into a bed. The air conditioner’s there and the controls are on that side. I cleaned out a corner of the closet, and this drawer at the top of the dresser. It’s not much, I know, but its home.” He smiled at her then, a wide, toothy grin spreading out from the dark stubble of his face and Hailey couldn’t help but return the gesture.

“I’ll give you some time to get settled. You should probably call Ohio; tell ‘em you got in safe. We’ll eat in an hour or so.”

He closed the door behind him and headed down the hallway. Hailey almost collapsed on to the firm, stocky mattress with its crisp, white sheets and took in the room around her. The window air conditioner hummed above the silence of the house and she
welcomed the cool wisps of air washing over her after the hot ride in the old truck.
Cleveland seemed days away from her now. She sat up to call home, but instead of reaching for the phone, she fingered the nap button on the bedside clock radio and fell back onto the bed.

The two of them sat down to a dinner of chili and store-bought cornbread muffins. Hailey didn’t have the heart to tell her father that she didn’t eat beans, and so she swallowed them down quickly while they were still too hot, burning the roof of her mouth but saving her from their taste.

“You see good,” she said, swallowing another bite.

“It’s southwestern, ya mean,” he laughed. “You won’t find nothin’ this good in the Midwest, that’s for sure. Best part of the country down here is the food.”

“And the scenery. Even the drive here was gorgeous.”

“Oh yeah, the mesas are a beaut. I was thinking you’d want to see those, and probably the mountain caves in Sandia too? Not sure what else, but there’s lots to choose from.”

“I’m sure it’s all interesting,” Hailey said, gulping down another bite.

“Sure is. We’ll take some time out tomorrow, figure out exactly what to do. I got four days off work, but come Monday I’ll have to head back. I wasn’t sure; do you need some one to stay with? A sitter or something? Sheila, she lives down the way a bit, she’s got a daughter about your age and offered to take care of ya while I’m gone.”

“I am fifteen,” Hailey replied.

“That’s true, only fifteen. And in a place you ain’t never been before.”
“I take care of myself at home. I don’t want to be a burden to anyone. I know how to get by on my own.”

“Your mother,” the words seemed to get caught in his throat and Hailey watched as he grappled with what he wanted to say. 

“She trusted me to take care of you. I know I haven’t always, but I’ll be damned if anything happens while you’re here now.” With that he got up from the table and headed back to the kitchen, returning with a bowl of salsa and tortilla chips. 

“Forgot these,” he mumbled as he placed the items on the table and sat back down. He looked at her then and seemed to stare straight through her eyes. 

“God, you look just like your mother. About her, Hailey. About what happened, the day you left…”

“Don’t,” she replied, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

So instead, they talked about the present. Her father went on for near an hour about his life and his work, the people down the street and the changes he’d made. From the letters they’d exchanged and his simple, one line replies she never would have guessed he was capable of talking this much, but it was nice to glimpse parts of his life. He had questions for her too, of course, but not nearly as many day to day details needed to be spelled out for him. From her letters he knew the names of all her teachers and closest friends. He asked how algebra was going and if her Spanish was getting to be any good, but for him it was like filling in the blank weeks since her last letter. For her, he was filling in a lifetime. And so she listened to him talk about his security guard job at the plant and ol’ John who worked the cameras with him and had been around for years.
She heard about the apartment building he had lived in up until a year ago in the heart of the city and how much work he had done to move into his new home.

“I always hoped that some day you’d come visit,” he said.

She found out that he attended a Bible study twice a week, and went to AA meetings just about as often. The Bible study didn’t matter to her much, but the AA did. He said he’d been sober for three years and twelve days. He was Protestant now, Lutheran, and he was sure that his connection to the Lord had helped him through.

Hailey reminded him that she went to a Catholic school, took theology classes and spent every Friday morning at mass. This seemed to make him smile and so she was glad she had left out the fact that all of these activities were mandatory. Still, the connection he seemed to feel between sobriety and faith was strong and Hailey would be damned if she contributed to him falling off any of his twelve steps. It was for that reason, and for fear of offending, that after the table had been cleared and the dishes washed Hailey sat down and listened as her father read passages of the Bible.

“‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.’”

She would learn the stories and passages that were his favorites. Ecclesiastes 7, anything from Proverbs, and the story of the Prodigal Son all seemed to be reoccurring in these nightly vigils. Hailey wondered if these were themes he followed on his own, or
whether her presence had made him change his devotion to one of reconciliation and mercy.

Over the next four days they visited ancient Native American caves, the Natural Museum of History, and several churches where her father told her that miracles had been performed. On their last day before he returned to work, he took her by bus to a Native American pueblo on top of a mesa and they marveled at the adobe huts that seemed to bake in the hot New Mexico summer. A tour guide talked about the history of the town and the ancient rituals that took place in the closed village center. A small, sun-baked woman with crackled skin had a table set up at the bench which served as the bus stop and was selling hand-woven blankets and bright orange terracotta pots. As they waited for the rickety beige bus to pick them back up, Hailey examined the work and the woman smiled and nodded at her as she carefully handled each piece.

“Yes, yes,” the woman said as Hailey examined a small clay doll, hand painted shades of turquoise and white.

“Yes, that piece is very special. My granddaughter, she helped me make it. I teach her to weave as well.”

The woman held up a small lap blanket made with bright purples and reds.

“She is good, no?”

“She is, very good. Everything is very beautiful.”

The old woman smiled a kind smile at Hailey and she continued to turn the doll around in her hands.

“How much?” her father asked the woman, appearing behind Hailey and watching her handle the small figurine.
“Ten dollars.”

Hailey’s father pulled a black, leather wallet from his back pocket and handed the woman the bill. The woman wrapped the figure in delicate white paper and handed it to Hailey in a brown paper sack just before the bus pulled up to its stop at the weathered bench.

Sunday nights her father spent at AA meetings and so Hailey was left to fend for herself in the beige house.

“Don’t forget, Sheila’s just down the way if there’s any trouble. Her numbers on the counter, along with any emergency numbers you might need. I shouldn’t be more than an hour or so. You sure you’ll be ok?”

“I’ll be fine.”

After he left, Hailey tried to watch a family movie on TV, but she kept getting distracted by the silence outside. She turned the television off and took another small tour of the house, this time touching every item. Finally, after sweeping her hand across the smooth countertop, her hand rested on the cold, black phone. She had called home the night she arrived to Albuquerque after dinner and her father’s prayer, but she had got the answering machine.

“I’m here, the flight was fine, I’ll talk to you soon.”

