A Thesis

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Table of Contents

Introduction 1

The Forbidden Object of Her Desire 21

Black Handkerchiefs 26

Burning the Shrine 42

Do You Still Love Me? 58

Ripped Away 77

 Conjuring Olympus 86
Conjuring Olympus: Defining Place for Women

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When Virginia Woolf spoke on the topic “Women and Fiction” at the Arts Society at Newnham, she cautioned her audience about the strictures of place for women. In Woolf’s fictionalized expansion of these spoken essays, *A Room of One’s Own*, she adapts the persona of an every woman when she addresses the reader to, “Call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is not a matter of any importance” (5). Woolf points out that, “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (4). Woolf uses this thinly disguised persona to ground her own feminist thought in the personal space of her “room,” as opposed to the academic space of Cambridge and the public place of the British Museum. Mary’s room forms a creative private place where she is free to create since it is a place bought and sustained through the generosity of her aunt’s legacy of 500 pounds per year. It is a place where gender does not act as a gatekeeper, as it does in Cambridge and in the British Museum. She equates her economic and artistic independence with her ability to write, to find self-expression in the world of fiction.

The British Museum provides an excellent juxtaposition to Woolf’s metaphorical “room” because Woolf writing as Mary in 1929 raises the lack of work by women artists displayed there. At the fictional Oxbridge (a thinly disguised Cambridge), Mary is shooed from the paths by the Beadle when he tells her that it is a place for the fellows and scholars. This shows that her gender creates a border between herself and the Beadle’s definition of fellows and scholars. Thorstein Veblen delineated these gendered spheres of existence in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, published in 1899. Veblen writes that “It grates painfully on our nerves to contemplate the necessity of any well-bred woman’s earning a livelihood by useful work. It is not ‘woman’s sphere.’ Her sphere is within the household, which she should ‘beautify.’ And of which she should be the ‘chief ornament.’ The male head of the household is not currently spoken of as its
ornament” (qtd in Schneir 221). Instead the male will inhabit the public spaces signified in A Room of One’s Own, as artist and economic provider. Veblen takes this theory further when he cites the “wife” as the consumer of economic goods provided by the work of her husband. The sharp gender division practiced at the turn of the century prompts Woolf to show how the absence of women in these public places speaks to an exclusion of women rather than a lack of creative or intellectual activity in the feminine sphere. Woolf discusses the academic and economic circumstance that reveals the social fabric that allows those places to exist—or not exist for women.

Contemporary critic Sylvia Walby defines the patriarchal standards that have created this disparity: “I am distinguishing two main forms of patriarchy, private and public. Private patriarchy is based upon household production as the main site of women’s oppression. Public patriarchy is based principally in public sites such as employment and the state” (18). This definition speaks to Woolf’s concern that women endure economic oppression in the home by their dependency on others for support. Walby also speaks to the oppression of women by misrepresentation in state funded institutions (the museum).

Unfortunately, Veblen’s and Woolf’s conclusions still hold true in American society at the close of the twentieth century. In 1993, Psychologist Carol Gilligan writes that “Women’s place in man’s life cycle has been that of nurturer, caretaker, and helpmate, the weaver of those networks of relationships on which she in turn relies” (17). She traces the incongruities between the female and male experience of caretaking and nurturing, arguing that men tend to devalue the role of nurturer in women. Gilligan cites contemporary stereotypes that “suggest a splitting of love and work that relegates expressive capacities to women while placing instrumental abilities
in the masculine domain” (17). In this way, gender defines the places women may explore. Men act; women react.

These marginalizing definitions of gender have persisted from Woolf’s time to our own. Contemporary critic Sherry Ortner writes, “I would flatly assert that we find women subordinated to men in every known society. The search for a genuinely egalitarian, let alone matriarchal culture has proved fruitless” (24). Although I cannot hope to bridge the gap between genders in my fiction, I do want to pay homage to Woolf’s as well as contemporary feminists concerns with the spaces and places that wall women in or out. I have extended that metaphor of place to include not only Woolf’s concern with women as writers of fiction, but all means of self-actualization in the form of creative and economic independence for the women characters in this short story collection, *Conjuring Olympus*.

The title comes from the final short story in this collection, formerly published in *Drought: An Online Literary Magazine*. I hope to conjure the idea of new spaces for women by calling attention to the places my women characters inhabit in their individual existences. They are single mothers, grandmothers, women facing ill health, and young girls on the cusp of womanhood. Although each of these short stories can stand alone, they are tied together by themes that explore how place can act as both oppressor and liberator for my characters. I have arranged them in an order that might mimic the stages and places of a woman’s life. All of these women characters are unique in that they are each negotiating their own space and location journeys. But in organizing this, I noticed that the characters form a composite age trajectory. The collection begins with the young girl narrator of “The Forbidden Object of My Desire” and ends with a middle-aged character confronting her own mortality in “Conjuring Olympus.”
stories sandwiched by these two feature adolescents, single mothers, and assorted other women characters traversing the space between childhood and old age.

Despite their varying ages, the women in these stories all strive to negotiate their own spaces and places in their physical surroundings as well as their broader place in class, social, and gender positioning. Much of the dramatic tension of these stories occurs as these young girls and women characters negotiate the gaps and explore the boundaries between the various places represented in their daily existence. These settings span decades ranging from the early 1960’s to the present time. I think they all share a debt to Woolf’s idea of place localized in the figurative room.

This “room” exists only when women possess economic and artistic freedom. Woolf’s room exists outside the domestic and the public because it is a private creative space in which she does not attend to anyone’s domestic needs but her own. She asks her listeners to consider the bricks of circumstance that support the foundation of that room in order to let it take shape. She constructs the role of Shakepeare’s sister to show the limitations imposed on women throughout literary history: “It would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare” (48). Furthermore, if Shakespeare had had a sister, she had no chance of going to school. Woolf compares parental expectations for women to those for men: “She {Judith Shakespeare} had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother’s perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers” (49).

By highlighting these differences, Woolf proves her conclusion that women need a social fabric conducive to writing fiction. Sadly, her trip to the British Museum shows the lack of
women there as well. Early twentieth century feminist writer Anna Garlin Spencer shows how 
this inequity has been turned against women when she writes: “The failure of women to produce 
genius of the first rank in most of the supreme forms of human effort has been used to block the 
way of all women of talent and ambition for intellectual achievement in a manner that would be 
amusingly absurd were it not so monstrously unjust and socially harmful” (269). This circular 
reasoning posits that women are not evident in the museum or exclusive school because they 
have failed to produce work worthy of that recognition.

In this way, faulty reasoning helped deny women the “room of their own” necessary to 
full participation in the intellectual and economic spheres granted to men. For this reason, they 
do not have their own Shakespearean counterpart to point to as symbol of their equality in the 
literary world. The irony of this position becomes even more pointed when one realizes that men 
defined all parameters for participation in these creative and academic pursuits. I admire Woolf 
and Spencer for their bravery in exposing this false perspective and I hope to extend their work 
to show how contemporary women still face limitations in place.

In this collection of short stories, I construe place in a variety of ways, particularly for my 
female characters. I want to show place in both its abstract and concrete forms. Place can take 
the form of social and cultural expectation as well as geographical location. I hope that many of 
my fictional characters will inspire readers to consider how women today can find the key to the 
room of their own, whatever it may be. My characters share many of the characteristics of 
Woolf’s idea of Shakespeare’s sister, but their self-actualization moves outside the realm of 
women writing fiction to include other expressions of independence that include full realization 
of their innate abilities.
French Feminist Collette Guillaumin discusses the barriers to self-actualization for women by locating them as exploited figures within an economic power structure that appropriates the labor contributions of women. This power structure involves not only the amount of unpaid labor women contribute within the household, but also the way salaries in the work force haven’t yet attained a level of gender equity. These disparities help to reduce women to owned commodities. She writes:

Everyone—or almost everyone—acknowledges that women are exploited: that when they sell their labour power in the labour market its price is much lower than that of men, since on average the wages of women are only two-thirds of those earned by men. Everyone—or almost everyone—agrees that the housework performed by all women, whether or not they are other wise employed, is unpaid work. (74)

In the same way that Guillamin acknowledges the gender disparity operating in the arena of valued versus unvalued work, I hope to at least heighten awareness of these gender inequities by showing the challenges faced by my characters. For example, women who perform unpaid domestic services in the home face distinct disadvantages on many fronts, especially if they have children. I am not advocating that all women need to move outside the home, put their children in daycare, and pledge allegiance to a corporation. Instead, I want to show that the work these women have performed should be valued, although it receives no formal sanction in the present patriarchal/capitalist economy.

Even more frightening for women working outside the formal boundaries of paid labor is the specter of divorce. Divorce frequently plunges these women into dire economic and emotional circumstances. Divorced women find themselves moving farther and farther away from self-actualization in their daily struggle to survive. I doubt they can figuratively or literally
afford Woolf’s idea of the economic or emotional independence necessary to have room for their own creative pursuit (whatever that might be) in their lives. Instead, they struggle to provide for their own emotional and financial needs as well as the needs of their family in a time of crisis and change.

Guillaumin also points out the inequities of gender position within the current economic gender configuration. Without their own means of income, women who depend on male financial support can easily become economic prisoners to their husbands and emotional prisoners to the needs of others. She locates the appropriation of women in four areas: time, products of the body, sexual obligation, and the physical charge of disabled members of the group. This appropriation extends not only to the wife, but to all females in the extended family. She writes:

Doing the laundry, caring for children, and the preparation of meals, etc. are sometimes taken charge of by one of the mothers or sisters of the spouses, or by their daughter or daughters, etc. This is not by virtue of a direct contract of appropriation, as in the case of the wife (whose naked appropriation is demonstrated—first and foremost—in the legal obligation of sexual service), but as a function of the general appropriation of the class of women. This implies that their time (their work) may be disposed of without contractual compensation, and may be generally and indiscriminately disposed of. (76)

This “implication” may be inferred from the cultural expectations implicit in such work. Families frequently place expectations solely on women for the performance of these domestic tasks. And many of these tasks, especially caring for children, should be extremely valued in our culture. I applaud caregivers, but I do think we need to evaluate the ways these roles can put
women in precarious positions in our present social system. Women without their own means of
support who rely on male income will quickly find that once the male safety net is removed, they
may be put at distinct economic disadvantage.

Yet, if you asked any of the women acting as caregivers if they would expect compensation for these loving roles, I doubt that many would expect it. These domestic roles are seen as “priceless,” falling outside the world of work. I agree that all of these roles have dignity and purpose, but since they are not valued through formal compensation or contractual obligation, I believe that we need to recognize the value these caregivers form in our society. In my fiction, I hope to expose what happens to the women whose work is taken for granted.

Although we may think that women have evolved from their confinement to the domestic sphere, we clearly have not. Women may still sacrifice themselves to the domestic sphere in most cases.

Women who derive their economic support from males in order to stay home and raise children may be especially at risk. Carol Gilligan writes “When women feel excluded from direct participation in society, they see themselves as subject to a consensus or judgment made and enforced by the men on whose protection and support they depend and by whose names they are known” (67). This is certainly true for all of the married or formerly married characters in this collection. The women must choose to either remain in loveless marriages or struggle to re-enter society with little career training to support themselves.

If Woolf were alive today, she would probably concede that women have transgressed some economic boundaries, but I believe she would speak out against the cultural and social expectations for wives and mothers just as Gilligan continues to do. Yes, the idea of having it all now means having the education, the career, and the tasks of chauffeur, chef, housekeeper,
launderer, tailor, archivist, travel agent, counselor, etc. The list and the time it takes to perform these tasks endlessly unwinds. Gilligan explains:

Women’s place in man’s life cycle has been that of nurturer, caretaker, and helpmate, the weaver of those networks of relationships on which she in turn relies. But while women have thus taken care of men, men have, in their theories of psychological development, as in their economic arrangements, tended to assume or devalue that care. (17)

Both Guillian and Gilligan recognize the disadvantage of the subservient role and space of women in this hierarchy. While meeting the needs of others, women’s own needs are subsumed and devalued. These theorists point out that women need not only time and space, but respect for the networks they provide to families. In addition to fulfilling the roles of nurturing caretakers, women need the space and economic security necessary to pursue their passions whether they take the form of writing plays, sculpting, or practicing law. Gilligan takes this further by locating these means of self-actualization as identity in the area of self-expression or the “Different Voice” of her title.

Gilligan also connects Woolf to the problems that women have today in realizing success on their own terms. Woolf writes that “It is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex... Yet, it is the masculine values which prevail (76). Gilligan references this exact quote from A Room of One’s Own and responds by pointing out that:

The same deference to the values and opinions of others can be seen in the judgments of twentieth century women. The difficulty women experience in finding or speaking publicly in their own voices emerges repeatedly in the form of
qualification and self-doubt, but also in intimations of a divided judgment, a 
public assessment and private assessment which are fundamentally at odds. (16)

In addition to trying to balance the need for building bridges between the public and 
private lives of women who strive to establish self-identity while struggling with economic 
realities and domestic expectations, some of my characters also exhibit the oppressive nature of 
gender construction in that they are objectified according to their youth and beauty. Gender 
construction for women means conforming to the airbrushed ideals represented in all aspects of 
the visual media. When women are constantly represented as an object to be gazed upon, their 
self-esteem becomes tied irrevocably to male perception of themselves as an object.

John Berger understands the dilemma of the constantly observed woman. He too equates 
freedom (or lack of it) with space. He writes: “To be born a woman has been to be born, within 
an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men” (46). Berger defines this limited space 
as a place where women develop a twofold consciousness. They perceive themselves from 
within and constantly envision how they appear to the gaze of others. “From earliest childhood, 
she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself constantly,” writes Berger (46). This 
incorporation of the male gaze into her psyche causes the woman to objectify herself by 
surveying herself as worthy or not worthy of that gaze.

Betty Friedan also addresses the problem of the public gaze women endure. She writes, 
“The public image, in the magazines and television commercials, is designed to sell washing 
machines, cake mixes, deodorants, detergents, rejuvenating face creams, hair tints. But the 
power of that image, on which companies spend millions of dollars for television time and ad 
space {that word again}: American women no longer know who they are” (72). The idealized 
image supersedes the image of reality in this case. Women struggle to define the gap between
the reality of their physical presence, with the hyper-reality of women in the visual media where perfection creates the norm.

Judith Jackson Pomeroy completed an interesting survey of women’s periodicals published between 1920 and 1996 that concluded that despite eight decades of social upheaval and the women’s movement, constructions of femininity still rely on image in relation to a sexual relationship. Pomeroy writes that “Women’s bodies have historically been used as a means to display wealth, to attract a mate, to achieve a certain image, and it is through these scripts that women learn how to present their sexual selves” (184). She also points out that the construction of this femininity in the case of the periodicals has an economic base realized through the advertisers who fund the products.

Pomeroy focuses on two specific modes of identity found in women’s periodicals for the past eight decades: “The messages center on either appearance or behavior, what I refer to as grooming (appearance) or interaction style (demeanor or behavior) vehicles” (185). Grooming centers on using external tools to manage the visual message carriers of feminine image. Advertisements for cosmetics, clothes, and accessories fall into this category. The second messaging involves controlling or manipulating emotional responses in order to achieve relationships with males. Jackson Pomeroy locates these message carriers in the text of the many self help articles that admonish women how to “act” in relationship capacities. Given the pervasive and enduring popularity of the periodicals she chose to survey, Ladies Home Journal, Mademoiselle, and Glamour, I think it is safe to conclude their dramatic effects on women’s ideas of themselves in our culture.

To summarize, I would like to review the ideas I have discussed thus far in relation to my own work. This short story collection is bound together by feminine theme and feminine
characters struggling with the spaces and places they find themselves in—whether by their won choice or not. I have addressed the plight of women revisioning their own disparate identities as caretakers, breadwinners, single parents, and artists I would like to present a brief overview of each of my short stories to show how they interact with the ideas discussed thus far concerning women and their sense of place underlined by the actual location of that space. Each of these stories can be read as a discrete part of a holistic text that attempts to address the progress, (or lack of progress) women have been able to make in the twentieth and twenty-first century. The contours of Woolf's room still exist and my characters search for the key. Some find it; some don’t. In all cases, gender defines their journey.

When deciding the arrangement of the stories in this collection, I discovered that I had women characters with a definite range of ages to work with. I decided to arrange them almost according to the linear progression of a woman’s life, beginning with the elementary and high school experience of the characters in “The Forbidden Object of my Desire.” I followed this developmental trajectory to include the adult relationships of “Ripped Away” and the mothering experiences of “Do You Still Love Me?” I decided to end with the more mature character Joanna’s experience of confronting her own mortality in “Conjuring Olympus.” I also wanted to end with that story because I believe it offers the most powerful use of the imagination to take the narrator out of the disturbing confines of place dictated by her own mortality. I believe this character truly transcends her situation for just that brief conclusive moment.

The first story in the collection, “The Forbidden Object of Her Desire” begins with the young child Diane as a truth teller. Diane is a 1960’s elementary school student who is beginning to realize the constraints placed on women in the patriarchal structure of the Catholic Church. She notices that the girls must keep their heads covered in church and must behave at
all times like proper “ladies.” More importantly, she has discovered that her converted mother may be right when she advises her not to accept all of the rules handed down to her.

This realization occurs when the school librarian, Miss Janice attempts to control Diane’s library book choices for the week. Diane uncovers contradictions in Miss Janice’s edict by discovering that some of the books containing fairy tales are much more frightening than the Poe book she has been forbidden from reading. This discovery allows Diane to take control of her own thoughts and marks an important discovery of the place within, a place where she decides the rules.

“The Forbidden Object of Her Desire” foreshadows “Black Handkerchiefs,” a story in which a young girl also discovers the inequities of opportunity for women in a 1970’s Catholic environment. “Black Handkerchiefs” takes the reader further into the place of women in this environment in that it shows the result of strict adherence to gender stereotyping in the home and in school. Mary Beth attends a gender-segregated high school located near an all male Catholic High School. Drawing on my own experience of this and interviewing others who attended these two Cincinnati schools (Seton and Elder High Schools), this story is an attempt to imagine a subversive rebellion against the clearly drawn boundaries that governed our “place” at that time. It does not provide a resolution to the problem, but hopefully it shows the effects of that repressive environment.

The administration, teachers, nuns, priests, and guidance counselors circumscribed our space in that female world. We were encouraged to act like “ladies.” Emily Jay Putnam’s book *The Lady traces* the evolution of the construct of the lady and she defines her as “the female of the favored social class” (247). In the 1970’s, this meant dressing properly, becoming a mother, or choosing a female profession like nursing. Putnam further qualifies the lady as someone who
exists outside the economic realm, with the support of a male protector. She notes that “the true lady is in theory a virgin or a lawful wife” (250). The true lady can only self-actualize within the realm of an upper class female, without dirtying her image. Putnam also points out that assuming the role of the “lady” leads to a life of isolation and uselessness. She writes “As soon as the division of early labour sent the man out to fight and kept the woman in the house, the process began which taught men to act in concert while women acted singly” (252). Putnam points out that women in the classes below “the lady” acquire more life skills and solidarity through their working class lives. We were not being groomed for these lower class positions. A lady was expected to marry and preside over a household.

In this story, two Catholic high schools, St. Pius and Our Lady of Assumption, stand adjacent to each other. The school for young women, Our Lady of Assumption, is decidedly more oppressive than the school for young men, St. Pius. The main character of this story, Mary Ann has engaged in some acts of aggression against some younger boys from the school. She and her best friend Christine trip the boys as they walk by. Putnam would agree that “true ladies” do not trip potential husband material. When Christine and Mary Beth transgress the bounds of their gender, they are admonished to stop. Clearly, their behavior is anti-social, but repression eventually breeds rebellion. Mary Beth’s mother sees her daughter in a new light at the story’s conclusion.

In “Do You Still Love Me?” a young mother and her daughter must also adjust their vision regarding their son and brother, Jason. This story presents women in a variety of locations, both within and without. In “Do You Still Love Me?” a single mother must confront the gap between her expectations for a child with a disability and his reality. His mother Hannah has trouble confronting her son’s departure from “perfection.” This is further complicated by
Hannah’s career as an esthetician in a spa dedicated to upholding cultural expectations for physical beauty. The very word “esthetician” connotes a preoccupation with surface appearance. Her son Jason’s world departs significantly from the ideal. His as yet diagnosed disability causes impulsive behavior and frequent outbursts. In my first drafts of this story, I named Jason’s disability. After reevaluating my goals for the story, I decided to leave it ambiguous. I wanted to emphasize that the language for the disability should not overwhelm or label the Jason I tried to bring to life. The conclusion of the story shows that Hannah and her daughter will follow him into his “place” even though it is as alien to them as the ocean floor of Amy’s school project. Their life with him will involve constant negotiation and acceptance of these limitations and transgressions.

Hannah’s mother plays a vital role in helping her daughter get to this place because she functions as the truth teller in this story on two levels. First, she makes it possible for her daughter to maintain her economic status by providing free childcare for her divorced daughter. The grandmother in this story typifies Guillaumin’s idea of the class of women owned by male interaction. If a female forms an alliance with a male, through marriage for example, Guillaumin believes that the husband may rely on all of her female relatives for child and domestic help, who routinely provide care for free. Guillaumin writes, “It is as if the wife is actually owned by the husband, and each man has use of the class of women, and particularly each man who has acquired the private use of one of them” (76). As a grandmother, she too offers unpaid services to sustain the family. Neither her daughter nor her former son-in-law pays her for her help. Although she will gain no economic recompense for her actions, this story is not an attempt to disparage those actions.
In “Burning the Shrine,” a recently divorced woman must also face an economic dilemma that realizes itself after her divorce. Sonya Ferral attempts to come to terms with her limited economic resources, her career choice, and the loss of her home. The recently divorced Sonya has just moved into a townhouse with her two young daughters, Maddie and Britt. Since the marriage ended abruptly, Sonya had to hurriedly choose a career and a less expensive place to live. She focuses her displacement in an obsession with the house she left behind, making it into a “shrine” to the loss of the perfect “nuclear family.”