She had tried to say, “I love you” but the words seemed stuck in her throat, so she hung up instead. Now she felt guilty, and contemplated making the long distant call. She was sure that they were either waiting by the phone, anticipating with every ring her voice on the other end, or they had forgotten she existed.
Instead she wrote them a letter. She would probably reach home before it got to them, but it seemed easier to let the words come out on paper: she was having a good time, they had visited an Indian village, it was hotter here than she had expected. She sealed the letter and tucked it in the drawer of the bedside table. The table also held the figurine, still wrapped in the thin paper, and Hailey removed it and untangled it from the delicate folds the woman had so carefully wrapped it in. She examined it once more, the geometric shapes of its dress, the careful smile and closed eyes of its tanned face. On the bus ride down, she had thanked her father for the trinket.

“You needed a souvenir of your first visit,” he said smiling. “Besides, I’m sure that woman appreciated it. They take great pride, you know, in their heritage. She could tell the way you loved every inch of that little figure, and it probably meant a lot to her that you’d take good care of it.”

“She said her granddaughter made it.”

“Well then, there you go. That’s why it’s so special.”

The next few days went off without much excitement. Her father agreed to let Hailey stay at the house on her own, so long as she checked in with Sheila throughout the day. On his way to work Monday morning, her father had taken her down the road to Sheila’s house and introduced the two.

“Here she is, Sheila. My little girl.” He put his arm around her shoulder and smiled wide.

“He talks about you all the time,” Sheila said to Hailey. “I hoped I’d get to meet you when you came. I have a daughter about your age, Moira. She’s still sleeping now, but if you’d like, we’d be glad to have you down for lunch.”
Hailey accepted the invitation and, after a lunch of homemade enchiladas, she and Moira went for a walk to the local park and talked about all Hailey had done since she had arrived.

“I love the pueblo,” Moira told her as the two of them sat on the red plastic swings. “My father was an Acoma. We lived there till I was three, but when my father died my mother couldn’t stand to stay in our house. Besides, she was always afraid I would be playing and would run right off the side of the mesa,” she laughed. “Oh, my mother was never meant for that life. I still visit my grandmother when I can and she always says, ‘I tried to teach your mother to weave, as soon as she married your father, but her fingers always got caught in the wool. She finally tangle the loom into such a mess, I had to let it go.’ I don’t think she ever really liked my mother, but she made the best of it.”

“Do you miss your father?”

“Of course I do. Didn’t you miss your father all those years?”

Hailey didn’t respond.

“But I like to think my father is watching over me. And my mother. I know that, from somewhere, he’s smiling down on us.”

Hailey spent the next day with Sheila and Moira at the mall and the movies before heading back to her father’s house to pack.

“I hope we’ll see you again soon,” Sheila said, hugging her goodbye. “If you need anything before you go, just let us know.”

Packing exhausted her, and Hailey fell asleep just as the sun was going down.
When she woke up, her father was sitting on the edge of the bed, holding the painted doll.

“I didn’t really remember the night your mother took you,” he whispered, more toward the figurine then to Hailey. “I was drunk, passed out on our bed. When I woke up it was bright out. She didn’t leave a note and I couldn’t remember anything that happened after supper, so I guessed she had just taken you to the grocery store with her. We were out of milk. It seemed obvious.

When the sun went down and you still weren’t back, I got anxious, angry. I was hungry. I thought she should have made dinner by then. I tried to call your grandmother, but no one answered at the house. I thought about getting in the truck, heading out looking for her. I would remind her of her place, that’s what I thought, but instead I took a beer out of the fridge and sat down in front of the TV. And that’s when I saw it, the empty bottle smashed against the wall, and I remembered. I remembered her, yelling at me to stop, trembling in the corner,” a tear rolled down her father’s cheek and Hailey sat, stark still, in the dimly lit bedroom.

“That’s when I knew. She was gone, and so were you. I drank everything in the house then. Beer, Jack, whatever there was. I stayed in bed for days, just staring at the ceiling. When I finally got up, I never wanted to drink again. What I wanted was your mother back, more then anything. I knew she had to be at your grandmothers’, but that she wouldn’t see me. That’s when I found the AA. It sounds stupid, that your mother saved me. But it’s true. As time went on, though, I gave up on her. I knew she wouldn’t want me back. That’s why I left. I moved around a lot, at first. Then one of the guys from the group helped me find a job down here, a place to live, a church. I gave up on
your mother, but I hoped that someday, someday I could be your father again. I didn’t give up on you, Hailey; I just had to wait till I could be your dad.”

Hailey sat still in the stone silence. She watched her father’s shadowed figure, taking in deep gulps of air, his hand on his forehead, waiting. She wanted so badly to say something to him, to tell him it was ok, that she was fine, and he could be her father now. Instead, she leaned over in the darkness and put her head on his shoulder as his body collapsed into sobs.

After the plane landed at the Cleveland airport Hailey headed down the ramp to find David smiling at her.

“Welcome back!” he said, a bouquet of pink carnations in his hand.

“We got your letter yesterday; it sounds like you had a pretty fantastic time. I want to hear all about it on the way home.” David handed her the carnations and gave her a quick hug. “Let’s head to baggage claim and then get out of here, ok?”

Hailey looked around, confused, as David tried to lead her down the crowded escalator.

“Where’s Mom?” she finally asked.

“Oh Hailey, she had a meeting. But we’ll catch up with her tonight, ok? Now how about one of those famous just-out-of-the-oven cookies they sell here, huh? You must be starved!”

But she didn’t see her mother that night. Eileen stayed late at the children’s center where she had volunteered since she had married David. She called around eleven o’clock to tell Hailey she was sorry, there had been an emergency with a little boy named Henry, but she would see her first thing tomorrow.
But in the morning, Hailey found a note on the table.

Sorry Hailey, had to stay last night longer then I planned. I’m exhausted and I’m just going to bed for a while. I’ll let you know when I wake up.

Mom

So Hailey spent the day unpacking. Fingering the white trim of her frilly pink and white bedroom and tiptoeing around the sounds of her mother’s deep-sleep breathing at the end of the hall.

Finally, as she finished putting her clothes away, she heard a stirring from her mother’s bedroom and a noise on the stairs.

“Mom?” she asked, peeking her head out of the door. But no one was there. She went down to the kitchen, looking through the rooms. She came back upstairs and there, standing at her dresser, was her mother.

“Did he buy you this?” she asked, holding the small Native American figurine in her hand.

“At the reservation,” Hailey said, watching her mother’s back. She could see her hands, turning the doll over and over. Suddenly she closed it in her hands. And started squeezing.

“Mom?” she didn’t say anything, but her grip appeared to tighten. “Mom?”
And then the figurine was on the ground, turquoise and white shards scattered on the hardwood floor, the light from the window streaming in, catching the colors like pieces of stained glass.
Guidance

“Hailey, I’m concerned.”

The conversations Hailey had had with her mother lately always seemed to start out this way.

Hailey, I’m concerned. Hailey, I’m worried about you. Hailey, your future.

But now it seemed Eileen had gotten the school guidance counselor involved, helping him out with one of her favorite phrases.

“Hailey, I’m concerned about your college applications,” the drone voice of Mr. Smith started again. “Your test scores have all been high. The SAT’s, the ACT’s, these are all excellent placements. Combined with your GPA, they should be enough to get you into a superb University.”

Hailey nodded her head at the man, but was really focused on his thick blond moustache which seemed to twitch every time the word ‘you’ came across his lips.

“Well, Hailey, what I don’t understand than is why you do not plan to apply to more challenging schools. Cleveland State? Cuyahoga Community College? Young ladies from St. Mary’s have prided themselves for generations on their outstanding achievements in academia. Perhaps there is a deeper issue at work here, hmm?”

Hailey looked at the rotund man, his glasses sliding down the bridge of his nose. A deeper issue? Yes, she thought, that’s it exactly.

“You may be right, Mr. Smith,” she said.

The counselor smiled at her.

“That’s excellent, Hailey. I’m so glad you could see it my way. This may be the first step toward figuring out what it is, hmm? Now, what I think is best is for you to
He handed her a list with the schools she had decided to apply to on one side. On the opposite side was a very different list. Notre Dame. St. Joseph’s College. John Carroll University.

“Just think about it,” he said. “Make the lists, and then we can meet again and analyze what all of your thoughts about these schools mean, hmm?”

Hailey could hear the sound of her shoes reverberating off the high ceilings of the stone hallway as she walked out of the guidance office and back towards her classroom. Clack, clack. Clack, clack. Clack, clack. The first floor always seemed to be abandoned, the dimly lit guidance office at the back end of the hall was the only place life was visible, but even that was rare. Other then Mr. Smith, the collection of offices surrounding the waiting room had been empty. Hailey thought that the wall of posters that stood as a greeting at the door with messages such as ‘Smile! And the World Smiles With You!’ and ‘The Only Losers Are the One’s Who Don’t Try!’ must have scared all the other students off. And maybe the counselors as well. The farther away from the office she got, the slower her footsteps became. Clack, clack.

She knew that when she returned to Sister Mary Clair’s chemistry classroom, which Mr. Smith had summoned her out of, every pair of piercing eyes would turn on her. They would all contain different sentiments, but their smugness would be the same. ‘What have you done now?’ one pair would ask. Another would glare ‘how did you manage to miss the lecture on carbonate ions?’ The rest might be more general. ‘We all
hate you’ would merely vibrate throughout the room and Hailey would be able to stop analyzing each pair of eyes and sulk her way to the back of the room.

Not that this attitude from her fellow classmates was anything out of the ordinary. When Hailey had first started at the St. Mary of Perpetual Suffering High School for Girls, she had simply tried to blend in. Most of the girls had known each other since birth, growing up in the large brick houses that lined the suburban streets outside the campus and toddling into each other at Gymboree playgroups, already eyeing each others pink Baby Gap jumpers and suede white shoes. Hailey was not one of them. It was only because of David, her stepfather, that she had transferred from her drab, public school that looked more like a cement parking garage to the imposing building she was in now.

“It’s the best school in the neighborhood,” David had said as he drove her on her first day. “And you and your mother deserve the best now.”

Hailey had nodded as they headed up the driveway and past the convent, to the brick structure that seemed to loom atop a cliff.

“Thank you, David,” she had said, slinging her blue book bag over her shoulder and closing the car door. But instead of going into the main hall for freshman orientation she had found her way to the nearest bathroom. She hoped only the round, red-haired girl who had been washing her hands when Hailey burst through the door heard her cry.

It hadn’t been until her second week at the school that Hailey had discovered the true hell she had tumbled into for the next four years. It was after second period gym, when the girls had all returned to the locker room to change, that the name had first come about.
“Hey, look at Twiggy,” said Becky, a petite, bronzed girl whose father owned a chain of bowling alleys. The popular girls all twittered along with her.

“Twiggy, twiggy,” they chanted, pointing at Hailey’s adolescent breasts and paper thin thighs. Hailey had felt a twinge of pain as Becky snapped her bra and she tried to cover herself, ashamed. Becky snickered taking a canister from her pocket and slipping a small white rectangle of paper on her tongue. She passed the container around to several other girls who did the same.

“Twiggy,” she laughed once more, before linking arms with the others and sauntering away to theology class to learn about the love of Jesus.

“They’re just jealous,” her mother would tell her whenever she brought home a new tale of twiggy horror. “Remember, names can never hurt you.”

But at the time the name did hurt. It stung, like stones being slung at her bony arms and thin, lanky legs. In the locker room after gym she would watch as the other girls would change into their rolled plaid skirts and white polo shirts which they filled out perfectly. Even the stiff, uniform fabric seemed to hug every one of their curves the right way.

“What’s the matter, Twiggs?” one of them would ask when they caught her staring. “I don’t care that you can’t grow your own, these are mine.” They would grab their breasts, like ripe red apples in their hands, and turn away from her, as if she would suddenly reach out and try to steal them. The other girls would all laugh.

“These are ours,” they would chant, “only bee stings for a twig.”

Once Hailey turned seventeen and her body started curving, looking more like a fleshy Greek goddess then a waif, she understood that despite their snarled lips and
piercing eyes the other girls had been unknowingly paying her a compliment. She knew now that when she got older she would have her mother’s body, soft and plump, instead of the model-like stick figure she had hated up until then. But the nickname, and the hatred, had stuck with her classmates, despite the disappearance of its original meaning.

And so, as Hailey headed down the gloomy hallway back toward chemistry and the malicious eyes, the clack, clack of her shoes stopped. Twiggy, she thought, shaking her head. That’s bullshit. Within a few months she would be graduating. She would be out of the world of plaid skirts and knee socks and party drugs in bathroom stalls. She would be out of the world of Twiggy. But she wanted out now. The clack, clack started up again but this time it was faster and it was heading down the side hallway to the back staircase. Clack clack, clack clack, clack clack.

Down the stairs to the basement and out the backdoor, she thought to herself, nearly tumbling down the stone steps, their edges crumbling. She reached the bottom and stopped to catch her breath, her heart pounding in her ears. Out, out, out, it seemed to thump.

The back door was immense, made from a heavy cypress wood with black iron trim. Like the rest of the school, it reminded Hailey of some sort of medieval fortress, outdated and overbearing.

“This school will keep you safe from the world,” Sister Mary Clair had said. “And the world safe from you.”

These words reverberated in Hailey’s ears and her eyes moved down from the rounded top of the heavy door to its black handle, and the thick chains that surrounded it. Trapped. Ancient nuns, ancient doors, ancient forms of confinement. She backed away
from her escape route and collapsed onto the stairs.

Any minute now they would realize that she was missing. Every student was accounted for every minute of the day. From homeroom to class, from class to study hall. Sign in. Sign out. No one falls through the cracks.