Sonya has hidden her yearning for creativity just as she has stuffed her quilting supplies under her bed. Her time is consumed with making ends meet and child care concerns. Sonya must still decide the configuration of her “room.” She feels that she is barred from happiness, just as she is barred from living in her old house. She fantasizes about how safe and secure she felt there—a place where her quilting supplies occupied a cabinet in her kitchen. The arc of this story builds to a literal transgression of space and boundary that helps Sonya realize that even in her present circumstance, she must attend to her own needs as well as the needs of others.

The story I believe I have taken the most risk with technically in this collection is “Ripped Away.” I decided to use the male narrator Sean to show the misconceptions he has about his love interest and co-worker, Abby. I build on the idea of time and place as disorienting features by placing the characters into a city foreign to both of them: London. This is the first time the two will travel together, and Sean hopes to consummate their relationship. The span of years separating him from Abby both excites and disconcerts him. She makes it clear that she does not need a protector or financial provider. She calls into question his idea of himself as a strong and powerful male. He does not understand her literal and figurative need for “space.”
Time and place figure prominently in the story. First there is the idea of the generational time and age difference. Secondly, there is the idea of time travel realized in the decision by Sean to take Abby on the evening Jack the Ripper walking tour. When Sean and Abby relive the experience of Jack the Ripper through a walking tour, Abby disorients Sean’s sense of place by calling into question his gender stereotyping. Her insistence on drawing boundaries between their two spaces disorients Sean’s idea of himself and acts as a catalyst for the violent act he commits later in the story.

The last story in the collection also serves as the title for the collection. “Conjuring Olympus” presents a small triumph over the circumscribed space of women’s bodies through the triumph of the imagination. In this story, place acts as liberator rather than oppressor. The narrator envisions a different place in time in order to survive the indignity of the place she must endure annually: the close quarters of the mammogram machine. The mammogram gives physical meaning to the idea of fragmentation of the female body, since the test requires women to place their breast into a machine as if it is an object. This story takes the reader through the annual visit and the consequences. It is written in first person, to create the necessary intimacy with the main character, Joanna who reveals just how it feels to have that physical part of the woman’s body handled like a dissection slide in a laboratory. Anyone who has experienced this may identify with the enclosed space of the examining room, and Joanna’s desire to imagine some power or control over that space.

I chose to reference Greek Mythology as Joanna’s liberator because of the classical belief in the flesh of their Gods as “divine.” Born from Zeus’ head, “Athene was particularly associated with activities of the head: she rivaled her father Zeus in wisdom and took after her mother, Metis, in possessing ‘cunning intelligence’” (Willis 136). I wanted Hannah to usurp
Athena’s power by using her mind to conquer those fears. And maybe that is how all women can conquer not only their fears, but their perception of their place in the world. Reading and writing fiction still offers women one of the best ways to learn how our myriad choices affect both our economic and artistic freedom.

Woolf’s idea of artistic freedom still resonates for all women, especially the women characters I have developed in this short story collection. Finding and sustaining that self requires women to acknowledge the strictures that kept them out of the halls of museums and the pages of fiction for so long. To nurture that self, a woman needs both the room and the lock. Betty Friedan reports on this becoming a reality for the women she interviewed for *The Feminine Mystique*: “This moment of personal truth was more likely to be marked by adding a room with a door to their open-plan house, or simply by putting a door on one room in the house” (146). In other words, these women created—both physically and metaphorically—a room of their very own. Women still must battle expectations and marginalization, especially when it comes to valuing their diverse roles. Fortunately, today, women have gained some leverage in having their works represented in museums and boardrooms.

I think of some of the art exhibits by women that I have had the good fortune of viewing. Like Virginia Woolf, I, too experienced an epiphany while viewing just such an exhibit. Woolf would be pleased if she could know that the entire gallery of this exhibit housed only women artists. This event took place at the Art Institute in Chicago in the late nineties.

The part of the exhibit that impressed me featured women addressing feminist themes. Cindy Sherman’s photographs of celebrity stills featuring herself as subject formed one portion of the exhibit, while another wall held Annette Messenger’s “My Collection of Proverbs.” These were white squares of material carefully and colorfully embroidered with adages and aphorisms
that disparaged women. I cannot remember the exact text of the messages, but many echoed the idea that a woman's place is secondary to man. How many women have experienced these ideas stitched into unspoken samplers in their own lives? And how many women have created something vital and beautiful in spite of the boundaries of place?
Works Cited


THE FORBIDDEN OBJECT OF HER DESIRE

In third grade, Diane thought that Catholic School was filled with rules, rules, rules, and even rules about the rules. When an adult walks into the room, rise and chime, “Good (morning or afternoon) Father, Sister, Mrs., Mr., or Miss So and So.” If you are a girl, pin a circle of lace over your head before going over to church. Put your hand over your heart for the Pledge of Allegiance. Don’t touch the walls in the hall. Don’t talk, and more importantly, don’t talk back.

So when she felt the school librarian Miss Janice’s hand close over her own as she reached for a book titled *The Raven*, she stayed still as the bust of Shakespeare that decorated Miss Janice’s desk.

“I think this book may be a little too, a little too *mature* for you, Diane. Why don’t you come back to it at a later time?” she said. Right below the title, just three letters announced the author: P-O-E. Those letters burned themselves into Diane’s memory. Why couldn’t she read this Poe book? Was this one of the things her mother had meant when she said, “You know, you don’t have to buy it all hook, line and sinker, honey. I don’t.”

Her mother was a “converted” Catholic and she always cautioned Diane to “think for herself.” Usually her mother’s recounting of her conversion experience in 1950 followed these admonitions. “No one is going to tell me that my parents are not going to heaven just because they are Baptists.”

“But mom,” Diane answered, “Pope John changed all that.” But her mother just shook her head and said. “It was wrong, I’m telling you. I’ll never forget it.”

Diane’s face grew hot and she felt torn in two between her mother and her faith. She believed that there just had to be a place in heaven for her granddad, he with the cornflower blue eyes and giving nature. Her grandma used to say she never knew who was coming to
dinner because granddad Ewing would take in any stranger down on his luck. He worked the
mines until his lungs filled up with soot and now he sat in his falling down house in Hazard,
Kentucky hooked up to an oxygen machine.

So Diane kept silent when Miss Janice helped her slide the book back between the other
Poe books. At St. Pius you didn’t discuss not swallowing the rules of the grown-ups “hook-line-
and sinker.” Diane would have never dreamed of questioning Miss Janice because she admired
everything about her. She was the first person Diane saw when she crossed the threshold for her
favorite class activity—Library Time. Miss Janice would smile through her white cat eyeglasses
at her from behind her desk at the center of that precious vault of books. She was about Diane’s
mother’s age, and like her, she wore neatly ironed, bell skirted, cinched-at-the-waist, cotton print
dresses every day. Her short flip of brown hair was touched with gingery highlights and curled
softly around her face. When she spoke, her voice had a few trills in it, and she pitched it at the
perfect decibel for “library talking.”

Diane had to respect anyone who had earned the right to preside over so many objects of
her desire and any memory that would ever visit her of Miss Janice would always come framed
in books. St. Pius had a huge gym, big enough for lunchtime volleyball leagues, but their small
rectangle of a library stretched just twenty by ten feet. This forced the 1960’s baby boom classes
crammed to forty-student capacity to visit in small groups of ten.

Diane loved the way the books lined every inch between floor and ceiling. She thought
that the dulled colors of their uncovered spines glowed just like the green, blues, and muted
corals of the sea glass she had collected in Florida. Cracking one open revealed the heady
fragrance of library book, a combination of glue and damp leaves.
She walked back to the children's side of the library and contented herself with a *Nancy Drew* instead of a Poe that day, but the refusal ignited something deep within her.

She had never been told that she *couldn't* read a book. Granddad and grandmom were one of the few families in the mountains to send their children all the way through high school. Her mother knew that reading was a gift, one you had to cultivate just like a garden. On their summertime visits to the public library, Diane checked out whatever she wanted. At that time, she was plowing through the brick-sized hardbound copy of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* she had gotten for Christmas.

While she walked back to class she thought about how much thicker that book was than *The Raven*, which was maybe only an inch wide. She pictured *Little Women* waiting at home for her on her *counterpane*, a word she had recently hunted for in the dictionary. Her smallish hands couldn't balance the book, so she only read it on top of her bed or stretched out on the floor. There she could escape into the world of Jo and her sisters, and it was there that she began to imagine what it would mean to write her own stories, like Jo did for the March sisters’ plays.

She had lugged the family dictionary up to her room to look up all the words she did not recognize in Alcott’s work. The one she liked best was *furbelows*, used to describe the showy trimming on ball gowns. She said it softly to herself, liking the feel of it on her tongue and in her ears. Knowing those words created a secret interior world for her and she began to connect the “seen” of this book with the “unseen” of the Poe book. It was her very own mystery, and she started looking for ways to solve it, just like Nancy Drew.

Usually the way around the rules was to prove yourself in some way. You could receive communion after you had been sufficiently prepared. She had memorized all of the questions and answers to that section of the catechism, but her mind couldn’t quite fuse the papery bread in
her mouth with the idea of flesh and blood. She had settled on the idea of the bread as a symbol, even though Sister Mark Ann had insisted that it was just like a math equation: bread and wine equals body and blood. But no one was keeping her away from dutifully walking up the center aisle and offering her tongue to the wafer. Her thoughts were her own, she had discovered.

She decided that she could earn the right to cross over the line to reading *mature* books. Maybe once she had mastered reading everything on her side of the library, Miss Janice would have to see that she could handle those other books. It became a goal to look toward. Miss Janice hadn’t said when the ban would be lifted, so there was some hope.

On her next visit to the library, Diane checked out *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, by Oscar Wilde. It was located on a high shelf, high enough that she strained and had to balance on the toes of her brown and white Oxford shoes to reach it. She read one of the stories that day during “Silent Reading Time.” And that story, “The Nightingale and the Rose” haunted her dreams that night.

The prince of this story had tried to woo a haughty princess. She told him she would go to the ball with him if he could produce a red rose. In this kingdom there were no red rose trees. A nightingale witnessed the prince’s sadness and determination and decided to consult the trees for the prince. One white rose tree told the little songbird that it could turn one of the white roses red by pressing its breast into a thorn on the tree and singing with all of its might. But, the price would be steep: certain death. And to Diane’s horror, the story went on to describe the nightingale’s last painful moments as its lifeblood ebbed into the tree, coloring the rose a brilliant red. The prince plucked the rose, but was rejected by the princess. She thought she had devised an impossible task for him. He threw the rose into the street.
In Diane’s dream, the rose flew out of the street and around and around and around her room. *I am the body and blood of the nightingale,* it sang. She woke up in a sweat, her sheets knotted around her legs where she had twisted to get away from the flying, singing rose.

She lay there wondering if Miss Janice really knew what was in these books. In a few weeks, she decided to try the Poe book again. This time she slipped it between two acceptable books and Miss Janice did not say a word when she stamped it out for her. When she finally did sit down and read it, she couldn’t see what Miss Janice could possibly have meant. Poe’s raven didn’t compare to the nightingale. Except that he was bigger and could say “Nevermore.”