She could already hear Mr. Smith’s voice in her head.

“I’m worried about you, Hailey.”

Sister Mary Clair would not be as forgiving.

“Our God is a righteous God, Hailey,” she would say. “He giveth, and he taketh away.” Then she would proceed to giveth Hailey detention and taketh away her hall pass privileges.

Hailey knew what her mother would say when she got the phone call from the Mother Superior.

“I’m concerned about you, Hailey.”

It was like a vicious circle of concern and care and overbearance that Hailey couldn’t escape. She brought her hands up to her face and felt a something scratch against her closed eyelids. In her hands was a crumpled paper, the schools Mr. Smith had given her to think over.

“Make a list,” Hailey said to herself, opening the sheet in her fist. “Why I want to go.”

She crossed off all the schools she had planned to apply too and turned the sheet over. She skimmed Mr. Smith’s selections, marking off a few as she went. Finally she got to the bottom of the page where Mr. Smith had added in schools that were out of the
state. She wrote a single line, folded the paper, put it in her pocket, and started back to class.

The next September, her friends at St. Gregory’s would ask Hailey what had influenced her college decision.

“How did you end up here?” they would say. “I can’t imagine anyone would choose Oklahoma.”

But her answer was always the same.

“It’s far away from Ohio. It’s far enough away.”
Bye-Bye Baby

“Mommy, Mommy, Mommy?”

“Katherine, what is it?” Eileen buckled the small girl into her car seat in the back of the green minivan. Katherine didn’t answer at first, and as Eileen saw her daughter shrink back from her harsh voice, she softened and tried again.

“What do you need, sweetheart?” she said, brushing the girls bangs back from her forehead.

“I forgot Teddy upstairs,” she said, lowering her eyes to her miniature, pink tennis shoes.

“Well, we can’t go to pre-school without Teddy, can we?” Eileen replied. “I’ll go get him for you and bring him and Jeremy back to the car so we can get going, ok?”

“Ok,” Katherine replied, immediately sucking on the sippy-cup of apple juice her mother handed her.

Eileen crawled back out of the van and headed to the back porch to fetch her son and Katherine’s darling Teddy. She felt bad for getting frustrated at the girl. After all, it wasn’t Katherine’s fault that she had been arguing with her son all morning, trying to explain to him why he had to go to kindergarten. Of course, Jeremy was almost always the problem. She had known that today would be no different when he came down the stairs at 6:30a.m. in his tyrannosaurus rex pajamas holding his stomach and groaning.

“Uhhhh,” he had moaned as he walked crookedly toward Eileen. “I have a tummy ache, Mommy.”

“Do you?” she had replied, not taking her eyes off the early morning news. “Oh, well, I guess that means you can’t go to school today, huh?”
“I guess not,” he replied, throwing himself down at her feet. “I don’t think I could even get in the car.” A cough was added for effect. Eileen knew that one day, when he was giving his acceptance speech at the Oscars, he would have to acknowledge her. Today though, she wasn’t in the mood.

“Wow, it’s that serious?” she said, furrowing her brow in concern. “Well, that settles it. You definitely can’t go to kindergarten today. I’ll just have to call Mrs. Brown at the school and tell her you’ll be missing show and tell.”

“Oh.”

“And kickball in gym.”

“Alright.”

“And your turn to change the outfit on Mr. Weather-bear.”

“Ok. Can I watch the Power Rangers?” Jeremy asked, now lazily lounging himself on the soft cream couch, watching his mother head toward the phone in the kitchen.

“Oh no, I don’t think so, sweetheart,” she said, peaking back around the kitchen door just in time to watch Jeremy’s head shoot up off the pillow. “No, if you’re that sick, I think I better call the doctor after I’m done talking to Mrs. Brown.”

Jeremy shot her an evil look from his now half sitting position on the couch.

“In fact,” she continued, “this may even call for a trip to the emergency room. You’ll probably need a shot, but it’ll be worth it to make my baby feel better.”

That was when the yelling had begun. Of course, he had told her the normal things: how stupid she was, how much he hated school, how if she loved him she wouldn’t make him go. In addition, though, this morning’s rendition of screams had
included a few words that Eileen knew he hadn’t learned at home. So she suspected he had been playing at school with Oliver, the little boy who lived down the street from them, but whom half the neighbors were afraid of. She knew that now she was going to have to talk to Oliver’s mother, a short, blond-haired woman who always answered the door in a bathrobe and whose baggy eyes gave away the fact that she might die of exhaustion at any moment. It wouldn’t do any good, and Eileen realized this, but there didn’t seem to be any other option. She wondered, for the umpteenth time that morning, how her husband, David, always seemed to be away on business when things like this happened. He had left for Tokyo the previous morning and wouldn’t be back for five more days.

There always seemed to be Tokyo. Or London. Or Hong Kong. He would be gone for six days, ten days, two weeks or more at a time. Eileen had never really even understood what it was that he did in all of these places. She knew his title, Head Executive of Finances, but she only really remembered because it was printed on the glossy, crème colored business cards which he always gave to the children to play with. That was the one thing about David. He was gone frequently, but when he was home, he was great with the kids.

Maybe that was why he missed all the tantrums or the trips to visit Oliver’s mother: the kids loved him. There never seemed to be any screaming when he was at home. David would even drop the kids off at school on his way to the office, finding inventive ways to get Jeremy into the car, and never forgetting Katherine’s Teddy. Last week, before he left for Japan, he had convinced Jeremy that the minivan was really a
rocket ship, prepared to take them to space. Eileen had tried such approaches in the past, but it never seemed to work.

“Come on kids!” she had said the week before. “The Batmobile is about to take off!”

Jeremy had come out the back door grudgingly and, instead of smiling and jumping in, had merely rolled his eyes at her.

“I don’t like Batman anymore, Mom. He’s stupid.”

Eileen sighed, remembering the conversation. She grew tired of it so quickly, the never-ending struggle of making up new games; it just wore her down till she felt so thin that she was sure another word from Jeremy would cause her body to evaporate into the air. Yes, she thought, David is a great father…when he’s around.

Before he left, David had reminded her of his love for the children while they had been in bed.

“I’m going to miss you,” he had said as his lips made their way across her shoulder and up her neck.

“I’ll miss you too,” she replied. “It’s so different here, when you’re gone…”

“And I’ll miss the kids,” he said. “You’re so lucky, getting them all to yourself!”

“Mmhm,” she mumbled, turning her head slightly, his lips nibbling their way up her ear.

“Ei?” he whispered. “Let’s have another baby.”

Of course, she had told him she would think about it. But she had also reminded him that there were things they needed to consider. She would have to talk to her doctor about going off the pill again and figure out if her body had recovered enough from
Katherine. Katherine had been a hard pregnancy, a hard birth, and her Obstetrician suggested that Eileen’s body had a slow recovery rate and that it might be prudent to give herself more time between births. David had to remember that. There was also Jeremy to consider. When Katherine had been born, Jeremy had played the part of the excited older sibling for about two days before he decided she needed to go.

“Can we take the baby back now?” he had asked Eileen one afternoon when she was giving Katherine a bottle. When Eileen had told him no he had apparently decided to take his revenge by forgetting how to be potty trained. The next time Eileen had gone to the bathroom she was met by a warm, sour smell and a large yellow puddle that started in front of the toilet and led to the rug.

“Jeremy! What happened?” she had yelled, storming down the stairs, a crying infant in one hand and the dripping rug dangling as evidence from the other.

“The wind blew my penis.”

The three year old had looked at her innocently, shrugging his shoulders.

“Look, the wind is blowing the trees too.”

When Eileen had reminded David of this, he had just laughed.

“Classic sibling rivalry,” he said. “I’m sure Jeremy’s outgrown that by now.”

When he had left for the airport the day before, David had given Eileen a last, knowing glance and innocently patted her stomach.

“Think about it,” he said, kissing her on the cheek.

She didn’t have the heart, as she watched his tall, lean frame carry his suitcase to the waiting taxi, to tell him her decision was already made.
“Jeremy!” Eileen yelled as she made her way toward the living room, checking in closets and behind the toy chest as she went.

“Jeremy? It’s time to go! Katherine’s already in the car!”

Only silence answered her. She glanced at the clock on the TV as she bent down, checking for her son behind the couch. Its fluorescent green numbers read 8:35; they were going to be late.

“Jeremy! Honey, Mommy will take you to McDonalds after school if you come out and get in the car? Or how about that toy you wanted in the store the other day? The death-ray gun with real sound effects? Mommy will get you that while you’re gone if you’ll be a good boy!”

Still Eileen got nothing.

“Jeremy Adam Jordan! You get out here this instant or you will get such a spanking, you won’t be able to sit for weeks!” The last words slammed out of her mouth and into the dead air just as a loud crash came from the back yard.

“Katherine?” she said, running to the back of the house and out the door.

The van door was still open, and Eileen could hear the shrieks of her little girl as she approached. There, on the floor, was Katherine.

“Mommy!” she yelled when she saw Eileen. Her face was bright red and streaked with tears. “Mommy! I wanted Pooh. Help, help!”

Eileen picked the small blond girl up from her place on the floor and kissed her kneed, which was turning a bright pink. She saw the Winnie the Pooh pop up book in the netting on the seat in front of Katherine.

“I’m sorry Mommy,” Katherine said. “I wanted Pooh.”
“It’s ok sweetheart,” Eileen said, stroking the girls blond curls. “It’s ok. Mommy will never let you get hurt.”

She looked up and saw Jeremy, standing on the porch and watching in fear.

After Katherine had calmed down, Eileen took her in the house, Pooh book in hand, and put her in bed with her Teddy. Then she set out again to find Jeremy. This time she didn’t have to look under furniture and behind doors. He was sitting stark still on the couch, his Power Ranger backpack behind him, his shoes tied.

“Is Kathie ok?” he asked when Eileen entered the room.

“She’s fine, Jeremy. It was just an accident.”

“I’m ready to go to school now,” he said, standing up and avoiding his mother’s gaze.

Eileen stepped forward and scooped him up, sitting back down on the couch.

“No sweetheart,” she said. “No. Today, you’re staying home with me.”

She cradled him and gently started to rock back and forth.

Maybe I will, she thought. After all, David loves children. All of my children, she reminded herself, scanning the row of photos on the wall and catching the bright blue eyes of her other daughter, Hailey, staring at her from a college graduation photo.
Something with Coconut

The cake was covered in a thick, chocolate icing that seemed to ooze down its layers and congeal in the curly Victorian borders at its edges and the large, opened roses on its sides. It almost appeared black compared to the stark-white front display and looked so rich that Hailey felt as if her teeth would ache from just looking at it any longer. It seemed as if it were towering over her, a mountain of sugar, waiting for its chance to topple on an un-expecting victim.

“Delicious looking, no?” said the slender girl who had suddenly appeared behind the counter. “Everything about it is chocolate. We made one just like it for a wedding last week, it was magnificent.”

“It is amazing,” Hailey said. “How many people does it feed?”

“Three hundred.”

Hailey stared at her and nearly toppled over into the giant confection. Three hundred? She didn’t think she knew that many people, let alone would imagine inviting them all to her wedding. Not to mention how much a cake like that must cost.

“That is some cake, huh?” A familiar voice behind her said, a hand gently touching her shoulder. “But I was thinking something a bit, I don’t know, smaller?”

“Agreed,” Hailey said, turning to face Dale. “I get a sugar rush just thinking about that thing.”

“You must be Miz Turner and Mizter Brockwood?” the girl behind the counter said. “Mizzez Genevieve is with another customer right now, but let me show you to one of our waiting rooms?”

The girl took them down a long, slim hallway and let them in to a room at the end.
“She will be with you shortly. There are some sample books on the table,” she said, closing the door on the two of them.

“Three hundred people,” Hailey murmured.

“What?” Dale said, picking up a binder and flipping through its glossy pages.

“That’s how many people the girl said that cake feeds. Three hundred. Could you imagine?”

“We haven’t totally figured out our guest list yet. I guess you never know,” Dale said.

“Well I know we won’t have three hundred, that’s not even a question. But have you thought about it any more? Who you want to invite?”

“Besides the family? A few coworkers from downtown I guess. Some of the guys from school.”

“See, that’s my problem. I don’t know if I should invite any of my friends from college.”

“Who?” Dale asked. “The psuedo-bohemians? Come on Hailey. I know they were your friends, but they seemed so, odd. Like, they wanted to be oh-so-tragic, but they couldn’t even get that right.”

“You only met them once. Besides, everyone has weird friends when they’re twenty. Tom and Geoff aren’t exactly what I would call normal either, you know.”

“No,” Dale said, “but they’re computer nerds. We technical guys, we’re a breed of our own. Not many people want to talk about input devices and compatibility charts, so we have to stick together. But your friends, I mean, you have to admit they’re not exactly your type. I swear Hailey; sometimes I wonder why you ever bothered.”
Yes, Hailey thought, why had she bothered?

Perhaps it was the mystery of them, at first. When she had met Patrick, he was wearing nothing but black. She thought it fit him in a rather creepy way. His skin was pale and his hair was spiked and matched his clothing. He reminded her of a vampire, and the first time they slept together she half expected to find two crimson gouges in her neck the next morning. His left ear was pierced in three places, and the cartilage was inflamed from what Hailey would later find out had been a nasty infection.