When Diane closed the cover of *The Raven,* she thought of Miss Janice behind her desk, her eyes blocked from view by the reflection of light beamed down by the fluorescent lighting in the library. Diane felt a surge of power as she tossed the book back on her pile and turned back to *Little Women.*

Beth had died, and Jo had just refused Laurie’s proposal.

END
BLACK HANDKERCHIEFS

We began tripping boys near the beginning of the football season in September, but we didn't get caught until the end of October, just a few weeks before homecoming. Once it started, we couldn't stop ourselves, so the school stepped in and did it for us.

I'm still not sure why it felt so good and why we kept on with it. And now detention was supposed to help us figure that out. My hand curled around my Bic pen so tightly that it stained the loose leaf on my desk. The wall clock's minute hand stuttered forward in minute-sized clicks, clicks that follow me into my dreams. Each moment of the day here begins with a whispered tick backward, and then a loud click forward onto the next black line. Eight clicks until religion class lets out. Four clicks until lunch. But in my dreams at home, beneath the pink and white ruffled curtains blowing over my headboard while I sleep, the clicks can turn into warnings: Five clicks until the man with the knife hiding outside your bedroom window that we had been warned about in Health class crashes in. The man you shouldn't take rides from has found out where you live. In just ten clicks, you will die.

In the quiet space of detention hall, Sister Clementine sat behind her wooden desk, one hand working the rosary dangling from her waist, making more clicks as she dropped each bead. Her mustache quivered over lips muttering Hail Mary's and Our Father's. The sun spooled in through the rectangular windows and heated us up until the whole room had that metallic-clean nun smell, like a dentist office. My pen dug into the callus on my middle finger, making a little crescent shape underneath, but no words would leak out of the nib.

I cut my eyes over to my best friend Annette writing away in her blocky penmanship, her fine hair making a blonde curtain over her bent cheek. I knew her writing as well as I knew my own signature because we wrote each other every single day. She tilted every letter back on its
spine until they all looked like they were getting ready to spring forward, kind of like those men in the "Keep 'on truckin'" cartoons. The words leaned into a conga line across the page.

The teachers hated it.

Her drawings of people showed the parts of a person's personality that they would probably like to keep hidden. Their dark side. Yesterday she passed me a letter in the hall on the way to class. I unfolded the triangle and saw Sister Clementine as a dragon with a long tail sticking out from under her habit. All of the little cross hatchings and shadings she had crammed into this picture made it look like it took forever, but I knew she had probably whipped it off during her fifty minute study hall. On the back of the dragon-nun’s habit was the letter:

_Hi Mary Ann,

See ya in detention with Sister C tomorrow. Are you in trouble at home? I'm supposed to “straighten up and fly right.” HA. All I want to do is fly away.

Luv ya like a sis,

Annette

***

The tripping started on one of those days in early fall when everything looks a little too bright. The leaves burned yellow in the trees up and down the street. The air smelled like ripe apples and a chill breeze pricked the hair on my nape under my ponytail. After the boys’ noisy Friday pep rally, Annette waited out front with me for the rest of the girls who walk home to meet up with us. A couple of freshman from the boy’s high school next to ours came walking up the sidewalk in front of our school, Our Lady of Assumption.

Our high school is just one block down from the boy’s school, St. Pius. The difference is: the boys like their school. They get to do fun things like get out of class early for these pep
rallies every Friday before the football game. Like I said, their pep rallies are noisy, and we can hear them chanting their fight songs through our open windows: *When a Lion roars, a Lion always scores!*

After the pep rallies end, they pour up the hill dressed in their school colors--blue and gold. Now those are colors you could be proud of. Sky and sun. On Friday nights at the games, they come with their faces painted like they're going off to war or something.

Not us. We hate Our Lady of Assumption. Hate the way they treat us like we're dirty or something.

"Kneel down Mary Ann," the sisters say, "Now is your hem touching the floor? I don't think so. You unroll that waistband right now." Our school colors are green and white. The colors of being carsick. The color of moldy white bread.

Instead of pep rallies, we have Career Days. "Be a Girl Friday." "Careers in Nursing." "Future Homemakers of America." These are our choices. "Girl Friday" sounded promising at first, calling up images of "foreign intrigue" or "espionage." I asked my mom what it meant and she said it was just the same as a secretary as far as she knew. And then she started in on me about "my future." Now that I'm a sophomore, she thinks I need to decide on something.

"You graduate in two years; you need to take some of those business classes. Typing is a valuable skill to learn."

That's what was playing in my head when the two boys walked up the sidewalk. They stared straight through us, smiling like they were all smug and shit, high on the cheers from the pep rally. These two were clearly younger than us. One of them looked like puberty was making a joke out of him. His feet seemed way too big for his body and his pants rode just
above his ankle. He had black wiry hair that he had tried to comb down to cover his pimply forehead, but it just made him look like a furry animal.

What probably set Annette off was the smile he threw us. It wasn’t a friendly smile, it was a “checking-you-out-from-the-neck-down” kind of smile. Who did he think he was? We were sophomores.

Annette put her foot out and tripped Fur-Hair. That wiped the smile right off his face, especially when he realized that it was a girl who had knocked him over. Annette just stood there, like she was daring him to hit her. Right after he stumbled, dropping his books like a stack of dinner plates, I thought, this is brilliant, he knows he can’t hit a girl. Instant expulsion from Pius if he does. That boy just picked up his books and kept on walking like it had never happened.

So it became a game. The next day at school, Annette passed me a note right outside home ec. I sat down behind the Singer sewing machine we were going to use that day and tucked the note inside the direction manual. Sister Ursula stood at the front of the room.

“Okay ladies, today we will practice different stitches. Open your manuals to the chapter titled: “The Perfect Stitch” and practice straight lines of as many stitches as you can. Take your time. Read the directions carefully before you begin. Raise your hand for assistance.”

Of course, three hands went up right away. The brown nosers who just want to get *individual attention* from Sister. Ginny Wheeler, her skin pale as white cotton waved her over first. Good. Time to read the note. I smoothed it open between the pages of the manual:

*Hi Mary Ann,*

*My mom is driving me nuts! She wants me to babysit today so she can get ironing done. SO I can’t meet up with you to walk around or go to the park. But*
I can meet you out at the gate (if you know what I mean). There are a few freshman I would like to show my new shoes to. HA!  

BFF (Best Friends Forever)--Annette

I was disappointed that we couldn’t walk around after school. I love walking out that front door, seeing the sidewalk stretch off to a tiny point way ahead. It reminds me of those "perspective" pictures they had us draw in grade school of railroad tracks.

The way I see it, my mom is stuck at the big blocks at the front of the picture. That tiny point at the end escapes her reach. After all day at Our Lady of Assumption, going from class to class with only a three minute break in-between, it's only fair that I have some time when I decide where to go and who I meet up with on the way.

Once I leave the house, my mom doesn't know what I do. That's when I feel the most like my real self. Not my schoolgirl self, not Mary Ann the big sister self, and especially not Mary Ann the daughter.

At the top of the note, Annette had shaded in a pair of enormous cartoon-inflated shoes, like the kind you would expect a clown to wear. The tops of the shoes gaped open and she had designed a pattern of diamonds all over the shoes that made them leap out at you like a 3-D picture.

A warm thrill ran from my stomach up to my eyes as I folded the note. And so it began. We would wait for the really weirdo looking guys and then take turns sticking our foot out. The most they'd do is mutter, "You bitch," under their breath. Mostly they'd just hurry up and get up so no one would see that a girl had made them fall or drop their books.

The note passing seemed more important after we began tripping the boys. We didn’t trip them every single day—that would have been too obvious. Friday was our favorite day to do it. It fit in with that feeling of freedom you get when the last bell rings and you know you have
two whole days without your life being run by the clocks, the bells, and the nuns. Another reason we had to pass the notes was because this year Annette and I have only one class together this year--religion class. All we're doing right now in there is the "Awareness" section.

In "Awareness" we have to talk about what we notice in the world.

Yesterday, the day after we got caught, Sister Thomas came in and wrote on the board, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life. What did you notice so far?"

You can say anything.

When she called on me, I talked about the way I noticed how fast paper burns when you light it. Annette jerked her chin towards me real quick when I said that. She knew what I was talking about. Yesterday was the day my mom burned all of our letters in the grill.

And now, in detention, that was all I could really feel sorry about: all those lost letters and drawings. And I also knew that I would probably keep on tripping boys if I could be sure my mom wouldn't be dragged into it again. I fingered the new letter Annette had given me in the breast pocket of my uniform shirt. While I thought about possible new hiding places for our letters, the voice in my head that usually makes the pen move was silent. I could hear the footsteps and chair scrapings of the nuns overhead in their top floor convent. Annette calls it their "coven."

Sister Clementine looked up and noticed that I had still not written anything. Instead, my paper was bordered with smiley-faced flowers. Her lips--those lips that have never felt lipstick or kissed a man--stilled from Hail Marying. She and I both stared at my paper.

"I don't know why you're just sitting there, Mary Ann," she said. "I've heard you can be quite the creative writer in your other classes. The other nuns say you're a whiz with the words, always writing notes to your friends during class."
Annette stopped writing and she looked up to see what would happen next I guess. But I'm such a coward, I just said, "Sorry, sister," and my pen moved across the page, gathering my rage and shame into its little blue tip.

As I wrote what I thought Sister would like to see, I thought about my mom, about how she was going to be hellbent on getting me into the business and typing classes after this incident. About how she can work herself into a huge temper tantrum in such a short time.


My mom is an excellent typist.

Almost every night, she types for the insurance company she worked for until she had the five of us. Stay-at-home-mom by day and bread winner by night. Foot high stacks of applications and handwritten letters disappear when her hands fly across the Royal's keys. Her fingers have a fluttering motion that reminds me more of the piano players on *Ed Sullivan* than the girls in typing class at Our Lady of Assumption.

"It just takes practice," she says, kneading the pink ovals her glasses pinch into either side of her nose." I could never get to be as fast as that, not if I practiced a million years.

After the stack disappears into various manila folders she pours herself a tall glass of vodka disguised as ice water and falls into a drop-dead sleep on the couch after she drinks it. The clear liquid had me fooled until one morning when I got to the glass before she woke up. It smelled kind of like Sister Clementine, only stronger, not clean. I looked through the cabinets
and found three bottles of Smirnoff Vodka. I told Annette about it, because everyone knows her
dad drinks.

"Vodka, huh, my dad said that's for sneaky drunks. They think that no one can smell it
on them," she said.

That's my mom, a sneaky drunk. I don't blame her though. If I had to sleep with my dad,
I'd choose the couch too. He's a fireman, and fighting those fires must make him awful thirsty.
If he's not at the firehouse he's down at the Five-Mile bar with all of his neighborhood friends.
My mom says we should think of him as a hero because he puts his life on the line every time he
goes out on an alarm. The only way my dad can stand the danger of his job is to go to the bar to
"relax and unwind from the pressure he's under every day," she always says.

As I've gotten older, I miss him less and less. When he is here, we have to be really
careful not to disturb him while he reads the paper or watches television. It's really hard for the
five of us to be that quiet. After me there's Mark, Maureen, Marty, and the baby, Mary Claire.
Dad calls us his M & M's. Mom had to have all those Mary names because she is really hung up
on the Blessed Mother. Her answer to every crisis is to whip out her rosary.

Anyway, I think she's trying to re-become a virgin herself. The only Catholic birth
control that's allowed: abstinence or alcohol comas. In the morning, it's always, "Mary Ann, I
have such a headache from typing last night. Would you get Mary Claire up and give her a
bottle?"

Which I always do, because Mary Claire is so sweet. The only one of us who got dad's
curly red MacLachlan hair. It looks like little pennies stuck all over her head. My aunts say that
a two-year-old shouldn't still be on a bottle, but my mom always says: she's the baby; let her
have it if she wants it.
I think our house is crowded, with three girls sharing a room, but we don't even come close to Annette's family. The Fedders have nine kids in three bedrooms. Some of them sleep on the couches in their living room, it's so packed upstairs. They keep some of their clothes in suitcases because they don't have enough drawers. And poor Annette, like me, is the eldest girl.

Everybody calls her only older brother, Dominic, Dice, because he was born with the cord wrapped around his neck and they think he's lucky to have survived his own birthday. A toss of the dice either way. Annette told me that Dice comes on the wall of his room right under a poster of Raquel Welch. She knows because her mom makes her wash down the walls on Saturdays. "Why doesn't your mom make the boys wash their own walls?" I asked her when she told me. "That is disgusting."

"Mom said that's not boys' work, that's women's work. The boys have to take out the trash and do the yard work," she said, picking at the sore on her inner arm that never really heals.

"So, what is this, like Tara at your house?" I said. I was reading Gone With the Wind. "You're like the inside slaves, and your brothers are the field hands?" Although Annette's house certainly does not even look close to Tara. Instead of a tree-lined drive, there is a cracked sidewalk that leads up to a red brick three-bedroom with one bathroom. I never use the bathroom when I'm there, it smells so bad from baby diapers and boys who can't pee straight, it makes my eyes water.

Annette just rolled her eyes at me and went on.

"Mom said I better not be out there lifting stuff like those garbage cans or I'll mess up my female parts. I won't be able to have kids."

After she said that, I ran over to her bed and tried lifting it. We both laughed so hard that tears ran over our cheeks. Whenever we see one of the neighborhood moms out in their pregnant
clothes, we look at each other and pretend we're lifting five-hundred pound barbells. It's our little secret, as people say.

Like the tripping. Until Tim Borgemenke told us. But we were especially mean to him. If he just wouldn't have worn that damn white tie. It's a part of their uniform. Dress slacks, Oxford shirts buttoned to the collar, and a tie. Most of them have two or three different ones, navy or maybe an adventurous plaid, stuffed into their bookbags or stowed in the glove compartment of their junker cars. Except for Tim. He wears the same kind every day: Snow white and as wide as a hand. You couldn't help noticing.

Annette took one look at him and I saw her shoulders stiffen, the same way they did that time I saw her dad slap her right across the face. She turned to me and said, “What is with the white tie every day?”

I hadn’t really noticed, but I wanted to see where she would go with this.

“He wears it every day?”

“Uh-huh. I think we need to tell him he needs a fashion makeover.”

Oh boy, I thought, Tim is in for it. When Annette started something, she just wouldn’t let it go. That’s how she got herself smacked across the face that night at her house. I had eaten dinner with the Fedders, (a bowl of tomato soup and a slice of buttered Wonder Bread) and when Annette pushed back her chair, her dad said that it was her dish night. She stood up from the table and yelled, "It is not my dish night, it's Carol's." He said I think I know whose turn it is tonight, and she stood up, squared those bony wings of shoulders she has and said, "Well, I'm not doing it." And wham, his beefy hand flew out and smacked her.

Annette didn't even cry one tear, even though you could see a white mark where his fingers had struck her cheek. That one slap in the face seemed worse to me than the way my dad
hits us. With him, it's like a formal ceremony and you know you're going to get it. Two or three swats with his belt on your behind is about it with him. He always says, "This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you, Mary Ann." Just once, I'd like to say, well, how about you give me the belt and we see which end of it hurts the most?" And then, the same story about how I have it so much easier because his dad, Papaw, used to make him go out in the yard on their farm and cut down a "switch" and bring it back so he could "smack the shit out of me."

Progress has smiled on our family according to him.

But at the boys' high school, no hitting or fighting is allowed on or off school grounds, especially not with girls. The guys we picked on couldn't really put up a fight until Tim. We only tripped him once, but he saw us tripping the others. His height kind of scared us, although we would never admit that to each other. Taunting him was even more fun than tripping him.

"White tie!" we'd scream at him as soon as we saw him walking towards us. Then Annette would laugh so hard she would lean against me and I would have to put my arm around her shoulders to keep her from collapsing out of breath right there on the sidewalk. Tim did not see the humor in this. He'd yell right back. "You two are fucked!" No one else could figure out what was going on. They just thought it was one of those boy-girl things that were always going on out by the gate that divides the two schools.

Later, when I'd see Annette at second change of class in the halls, she'd just mouth "white tie" at me and I would practically become hysterical laughing. By myself, all the way into biology. I guess you could say that Tim's white tie became the Achilles' heel we read about in English class. It became the place we couldn't be careful enough about. The place where they could get us.
Tim, being the big baby that he was, told his mom what we were doing after he found out our names from some of the guys from our grade school. Once they get to Pius, they forget that they were your friend in grade school. Forget how you didn't tell on them when they snapped your bra strap from behind.

When Augustine called yesterday, I was out in the dining room helping Maureen do a puzzle and Mark and Marty were out in the kitchen fighting over the last Hostess Sno Ball pack left in the pantry. Mom was just coming up from the basement with a laundry basket of towels balanced on her hip. She grabbed the snack away from the two boys and yelled, "Outside, right now," before she picked up the phone.

"Yes, this is Mrs. MacLachlan," she said, acting real business-like. "I see." Then all of the color drained out of her face, and she looked at me, her blue eyes steeling up, her mouth a thin hard line. She set the Sno Balls on top of the mound of clean towels.

"I see," she said again.

"Oh, no, I'm not questioning you, if you say she and that girl tripped that boy, I'm sure she did." "I see." Again. "Yes, I totally agree with you. I can't believe Mary Ann was involved in something like that."

She looked down at the spotted linoleum of our kitchen floor as she listened, twisting the spiral cord into a knot.

"I think that would be an appropriate punishment," she said and promised to talk to me about "my behavior."

She hung up the phone and stared at me.

I put the puzzle piece I was holding down on the table. I thought about running out the front door, but something in her gaze pinned me to the back of my chair. That blurry look
around her mouth, like her lipstick was on wrong, told me that I had let her down and she wasn't going to just shrug this one off.

She walked toward me and I swear to God, I wish she had slapped me. It would have been easier than watching her face crumple into tears. My mom never cries. And when she does, it makes me feel like all of the cells holding my body together might fly apart and I'll be gone, into nothing. My minutes all clicked. A stain on the wall.

"Whatever possessed you?" she kept saying.

I just looked down at the unfinished puzzle. The little ones in the family had stopped playing to watch me get in trouble. Better than the soap opera mom watched! Another World. They looked at me with worry lines creasing their perfect little foreheads.

"You weren't raised to act like that. No one on my side of the family resorts to that type of behavior. It's that Annette you're running with. You know her mom had to get married. And she just lets those kids run wild."

Now I would have to admit that this is true. During the week, Mrs. Fedders locks the house during the day so she can get her housework done. After the ones old enough to walk and talk are done eating in the summer, she tells them to go out and play and she doesn't want to see their faces until lunchtime.

"I think I know what the problem is" she said. She came over and grabbed my arm and walked me upstairs to my room.

"Where are they? Get them out. Right now."

"Where are what?" I had no idea what she thought I had in my room.

"Those damn letters you're always writing to your wonderful friend Annette! I'll know you squirrel them away in here. Now get them out."

I went over to my closet and lifted the stack of folded sheets that I kept the shoebox hidden inside. My heart sank. I couldn’t let her read these letters. She would see Annette’s drawings of her with her hair drawn into a big pile of cotton candy and a bottle of vodka in her hand. I noticed how her hand shook as she pulled her pack of Kool’s out of her skirt pocket. Her mouth screwed to one side to steady the cigarette as she lit it. A ribbon of smoke whirled up and away from her champagne-colored hair.

I hate her hair now that she goes to the beauty parlor every week for a shampoo and set. They backcomb it into this bubbly thing that barely moves in a strong wind. She says it’s easier this way. The teasing also helps to "disguise" the grayish seam that lines her part when the color grows out.

"I think you need to stop this nonsense," she said, squinting through the smoke at me. I think that whatever you did had something to do with hanging around with some girl from the other side of the Pike. Find someone from a nice family."

“Oh, you mean like ours.”

Then she grabbed my arm again and I dropped the box. I lunged for the scattering sheets of paper, but she was quicker. She crumpled them all against her chest and ran out of the room. I followed her outside and watched as she dumped all of the letters into the charcoal grill and grabbed her lighter out of her pocket.

“You two ARE NOT going to see each other anymore!” she screamed, clicking her lighter down again and again, lighting them. The tiny flames grabbed hold and I felt my stinging cheek and cried. I was glad she wasn’t going to read the letters but I thought of what was being lost. Those letters were the pictures destroyed in the house fire, a kind of diary that I could never
get back. I realized that there was nothing I could do now, so I just watched the paper curl into black handkerchiefs that shredded themselves into the air.

* * *

After she was sure the letters were gone, she turned to me and said, "And I'm not even going to tell your father about this, it would upset him too much," she said, turning on her old blue Keds and walking back into the house. Then I knew that I was off the hook with her. If she's not telling, then she's not really as upset as she's acting. This is her way of protecting me from him. There is nothing worse than knowing that he is going to find out when he gets home. I've noticed she hardly ever tells him anything about me anymore. That's probably why she felt like she had to do something dramatic, like burn the letters.

That night, she kept quiet all through supper until dad left for the bar. She moved to the Royal on the dining room table and looked back into the kitchen at me.

"After you clear the dishes, would you mind entertaining the little ones?" I had a ton of homework, but I decided I better just do it later after I put them to bed.

"Sure," I said, happy to be her "shining star" again. Sometimes she calls me that, other times, I'm the "thorn in her side."

"That will be a huge help," she said, uncovering the typewriter. She stopped and turned to me, still holding the plastic cover. A look passed over her face that I had only seen once before, that time in church when Maureen had yelled out: "Why is that man wearing a dress, mommy?" It was like she had to will her face to not smile. It gave her an over serious look. Like she was playing at being a grown-up like the little ones do in their imaginary games of house. Her body stilled as it had then and she said, "Mary Ann, what on earth possessed you to
do that? You've been in Catholic school since first grade. What you and Annette did, that just seems so, well, un-Christian. Did those boys do something to you?"

"No, not really," I said. "They're just, well you know, the boys are just, well, I really can't explain how they make us feel sometimes. It's like they know something we don't and they're rubbing it in or something."

 "Well when I was at Our Lady of the Assumption, I was mostly scared of them, afraid I would never get a boyfriend," she said, setting the cover down and scratching her scalp with the eraser of a pencil so that she wouldn't disturb her hair. "I would never have done something like that."