“You got a smoke?” he’d asked her on that first cold October day. Hailey was only eighteen then and was sitting on the steps of her college’s art building. She had just received her first failing grade on a drawing project and had left the building to clear her head before going for a conference with the professor.

“No,” she finally said, regaining her composure. “I don’t smoke. Sorry.”

He sat down next to her anyway, rummaging through an army green messenger bag.

“I swear I had another pack. Man, I really need one right now.”

“I bet.”

He stopped rummaging and looked up at her.

“Patrick,” he said, extending his hand.

“Hailey.”

“You look like you could use a cig yourself,” he said, going through the numerous pockets on the flap of his bag. “Who did it? Ackman?”

“Kendall.”
“Oh man, he’s the worst. Sorry you got stuck with him. He once failed a project of mine because he said my painting was too linear or some shit. I mean, it’s art, right? Shouldn’t that be, like, totally subjective?” Patrick pulled something out of his bag and looked at Hailey in triumph. “Found ‘em. Listen, fuck Kendall. You sure you don’t want one?” Patrick took a cigarette from the box and held it out to Hailey.

“What the hell,” she said, pulling one from the package. Patrick gave her a light and she awkwardly inhaled, then tried to muffle a cough. Patrick laughed and patted her on the back.

“You really don’t smoke, do you?”

“No, I really don’t.”

“Freshman,” he said, shaking his head. “Don’t worry, you’ll learn.”

Dale slid the binder across the table and pointed to a square, white cake with two birds perched on top of its highest tier.

“What about this one?”

“Doves?” Hailey said. “Don’t you think they’re a bit obvious? I mean, doves or bells or rings. They seem so normal, don’t they? I always wanted something—”

“Different?”

“Yes. Different. I mean, do you really want to have a wedding just like everyone else’s?”

“But it won’t be just like everyone else’s,” Dale said. “It will be ours. That’s what makes it unique.”

“I suppose you’re right.”
“Of course I am,” he said, reaching across the table and kissing her hand.

Hailey’s ponytail was being tugged. This thought pulled her back to consciousness and her eyes blurred open to a blank computer screen and a pile of candy wrappers.

“So how’s it going, Hal?” Patrick’s voice was behind her, and then next to her as he pulled up a padded chair and flopped down.

“You writing a paper?”

Without a word Hailey brought her hand to the mouse and scrolled up the pages, revealing half of them as blank or having only a few sentences.

His use of meter and rhyme scheme may seem thin to the untamed eye…

The theme of this poem seems a bit preposterous and…
This particular Wordsworth poem shows him to be something of an imbecilic ass…

I hate this fucking shit!!!

Patrick smirked at her.

“Very productive. Is this the finished version, or are these your revisions? Because honestly, I think the words ‘imbecilic’ and ‘ass’ are not used nearly enough together in the academic world. That sort of creativity and freshness could win you some real bonus points.”

“Please shut up,” Hailey said. “I haven’t slept and my diet right now consists of Kit Kat bars.”

“Actually, you have slept. That’s what you were doing when I got here, remember?”

“This is due in five hours and, as you pointed out, it’s not exactly done.”

“I was just saying, that’s all,” he looked at the wrappers in front of her. “You know, you should really switch up your candy preferences. Something with coconut in it is really necessary for an all-nighter.”

“Why are you still talking to me?”
“Whoa, you really need to relax, Hal. You come off as uptight, do you know that? We keep meeting like this, and I’m never gonna ask you out.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m worried about right now,” she said. “Going out with you.”


“Knock knock!” a high voice called as the door to the small room opened. A plump, gray-haired woman entered, carrying a clip board and a plate of pastries.

“You must be the happy couple! I am Genevieve L’apour and I am so glad to meet you at last. I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. We have a new secretary, darling girl, truly a gem, but she just doesn’t have the business down yet.” Genevieve leaned in towards Hailey. “Plus she’s so thin! Not right for a girl in this line of work. Not at all. Gives the wrong impression you know.”

“I can imagine,” Dale said. “But don’t worry, she didn’t scare us off.”

Patrick pulled up to the curb in front of Hailey’s dorm room and parked his red, rusting truck.

“So,” he said, “is this a date yet?”

Hailey laughed.

“Patrick, how many times have we hung out in the last six months? Have any of those been dates?

“You can’t blame a guy for trying.”
“Can’t I? We have fun, that’s all. Besides, I heard you were dating some other girl. Belinda? Bianca?”

“Beatrix. And if we’re not dating, why does it matter?”

“It doesn’t,” Hailey said “Anyway, are we still on for the art show tomorrow?”

“Yeah. The gallery doesn’t open ‘til two though. You wanna do lunch first?”

“Sure. We can run to Maria’s? They’re having a special, two for one.”

“Now this cake,” Genevieve said to Hailey, “Has two layers of chocolate for every one layer of strawberry jam. Oh, and this one is a conventional, white cake with butter cream frosting. Simple, but elegant, don’t you think? We can do up to six tiers.”

“Yes, it’s lovely,” Hailey said, glancing at Dale. “Could you give us just a moment, though? To talk things over?”

“Of course!” she gushed. “It’s an important day, I know. Everything has to be perfect. I understand.”

“Right, perfect,” said Hailey as the woman walked back to the front of the bakery, leaving the two of them alone in the snug cake tasting room.

Hailey looked at the large, mostly blue, canvass on the easel in front of her and tilted her head slightly to the left. Then to the right. Then squinted.

“I call it, ‘phantom lover’. Pretty good, huh?” Patrick called from the kitchen. Hailey shivered involuntarily, trying to make out the freakish looking shapes in front of her. She knew Patrick wouldn’t notice. She was truly cold, standing dripping wet in the living room of his campus apartment wrapped in a tattered gray towel, her nose still red
and her hair slicked back, small tendrils forming at her temples. The painting was good. Or at least, interesting. But something about it in its unfinished form made her anxious.

“I’d love to see it when it’s done.”

“You will. I’m including it in the senior gallery in the spring.”

A loud “Beep!” escaped from the microwave and Hailey turned around to see Patrick ladling soup into glossy black bowls.

“Come on,” he said, nodding his head toward the scuffed wooden table.

“Homemade from Mrs. Campbell.”

He set the still steaming bowls down and returned to the kitchen. Hailey sat in one of the red, mismatched chairs and started blowing on her spoon.

“You know, I just figured out what I don’t like about this place. It looks like a bag of frosting exploded on it,” Hailey said to Dale as soon as the woman was out of earshot. “I mean, look at this chair, I feel like I’m sitting on a cupcake gone wrong.” She stood up and examined the overstuffed, pink chair.

“The samples are delicious though, Hailey. Don’t you think?”

“Yes, they are good. But Dale, the more I think about it and see the pictures; I don’t see why my grandmother can’t just—”

“Hailey, we’ve been over this,” Dale replied. “We don’t want your grandmother to make the cake because we want her to enjoy the day. Do you really want her stressed out about baking on the day of her granddaughter’s wedding?”