The tone in her voice made me feel like I was something that she had never seen before like self-folding laundry or a talking cat. Finally, she looked away from me and sat down and began to go through her pile.

After the dishes were stacked on the sink, I set up Chutes and Ladders for my little brothers and sisters and we all moved our pieces up the ladders and down the chutes to the snaps of her typewriter keys, the snaps blurring until they sounded like one big cricket song.

END
BURNING THE SHRINE

If I followed the routine it usually worked. First, I turned back the covers and got into bed, closed my eyes and let go of everything new: job, budget, apartment. Then I relaxed my body, beginning with my forehead muscle--*frontalis*--imagining a giant comb untangling each fiber. Once inside that furred margin between wakefulness and sleep, I switched on a mental image of the house I had left behind. My home. Where we live now is just a place I had to decide on when time nudged its big wet nose toward me like a dog that needs to go outside.

I turned my pillow over to get the cool side against my damp cheek and let myself imagine my nightly walk through the house we had lived in for eight years. I remembered how strong and smooth the pegged wood planks felt against the soles of my feet as I pictured myself walking down the hall to each of my daughter's bedrooms. I opened each of their doors, and saw them--first Maddie, then Britt--stretched replete with sleep under the Feathered Star quilts I had sewed for them.

If I didn't think about the Double Wedding Ring quilt stowed under this bed, I could usually fall asleep. But tonight, I couldn't block that quilt out. I missed sewing but I just couldn't justify giving any time to it now. I thought about how happy it had made Tim's mom, Millicent Ferral, when I called her to help me get the pieces of that quilt together. She would show up at my door, her body swathed in yards of nylon running suit, toting plastic bags filled with fabric prized from boxes in her basement dedicated to the preservation of Tim's childhood: his baby blankets, his cub scout uniform, his striped and dotted ties. It had taken me nearly six months to complete--that monument to us. The yellowed lace from my first communion dress preserved next to his camouflage army pants.
Now, that quilt has metamorphosed into a nagging reminder that my husband probably spends his nights curled against Leslie, the perky little manager of the Hallmark store that he met when he resurfaced their parking lot.

*Stop, I thought, just stop.* I turned onto my back and lay my palms straight up. I closed my eyes and tried to will my imagination to take me back into my old house. *Back through the hallway, the kitchen is on your right. Walk in and make sure that each gleaming appliance is turned off.* Of course, in my fantasy, my house was always clean. *Turn the handle to lock the back door tight against the night. Walk by the hutch Tim built into the corner; palm one of the cool china coffee cups mounted on hooks, like a row of open mouths waiting to be filled. Turn and open the cupboard filled with quilting supplies. Breathe in the clean tumble of color falling into a rectangular mosaic.* My breathing slowed and I felt my body relax toward sleep.

In the morning, I woke up with my false sense of calm firmly intact, but just for a small corner of time. I lay in bed and stared at the pale ceiling stretched above me like a calm lake until my brain seized and lobbed that first flat stone across the water breaking that surface into a million wrinkled worries. It's Friday, you've got to get up, I told myself, get dressed for work, pack the lunches, mail your bills. All of these thoughts throbbed in my head like a sore tooth that my tongue couldn't resist. I wadded my covers up and threw them against the wall.

I shoved my feet into slippers so that I wouldn't make contact with the dingy gold carpet that often exhaled smoky smells from the previous tenants. I walked across the hall to Maddie and Britt's room and said, "Morning Glories, time to get up."

Maddie pulled her covers over her face so that only her nut-brown bangs were exposed. Britt obediently swung her feet to the floor, running her hand over her face as if to clear the cobwebs of sleep still clinging there. Maddie was in fifth grade and Britt was in second, at Our
Lady of Perpetual Help. The choice of this apartment was to guarantee that we still lived within parish boundaries so that they wouldn't have to change schools after the divorce. It seemed like too much to ask, giving up their home, a live-in dad, their school and friends. So I had tried to keep as many parts of the whole the same, at least the parts I could control.

Britt followed me out to the kitchen, and I opened one of the fake wooden cabinets to get two bowls for cereal and milk. I moved the three stacks of bills I had sorted last night to make room for breakfast. The stack that I had mentally marked "pay immediately" included the essentials like the gas and electric, the rent, and the phone. The second stack held my two Visa bills. I offered them a small amount each month, but the interest kept increasing exponentially. My small checks were only Band-Aids when what I really needed was a tourniquet. My last stack was just my bill from my divorce attorney, Catherine Drexel. Although it has been almost a year now, I hadn't been able to make much of a dent in the sum. I remembered what she had tried to tell me when we had first met.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" she had asked. "Are you sure you won't attempt some counseling?"

"No," I had said, slicking my shoulder length hair behind my ears. My face burned and I could feel my hair fuzzing up into a coppery tangle as it reacted to the heat pouring from my scalp.

"Sonya, I'm going to say something you're not going to like, but be practical. You haven't been in the work force for almost ten years, you don't have a college degree, and you aren't going to get much in the divorce settlement. Maybe you could try to work things out for awhile with your husband, at least until you are economically ready to leave him."
Catherine had sat behind her desk, ironed into her tailored black business suit, folding her French manicure around some documents.

"Can I ask you a personal question, Catherine?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"Are you married?"

"Why, no," she said. "But Sonya, I am in a position to see how these things generally turn out. It may feel great to you right now to use the divorce as a punishment for what Tim has done, but think of how you might end up hurting yourself and your children."

And as I looked from the pile of bills to my view of the alley behind us, I realized that she had been right; my pride had turned out to be a thin garment to weather what the divorce had cost us.

Maybe a thirty-two-year-old shouldn't adhere to the rules her sixteen-year-old self had laid out for her, without knowing what would happen next. The very qualities about Tim that charmed me at seventeen turned out to be the very same things that began to annoy me ten or fifteen years later. Tim was impulsive, then and now. Once, on Valentine's Day he had shown up at my house with concert tickets in hand and we went to see Neil Young and Crazy Horse. I'll never forget that night. The musky smell of marijuana surrounded us like an erotic cloud and when everyone held up their lighters during the last encore, I felt as if Tim had arranged to bring a skyful of stars and lay it in my lap.

With age, this spontaneity had hardened into recalcitrance. He refused to plan ahead, filing his bids for blacktopping jobs late, dealing with daily crises in random order, managing to squeak by on his reputation for great work. And that was how he had viewed his affair, as a crisis that he could smooth over just like he filled in the cracks and holes of the parking lots he
serviced. He had some loyal customers who didn't mind his last minute approach, but I had decided that I wasn't one of them.

Britt came over to me as I stared past my reflection to the alley and put her arms around my waist. I lay my palm on her pinky gold hair for a second and then I realized that Maddie still hadn't surfaced from her nest of covers. I walked back to the bedroom and found her lying on the edge of the bed, staring at the floor, her forehead drawn into upside-down "U's" in the space between her eyebrows.

"Maddie, you really need to get a move on," I said walking to the closet she shared with her sister. Her plaid uniform skirt lay in a wrinkled heap on the floor, but the white knit blouse hung crisply from the hanger. I ran my hand over the skirt to smooth the pleats and placed it on the wicker chair. Maddie retreated to the middle of the bed and tried to pull the covers back over her head again. Anger tickled my throat as I pulled the blanket back and slid my arm beneath her shoulders, folding her into a sitting position.

"Maddie Marie, we have only fifteen minutes left to get out the front door or you will get a tardy slip for sure. Come on now, let's get going."

"I don't care if I get a tardy," she said, holding her chin up to me at what she probably hoped was a defiant angle. "I just don't care."

Britt appeared in the doorway just then. "Well I do care," she bellowed, "I can't get a tardy!"

I wished I could take my words back because I hadn't known Britt was listening. For her little second grade self, a tardy was as awful as wetting your pants in class.

"Maddie!" I said, shoving the clothes at her.

"Oh, all right," she said, grabbing the clothes from the hanger and standing up.
I put my arm around Britt and said, "Don't worry, we'll leave without her if we have to," even though I knew that this was not a possibility. I did not have the luxury of time to make two trips to school before getting to my bank window by 8:30 a.m. When had I started making idle threats like this?

Come on, Britt, get dressed and brush your teeth, and I'll fix your ponytail for you," I said, giving Maddie one last icy gaze as I left her room.

After finishing with Britt, I went to the kitchen and poured Maddie a glass of milk and pulled a Pop Tart from the cabinet so she could eat on the way.

When we were all settled into car, I thought, "Late bills, Pop Tarts and idle threats, what would be the next band of resolve to break?"

I backed the car from the driveway and aimed it in the direction of the girl's school. Brilliant beams shone through my dirty windshield, signaling that the sun had moved into a closer orbit with the earth. I had survived my first winter alone. I still dreaded passing our old house every morning; it sat right across the street from Our Lady of Assumption School. It wasn't a grand house, but it was our first house and it enshrined a repository of memory for me. Both girls were quiet this morning. Maddie silently munched her square of dough and sugar. Britt threw her sidelong glances across the back seat of the car.

When I passed our old house, I noticed that the green spikes of the daffodils waved folded yellow buds at me. I had planted those bulbs right when we had moved in, and they had multiplied steadily into two gratifying clumps under either side of that front bay window. I had a flashback of myself holding plump little Britt to its mullioned glass, pointing out the blur of yellow cups holding their faces to the sun. I was glad that my sudden teariness was hidden behind my sunglasses from the girls. My rusty Toyota merged into the carpool lane, dwarfed by
all of the shiny new mini-vans dropping off children who I imagined still lived in the velvet
shelters of their parents' dream homes.

"Bye girls," I said, as each of them shouldered their backpacks and slid across the back
seat.

"Mo-om, the door?" said Maddie, her voice lilting in accusation.

"Oh, right, the door," I said, stopping the car and getting out because the right side had
started sticking. After I got back behind the driver's seat, I couldn't shake the thoughts of my old
house. What if I just pulled in the driveway to get a closer look at how many bulbs came up?
What harm could it do? But one of the other parents driving carpool might recognize my car,
and really think I had flipped. No, not now. But maybe some other time, late at night when the
girls would be spending the night at their father's. Maybe one stolen moment could recapture
that old feeling of contentment, even if it was as brief as that little high I used to get from
smoking a smuggled cigarette before high school. A harmless little buzz. The Marwyckes, the
couple who now lived in my house, would never know.

The Marwyckes, I thought of them as a deep well that I could pour all of my hate into.
At the closing they had acted smug, patting my hand after I signed my house over to them.

As I swung past the house again, I saw that my old next door neighbor Ann was just
walking out to retrieve her morning paper. Without hesitation, I pulled into her driveway.
Ann gathered me into a hug as soon as I stepped from the car.

"Oh Sonya," she said, releasing me and running her hand through her short gray hair, "I
miss you so much, it's just not the same here without you. Just look at what they've done to your
back patio." She gestured with her hand to the free standing hot tub the Marwyckes had installed
just a few weeks ago.
"You should see them out there flopping around in their bathing suits, drinking beer in the can and throwing them down on the patio till the next morning," said Ann, holding her hand up to one side of her mouth, cupping it so that her words wouldn't be overheard.

Although I knew it was mean, I laughed at the mental image Ann had conjured up for me of the Marwyckes, their large white bodies crammed into bathing suits--like dough when it has too much yeast in it.

"I really miss you, too," I told Ann. I had been avoiding her since the move, because it had been hard to think of standing here in full view of the house. But now, I was grateful. I could see the apron of green shoots easily over Ann's shoulder.

"They only have the one son, Howie. They say he's some big deal at Coca-Cola in Atlanta. That's the only topic of conversation they have -- Howie this and Howie that. They're flying down to visit him on Friday morning. It will be a relief to have them away from that hot tub for one weekend."

"Ann, I have to go to work now, but we really should try to get together," I said around the lump forming in my throat like a hand around my neck. "I'll call you. It's just been so hard getting," I said, my voice stalling, looking for the right word for "back to normal."

"I know, I know," said Ann, "Call me when you feel ready. We should go out, see a movie or something when Tim takes the girls. You shouldn't be sitting home alone."

"Okay, sounds good," I said, feeling my mouth push its corners into a smile. As I turned away to get in my car, the wind kicked up a whiff of wet earth, pungent as bloated coffee grounds. I knew I would have to speed to make up for this lost time, but I didn't care. It had been worth it. Any jealousy I had had concerning the Marwyckes had vanished with the thought of them making fools of themselves in that hot tub.
When I pulled into the bank's parking lot, a few clouds, dull as the quarters I would soon count into my drawer, scudded overhead, promising an afternoon shower. I wondered if anyone planned to rob this bank today as I grabbed my purse and locked my car. This worry, planted in my head by the security films we had watched while in basic training, rode with me to work every day. When I walked inside the bank and felt the door silently suck shut, I felt as if my fate were out of my hands until I could get to the other side at five o'clock. I imagined the vault of the bank expanding until it enclosed the whole of the bank, locked tight against intruders, but also locking me inside.

The word "intruder" kept visiting me as I walked over to my teller station. What would it be like to be an intruder? Would I feel like an intruder if I stepped into my old house again? I felt more like one here, in this orderly world of checks and balances. Total strangers were forced to share their personal finances with me. I was the one who could refuse to cash their overdrawn checks when it was I who was living an overdrawn life.

Wasn’t I just an intruder in my rented space with a security deposit hanging over my head? Neighbors positioned on the other side of the wall worried me about raised voices or running children. I opened my drawer and began to count, hoping to trade chaotic thoughts for the cool rationality of numbers.

"Did you have a good weekend, doll?" said Barry, as he came up behind me to open his booth to the left of mine. Barry hated this job as much as I did, but he was trying to make the best of it, carrying a briefcase and referring to it as "our career in finance." Barry was also from Atlanta, and had moved to Cincinnati after meeting his partner Julian at a national hair show there. I loved the way his speech rippled with drawn out vowels and southern clichés. He
landed his "I's" into long flat "ahhhh." He was the only person I had ever met who could say, "Oh my stars" and get away with it.

Barry had been a hairdresser, a truly gifted one, winning prizes for his entries in national competitions. After he moved north to be with Julian, his hands had developed an allergic reaction to chemicals and had begun to welt up and break open in the dryness of northern winters. His dermatologist had told him he needed to change careers.

"That bitch, why did I listen to her?" he said again this morning as he unlocked his drawer. "What bitch are you talking about this morning?" I asked. Another one of the things I loved about Barry's way with words was his foul mouth.

"The dermatologist. I curse her every morning for helping me ruin my life. After Julian died, I was in no shape to make a career decision."

"You had to make a living, right?" I said, watching him sort and stack his money with the expertise of a casino Black Jack dealer. Julian did have beautiful hands, fingers tapering to neat squares coated in clear nail polish.

"And you wanted to do something simpler, you said," I offered.

"Well sometimes simpler makes things a hell of a lot more complicated," he said, slamming his drawer shut. This didn't seem like Julian's usual complaining routine. His voice sounded raw and shaken.

"When I was doing hair, I felt like I was giving people something, something sort of like hope. When they would come in and say 'Barry, whatever are we going to do with this mangy mess?' I mean, there were several different roads to take. But here, it's just, hand me your paycheck and here is what you get back. There's only one right answer, and you know life is just too short for
that and, I've got to find something more creative to do than this; I feel like I've let Julian down by settling."

Barry stopped talking, and I could see tears filling his bluish eyes behind his wire thin Armani frames. I went over to him and put my arm around his shoulders.

"What do you mean, Bar, what's wrong?"

"I mean," he began, "forgive me for getting so wrought up, but, I got a letter this weekend. From Julian's insurance agency. His will is being contested by his parents. So, I called my attorney and he said that this often happens when partners aren't 'legally' married. Their relatives come in and try to overrule their loved one's last wishes."

"What can they do?"

"Well, the worst is, they might get the house. My name was never listed on the deed. Julian bought that house before we got together."

"Losing your house, now, I know exactly what that's like."

"Well, I'll tell you one thing," said Barry, as the front door opened and a few customers walked towards us. "I will burn it down before I let them have it."

*Burn it down, just burn it down.* Now Barry had lodged more disturbing words in my thoughts for the day. Think happy thoughts, my mother's voice suddenly surfaced. But the happy thoughts all seemed to be locked in my past.

"Why not," those two words began to unwrap and repeat like a mantra in my brain, "Why not just burn my old house down?" The thought stayed in my mind like it was written in red neon. It felt like a solution. And Ann had said that the Marwyckes would be leaving this weekend.
It would be so simple, no one would ever suspect. This Friday night, while Tim had the girls.

Later, after I had eaten my sack lunch, I looked over at Barry. He seemed fine. Calm and efficient again. None of his customers would ever suspect that he had cried this morning. Finally, both of our lines were empty.

"Barry," I said, "Would you really burn your house down?"

Barry turned, his hair falling to either side of his ruler straight part.

"Naaah, sugar, I could never do that. Did I worry you? That was just me spoutin' off. I always feel so much better after a good rant. You should try it some time. Looks like you could use one, too."

"But what will you do if they get the house?"

"I'll do what you did. Start over, somehow, some way. You know Sonya, maybe I should unload that dam house, I could move south again. You know you're my number one role model, don't you?"

A role model? Me? All I could think of right now were the daffodils; their blooms would be bursting open soon, like yellow flames.

* * * * * * *

That night at six sharp Tim pulled into the complex lot. I felt giddy enough to risk a face to face with him. He stepped out of the pick-up and stopped, clearly surprised to see me follow the girls outside.

"Hi, Sonya," he said, cutting his eyes down to the overnight bags as he loaded them into the truck. "I'll have them back by noon tomorrow, if that's okay?"
"Fine with me, Tim," I said in a voice that I hadn't heard for a long time. I hit each consonant, strong and true. Both girls stopped beside their father and looked back at me.

Maddie smiled, "Bye mom, try not to miss us too much." Usually this would be enough to ruin my whole night. I often did spend the whole evening missing them, and--I had to admit it--I sometimes missed Tim too.

"Don't worry about me, I've got tons to do," I said.

I set my alarm for three a.m. and fell asleep around eleven to Bette Davis driving drunkenly around in her car with her real Oscar clutched in her hand. For once, I did not need to conjure any waking dream of my past life. Tonight, I was going to act, to do something that would ease my pain and free me from my trap.

When the alarm went off, I startled awake and put on the black clothes and cap I had set on the chair. The lighter fluid and the pack of matches fit neatly inside my jacket. When I got outside and the chill night air hit me, my hands shook so much that I couldn't get my key into the lock on my car door. I dropped both hands to my sides, "Deep breaths," I thought, and willed my hands to stop, but they wouldn't. I sat down on the sidewalk, and decided to walk instead. No one would recognize me if I tucked my hair up into the cap I was wearing. From the back, with my spare figure, I would probably look like a teenage boy walking home, breaking his curfew.

_I'm invisible_, I thought as I started down the stretch of the main road, bordered by trees on either side. The sky was a bowl of stranded stars lit by a waxing gibbous moon. Ahead of me, just four blocks away, lay the house, the home that had once held my family inside its luxurious shell.
All of the houses on my old street were dark, except for a few nightlites flickering through drapes, like trapped fireflies. A fine sweat coated me and my throat felt tight, but I was so close now. As I entered the driveway, the calm I had expected didn't wash over me. Instead, adrenaline pushed through every cell, forcing me to walk behind the house and lean against the garage doors so I could catch the breath that was now leaving my body in ragged strips. The band of my bra beneath my breasts was damped with sweat, and I willed my heart to slow down.

Set into the side of the double garage door, the keypad for the garage door opener glowed in the night like a darkly glittering diamond. My old code immediately popped into my head. Surely, the Marwyckes had changed it, I thought. But, why not give it a try; just to put my signature on the square little keys one more time, pound a little tattoo out here under the garment of night. As I put my finger to the square lozenge of the keypad, I wondered if the Marwyckes were simple enough to use the address—the address I missed so. My finger acted of its own volition, tapping it in, three-one-oh-five. The door rumbled open.

Now, if only they didn't lock the door to the kitchen, I could actually go in, just once more, before I burned it down. Just one quick trip through so I could get that little buzz I craved. It would be like drinking just one glass of champagne and refusing more, holding that blurred state as a tiny escape, just for a few moments. The door handle felt round and sure under my hand, and just as I had hoped, it yielded.

And there it was--my old kitchen, the center of my shrine to our family, backlit with moonlight. My eyes adjusted to the night and I went over to the breakfast counter, the place where I had offered so many meals, worked on homework with the girls, and shared after dinner coffee with Tim. I lay my fevered cheek down to the cool blue and white porcelain tile and stroked the surface with my hand, but it was not as smooth as I remembered. I tried to imagine
the sound of us, sitting down to the table for dinner, the talk, the laughter, even the two girls
fighting, but the only image that formed in my mind was of Maddie as she left tonight, smiling at
me and saying, "Don't miss us too much mom."

I lifted my head, and noticed that the gritty texture I felt was paint. The Marwyckes had
painted over all of the blue tiles in the patterned counter with white epoxy. They had also
wallpapered every wall with a pattern of Mallard ducks. Ducks held the napkins on the table;
ducks swam across the bottoms of the cafe curtains. I looked over at my hutch and saw that it no
longer held china cups; it had become a ceramic duck display case. The kitchen I conjured up
for myself every night no longer existed.

My own laughter startled me, because it came from deep within my sternum. I laughed
until I was bent double grabbing my middle. I felt the pack of matches and can of lighter fluid in
my jacket. I pulled them out and laughed even harder. What the hell had I been thinking? Me,
Sonya, commit arson over a stupid house?

The house wasn't what I had missed; it was what this had held for me--for all four of us.
But I was trespassing. The tears the laughter had sparked flowed even faster down my cheeks
now as panic set in. All I could see were armies of ducks marching their webbed feet all over
my carefully planned kitchen. I had to get out, but my feet were mired in an imaginary swamp
ruled by the ducks.