“She won’t see it like that, Dale. I think she’ll be disappointed more than anything if we don’t ask her. She’s always loved baking.”
“Yes, she has. But she’s getting older now. You don’t see what a strain it is on her. Come on, trust me on this. Getting the cake done by professionals is the best thing for everyone.”

“You’re right, the best thing.” Hailey stuck another of the moist samples into her mouth and nodded. “The best thing for us all.”

“You have a classic sort of beauty, do you know that?” Patrick was running a smooth finger over her hips. “White hills, white thighs—”

“Do I look like a world, lying in surrender?” Hailey asked. She pulled the thin sheet up, covering her body, and turned toward him. “Neruda. A bit obvious, isn’t it?”

“I keep forgetting you’re an English major now. Your killing my style, babe.”

“Just calling you on your poetry. Besides, by ‘classic beauty’ I know you mean fat. It’s just like telling a woman she’s ‘pleasantly plump’ or ‘big boned’. I won’t stand for it.”

“No, it’s not like that. It’s just; you’re different than the girls I normally date. Very Reubenesque.”

“Oh wow, you mean I weigh more then 80 pounds? Besides, we’re not dating.”

Patrick laughed and brushed away the loose strands of hair that had fallen over Hailey’s eyes.

“You really must think I’m shallow, huh?”

“Well, lets see, there was Kristty, Antonía, Melinda-”

“Point taken.”
“No, no I’m seeing a pattern here, Patrick, let’s think about this. All the women you’ve dated in the past year have been skinny twits with weird names. I think it must reflect something about your personality. Did you get along with your mother as a child? How much did she weigh?”

“Your neurotic, do you know that?”

“Yes, I do. And that’s the harsh, candid Patrick I know and love. For a minute there I was afraid sex had ruined our relationship. The last thing I need is you going soft on me.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem.”

Hailey started to laugh and Patrick took the opportunity to pull the sheets back down and examine the body of the woman once more.

“I figured it out,” Hailey said later. Patrick was spooning her, the sound of his racing heart still audible, his body moist.

“You were afraid,” she continued. “That’s why you dated them.”

“Afraid? Of what?”

“Have you seen yourself?” Hailey asked. “You’re all bones. I’m surprised with the last girls no one ever lost an eye. Subconsciously, you were afraid a heavier girl would crush you or something. Obvious physiological dilemma.”

“I see,” Patrick mumbled into her hair. “Well, I think you may have cured me of it.”

“What are friends for?”

Patrick wrapped his arm more tightly around her.
“So Hal…”

“No, Patrick. We’re not dating.”

“Fine,” he said. “But you’re still beautiful.”

“Ok, what about this one?” Dale pointed to a round, three layer cake. It was a soft tangerine orange and pieces of sugared figs and plums were situated around its edges. “It’s beautiful, elegant, and defiantly different. No flowers, no doves—”

“No passion.”

“I’m sure Genevieve could add passion fruit if we asked nicely.”

“I’m serious, Dale. It just doesn’t seem right to me.”

“Hailey, we’ve been doing this for hours and you haven’t liked any of them. I know this is important, but we’re running out of time here. I have a meeting at 4 o’clock. This needs to be done today. We have to make a decision. Now, do you like this one? Or do you want to go back to the white with the doves?”

“Dammit,” Patrick said, pounding his fist into the dresser.

Hailey took the pack of Camels that had become a permanent fixture in the side of her bag and held one between her fingers.

“What are you doing?” Patrick asked, plucking the cigarette from her and sticking it in his own mouth.

“That’s bad for the–” he stopped, the flame of his lighter still bright, and looked at her stomach, shaking his head.
“So what?” he said. “We can’t date, but we’re gonna get hitched? I don’t know Hal. I graduate in a month, but you’ve got a hell of a while to go, ya know?”

“Wait, who said anything about that?” Hailey asked, reaching for her bag again. She inhaled deep and then let the smoke drift puff by puff from the corner of her mouth.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, holding the cigarette out of reach as he came towards her again. “None of it matters, now.”

Genevieve’s head popped back into the room.

“Anything decided?” she asked sweetly. “Or should I come back?”

“No, we’re ready,” Dale said, looking pointedly in Hailey’s direction. “Right?” Hailey nodded and flipped the sleek design book closed.

“Well,” Genevieve said, “which will it be? The tangerine tort or the white butter cream?”

“You know, the girl out front was telling me about the cake on display when I first came in. She said it’s all chocolate?”

“Well yes, it is. It’s a dark chocolate cake with chocolate mousse and a rich mocha frosting. Delicious, of course, but a bit, shall we say full flavored?”

“Have you ever changed any of the ingredients? I mean, could the chocolate mouse be substituted? For, say, coconut?”

“Well yes, I suppose that would be possible.”

“Then we have our cake.”

“But, Hailey, that wasn’t one of our choices,” Dale said. “You haven’t tasted it. Do you even like coconut?”
“Of course I do. It’ll be perfect. And after all, you wanted me to make a decision, Dale. You’re always right.”
More Than One Way

When she had landed in the thick Cleveland snow, Hailey had wanted to jump off the plane and be the first to run through the gates and onto the cold, frozen ground. But now, standing at the baggage claim, waiting for her tattered blue suitcase, a knot was forming itself in the pit of her stomach, begging her to turn around and head back home. She hadn’t seen her mother since the wedding, fourteen months ago, and the thought of being stuck in the car with her for the short drive into the city seemed worse then the hours Hailey had spent alone on the plain. At least alone, Hailey could think. She could plot and plan the best way to prepare her family, to get them ready before springing the news on the unsuspecting Midwesterners.

Her mother had sensed something was wrong on the phone. Hailey could tell by the long, cold pauses and fake, chirpy laugh Eileen used with every sentence she finished.

“You’re coming home?” Silence. “Tomorrow?” Silence. “Well darling, that’s just wonderful. We’ll all be so happy to see you.”

When she finally saw Eileen, bobbing along behind a pair of nuns with suitcases on wheels, she felt a tinge of pain in her stomach. She’s going to hate me, she thought, plastering on a bright smile and waiving her bare left hand.

“David agreed to pick Jeremy and Katherine up from school today so that I could come meet your flight. They should get home at about the same time we do,” Eileen said as she turned onto the highway.

“Oh, that was nice of him. I didn’t mean to be a burden, Mom. I could have taken a taxi.”
“Nonsense,” said Eileen. “You may be used to taking those things in the city, but while you’re here we’ll get you around. Besides, I’m sure the kids will be thrilled. They’ve hardly seen him in the last few weeks. Did I tell you he just got back from Tokyo?”

“I think you mentioned it on the phone,” Hailey said, squinting out the window. “Did they tear down the old playground over off of Warren?”

“Just last month, dear. They’re turning it into a parking lot.”

“Hailey!” a voice said as soon as Eileen opened the back door to the house. There, holding a Happy Meal box between his grimy fingers, stood a five year old boy with sandy blond hair.

“Jeremy!” Hailey responded, stooping down to hug the small boy. “You remembered your big sister, huh?”

“Did you bring me a present?” he asked, abandoning his box to the floor. He started examining her suitcase and slipping his little fingers into all of her coat pockets. Hailey laughed and pushed the prying hands away.

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” she said.

“Daddy brought me a present from Japin.”

“It’s Japan, sweetheart,” Eileen said, but Jeremy was already gone around the corner.

“If you’ve been a good girl, maybe you’ll get a present from Japan too,” a voice behind Hailey said. She turned around to find David, holding a sleepy Katherine in his arms.
“I’m not sure I deserve a present,” Hailey said. “But maybe when you loose the cargo you have there I would take a hug.”

David laughed and shifted his weight.

“She fell asleep on the ride home from school. I hated to wake her but I didn’t want her to miss your arrival. Isn’t that right, Kath?”

The girl flashed her eyes at Hailey, and then quickly buried her head into her father shoulder. All that was visible were curls.

“It’s ok,” Hailey said. “I didn’t really expect her to remember me. She was only two the last time I saw her.”

“That’s true,” David said, “but she did make an excellent flower girl.”

“Hi-ya!” Jeremy suddenly appeared behind Hailey, a white headband with Japanese characters was falling over his eyes and he held his hands out in front of him like boards of wood.

“I’m a ninja! Get back bad guys!” he swung his leg out toward Hailey, but lost his balance and ended up toppled on the floor.

“Jeremy!” Eileen said. “Get up! I told you, you have to be careful.”

“The Power Rangers are never careful,” Jeremy said, getting to his feet. “They’re too tough for that.”

“You should really go see Miriam,” Eileen had said, taking a sip of tea. She and Hailey had just finished doing the dinner dishes and David had taken Jeremy and Katherine upstairs to read a story.

“She was so excited that you were coming. I’m sure her apartment has enough bakery in it to feed half the city at this point.”
Hailey had agreed. But now, standing in the elevator, hearing a slight ding! every
time she got a floor closer, she wasn’t sure she was ready.

When the doors opened and Hailey stepped onto the speckled orange carpeting,
she knew her mother had been right. The entire hall smelled of apricot and gingerbread,
and every other smell that reminded Hailey of her childhood. The heavy brown doors
were all decorated with flower wreaths or old proverbs or pictures finger-painted by
loving grandchildren. When she got to the door marked 515A she took a deep breath and
gave a light knock before opening the door.

“Grandma?” she called in to the dimly lit apartment. The table was covered with
cookies and the light was on in the kitchen, but Miriam was no where in sight.

“Gram?” she called again, before entering the apartment and seeing a pair of light
brown moccasins sticking straight up from behind the cabinets of the kitchen.

The hospital was blinding. The absolute whiteness of it all caused Hailey to feel
dizzy and the nurse made her sit with her head between her knees to keep from passing
out. Eileen and David had arrived just after Hailey had gotten out of the ambulance and
watched as they rolled her grandmother through the doors. They were with the doctors
now. Talking, waiting.

Hailey knew there were calls that needed to be made in these situations. Family,
friends, anyone who would want to know her grandmother had had a heart attack. When
she had first picked up the phone, she had thought about calling Dale. She knew she
should. It seemed reasonable that the first person you would contact in an emergency
would be your husband. But instead her fingers had taken control and started punching in
the Albuquerque area code. Her father wasn’t home but Sheila, whom he had finally
married five years ago, told her that she would get a hold of him at work and have him call as soon as possible.

From there the calls had been easier. Aunts, Uncles, Cousins, all of them had the same questions. Is she ok? How did this happen? What are the doctors saying? Hailey had been calm. She had explained, over and over again, that they didn’t know much, it was too soon to tell, they would call when they had more news.

Finally the list of people she had been checking off in her mind had all been called, all comforted and informed and left with a bit of hope. Dale’s face flashed before her but her mind rejected the image. No, it seemed to be saying. No, don’t call home. But she had to call someone. Wasn’t she the one who needed comforting now? Didn’t she deserve to be told it would all be ok? That her grandmother would pull through, that there would be years of gingerbread cookies and funny family stories and warm, enveloping hugs in the years ahead?

And so she dialed. An old number, one that was familiar even though it had been tucked away for years in a part of her memory she had tried to erase. The line on the other end rang three, four, five times before a thick voice finally answered.

“Patrick?” Hailey’s whispered. Then she broke down into sobs.

Eileen placed a Styrofoam cup in Hailey’s hand and sat down in the stiff chair next to her.

“It helps,” she said, rubbing her hand across Hailey’s back. “And you look like you need it.”
Hailey nodded and took a sip from the steaming cup. It burned against the tender skin on the roof of her mouth, but she kept drinking, letting the heat flow down her throat, hoping to scald everything inside her.

“Is Dale able to fly out tonight? Or are they making him wait till morning because of the storm?’

Hailey took another sip and looked up at her mother, the rims of her eyes red.

“He’s not coming,” she said.

“Well of course he is, darling. Don’t be so stubborn. You need him now, no matter what you told him. He knows that. I’m sure he’s getting on a flight right this instant.”

“Mom, I didn’t tell him anything. He’s not coming because I didn’t call him.”

Eileen nodded her head, ran her hands down her knees to straighten out her skirt, and looked back to her daughter.

“I thought that was it,” she said. “When you called me, I knew. You’re not very good at secrets, Hailey. You never have been.” She took her daughters hand in her own. “Plus the missing ring was a big clue. Are you absolutely sure about this? The first year is always the hardest. It’s not like it was when I married your father. There are things you can do now. Counselors you can see, classes you can go to. They say they’re quite good.”

“I’m sure, Mom. I’ve been sure, for a while now. I just didn’t want to be.”

The noise of the hospital seemed to come into focus as the two of them sat there, hand in hand. A nurse’s shoes scuffled past, the elevator door opened and a young man
rolled a wheelchair past, in the distance a machine was beeping slowly, as if it was about to let go. Finally, Eileen released Hailey’s hand.

“They think you got to her just in time you know,” Eileen said. “If you hadn’t found her, it could have caused more serious damage. It could have even…”

“I know, Mom. I know. We were really lucky. If you hadn’t made me go see her—”

“You would have gone on your own.”

“Maybe I would have,” Hailey said. “But maybe not. Maybe there’s just more than one way to save a life.”

And then they embraced, awkwardly, with the arms of the waiting room chairs between them. And in the distance, the low hum of a machine droned on.
Works Cited