I closed all the doors behind me and sneaked back outside along the back of the house.
My heart pulsed in my ears and my legs felt like they were made of sponge rubber. As I neared
the front walk, the daffodil heads glowed softly in the moonlight. I walked over to them,
crouched low, and twisted off a few into each hand. Straightening, I broke into a run as I crossed
the street, clutching fistfuls of flowers.
Once I had gained enough distance from the house, I slowed back to a leisurely walk and turned around. The moon shone white shadows through the trees onto the pitched roof of the house. In my mind, I ignited those shards of moonlight until the whole roof blazed with jagged triangles of flame. I took a deep breath and let my conscience barge through my fantasy arson.

What if I had been caught inside that house? What would Maddie and Britt have thought of me then? Nausea trilled up from my stomach and I willed the tears to stop as I forced my feet to keep moving. You're safe, I told myself, you didn't get caught. Now you just look like someone who got angry with a date and had to walk home.

Home, the word soothed me. I crushed the flowers to my face, inhaling their waxy scent.

Back inside the apartment, my heart still pounded; and my nerves felt like they lay stretched on top of my skin. I peeled off my sweat soaked clothes and decided that this acrid smell was the distilled essence of panic. I began to run a hot bath. Standing in my own bedroom naked, my body felt strange and strong after the walk home.

I thought of what Barry had said, "start over." He thought that I had started over, but I knew that that step still lay ahead of me. I was the only one who could make something new out of this mess. Still naked, I crouched down and reached under the bed. I lifted the lid of my sewing box and rooted for a needle and two squares of cloth, willing my breath to slow to the rhythm of the needle as my fingers forced it to join the scraps together. This quilt would be different, at its center, a big sun of a fire would burn a yellowy orange, blue and white hot.
DO YOU STILL LOVE ME?

Hannah took the project from her daughter Amy's hands and carried it from the dining room. The heavy rectangle of clay she balanced against her waist was a replica of the ocean floor, each deepening segment of its surface marked by a new color of modeling clay, like a muddy rainbow.

"Where are we going to put it until I have to bring it to school?" asked Amy. She had worked on the project all day Sunday, while her brother Jason was out with their father, Adam. Each band of color bore the marks of a different tool pressed into it for texture: fork tines, a pinecone, and a grater with star-shaped holes.

"I think we can cover it with a bag and put it up here," said Hannah.

The top of the refrigerator should be safe enough, she thought, especially since Jason didn't know anything about the project. If he had seen the clay, there would have been no stopping his desire to touch it, to knead the wet clay between his fingers.

"Are you sure he won't look up there?" asked Amy. "Remember that time with the volcano?"

How could she forget? Two years ago, Amy had been in fourth grade, and Jason in second. The divorce had been final for just one year when she and Amy had begun building the volcano from shredded newspaper dipped in flour and water.

"Can I help?" Jason had asked.

"Mom," said Amy, her blonde eyebrows coming together over her nose.

Hannah laid her hand on Amy's small shoulder. "Let's help Jason help us. Okay, Amy?" she said turning to Jason. "You can be the mixer man, okay? Take the bowl and the spoon and make sure that we don't run out of our paste." She held her breath, waiting for his response. But
that had been one of the good days. Jason had grabbed the bag of flour and began scooping out messy handfuls to throw into the bowl of water. Hannah steadied the bright blue bowl as Jason pounded the wooden spoon through the starchy gruel. Amy was able to do her part alone, carefully dipping newspaper into the paste. The volcano quickly rose from its cardboard floor.

When they had finished, she wiped her face with her forearm, feeling a layer of powder dusted over her skin. Wouldn't the women at the spa laugh if they could see me now, she thought. Her position as an esthetician required her to be fully made up every day that she worked. At home, her skin stayed bare.

After applying masks of make-up to scores of aging women, Hannah had lost her original enthusiasm about cosmetology as art. People who were naturally beautiful didn't need her services, and younger women didn't have the kind of disposable income that her "old ladies" did. If they could see her at home, her red hair skimmed back in a high ponytail, wearing old jeans and a T-shirt, they probably wouldn't recognize her. All of the women she worked on usually commented on her "peaches and cream" redhead complexion. Maybe she'd tell them her secret: flour paste and sweat, for that "harried young mother look."

Later that afternoon, after Amy had run out to play with her friend Jess, Hannah had found Jason pounding the volcano flat with his fist out on the patio where they had set it to dry in the sun. They had had to start all over again. The memory was still fresh in both of their minds: The fun of completing the project together paired with the anguish of seeing Jason destroy all of their work with no apparent regret.

"Amy, I'll keep an eye on it. If we clean up the mess and make sure he can't see it, I think it will be all right in its hiding spot."
When Jason came home he ran into the kitchen and began to circle Hannah, running faster and faster. She knew this was his way of showing her affection. Hannah thought about her mother’s complaints that Jason wouldn’t let her hug him. If you tried, he made his body into sharp angles and pulled away. He just wasn’t a “huggy” kid.

Finally, he stopped running and threw himself into the kitchen chair. Hannah walked over to him and stood behind him.

"Did you have fun, Jay-bird?" she asked as she rubbed her palm across his flattop. His soft and pale half-inch bristles reminded her of a sea anemone.

He reached up and caught her hand in his, squeezing it so hard that she felt her bones chafing her skin from the inside.

"Noooo! I don't want to go!" he said.

"Stop it, stop it right now," she said, trying to pry his fingers from her hand.

"Where don't you want to go? I can't listen to you if you're going to hurt me."

Jason fell sideways onto the floor and began kicking the cabinets. The bottom third of almost every cabinet in the kitchen was sprayed with nicks and dents from his temper tantrums. The door to the vanity in the guest bathroom hung from one hinge because he had ripped it off one evening when he had locked himself in there to escape bath time.

Nuh, Nuh, North Carolina!" he cried. "I don't want to go to on vacation with dad!"

Damn him, thought Hannah, why can't he tell me his plans first?

"Why don't you want to go?" she asked, sinking to the floor so she could look into his eyes while he talked.

He looked away from her, "I don't know. It's, it's far." His face had twisted into that scowl she hated. It made her worry that something really was wrong. Maybe she should listen
to her mother and take him to a psychologist, but counseling wasn't covered on either her or her ex-husband's insurance policies. The cost of independent testing would destroy the careful budget she culled from Adam's child support and the commission and tips she received as she built her clientele at the Looking Glass Day Spa. What could testing prove anyway? That she needed to drug him out of his personality? But still. Her mother always pointed out that Jason didn't seem to be growing out of his angry phase.

She hooked her hands under his armpits and pulled him back into a sitting position.

"You don't have to go if you don't want to," she said, smoothing his back with her hand, imagining his frustration disappearing along with the wrinkles in his shirt.

"I don't?"

"No, you do not. No one can force you to do something you don't want to do."

Not even your father, she thought. Adam thought that taking Jason to do normal things would make him act more normally. A trip to the beach would be his answer to Jason's tantrums, just like the time he thought a family vacation would save their marriage. After he spent the entire time in the airport on his cell phone to his office, Hannah had decided that she had had enough. Other traveling families stared at them as Adam barked loud instructions to his employees into the phone. Gorgeous but vapid Adam, a leftover from her beauty school days.

He managed the strip center where the cosmetology school was located. One day, while she had been on front desk duty, he had stopped in with a plumber to inspect the sink station. His black hair gleamed blue as sunshine poured through the plate glass windows that framed the school's entrance. She later came to think of that blue as vacant, opaque. But then, he had caught her off guard when he had asked her to meet him, "just for lunch." She agreed, and his initial attentiveness had faded as soon as he knew he had won her. The bouquets of flowers he
brought to her apartment became stuffy arrangements delivered to their home on her birthday, at his secretary's command.

Jason jumped up and ran down the hall to his room in that same home, the one that she had managed to keep in the settlement, with some help from her mother.

Shit, she had forgotten to check his pockets. Whenever he came in from outside, she tried to gently convince him to show her what he had collected that day because he liked to hide things -- things she didn't want in the house -- like cigarette butts from the street, labels torn from soft drink containers. After the fourth of July she had found a cache of spent fire works hidden with a half eaten sandwich in a lunch bag under his bed. Most of it was garbage. He had always hoarded objects, never wanting to throw anything away. The disarray of his collecting represented an internal disorder that she did not want to confront. Maybe it was just a phase, she cajoled herself -- a collecting phase.

She went upstairs to walk by his room, just to see what he was doing. He lay prone on the floor arranging his baseball cards in an order that Hannah thought could only make sense to him. The cards overlapped and shuffled together at odd angles. Once, during his weekend visitation, Adam had tried to show Jason how to arrange them by teams, but that had only triggered another temper tantrum, according to Amy.

"What did daddy do then?" Hannah had asked, keeping her voice at an even pitch, careful not to show how much importance she attached to Amy's response.

"Oh, you know, he just set the cards down, said, do it your way then.

Typical, thought Hannah. Adam never really tried to meet Jason on his own terms. He had simply given up on a real relationship with him. She knew that Jason could never live up to be the ideal son Adam had hoped for. He wasn't interested in team sports, preferring his
baseball cards to backyard pick-up games. Adam doubled his interest in Amy's athletic abilities. He coached her through t-ball and she was just starting softball. Would Jason resent this someday? Hannah tried to compensate. She sat and played endless made up games with Jason. If she got out checkers, he had to change the rules. She, too had given up, but in her case, it was more like giving in. Was it an earth-shattering problem if Jason kinged all of his checkers before the game started? Did it matter as long as they interacted in some sort of shared activity?

The next morning at the spa, Hannah sat on her rolling stool at the head of the chaise lounge. She had just begun applying Super Emollient to Victoria Moss's eyelids when Marilyn, the receptionist, knocked at the door.

"Excuse me, Hailey, but the phone is for you," she said. They had changed Hannah's name to Hailey when she was hired. The salon manager Pauline had said that "Hannah" wasn't "hip." "If you want to sell the product, you've got to be the product," she had said. And Hannah had since seen that she was right. Her clients could be overheard in the waiting room: "I have an appointment with," and here they paused, "Hailey," they would announce, their voices lilting at the "l" sound.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Moss, I'll be just a moment," said Hannah, rising from her seat and walking toward the reception desk.

"That's okay, dear, just hurry back so I can finish telling you all about my cruise." Hannah hated being interrupted when she was with a customer. It broke her rhythm, destroyed the rapport she had to build with each client in order to gain their trust.

"Marilyn, did they say who it was?" she had to decide who to identify herself as, Hannah or Hope.

"It's Jason's school, the nurse."
Hannah used a pencil to hit the hold button on the phone in order to save her nails.

"Hannah, I think Jason has a little problem today," said Mrs. Argo.

"Is he ill? Do I need to come get him?"

"Well. He can't seem to stay in his desk. Mrs. Midoni said that he keeps leaving class to go to the bathroom. He left five times in one forty-five minute period. And we had another student go check on him, and he, he wasn't using the facility."

"Well, what was he doing?"

"The other student said that Jason only goes into the stall for a short time, and then comes right back out. He repeats this three or four times before going back to class. Mrs. Midoni said that it disrupts class because now everyone is trying to get out of class to go to the bathroom," she said. "He seems very insistent that he has to go and she's afraid that he'll have an accident if she doesn't give in."

Hannah picked up the picture of Jason that she kept at the front reception desk and cradled it in her palm. He wore a baseball cap and smiled, it seemed, right at her. The picture looked like a sunny moment in the life of any well-loved little boy.

"All right, well, he was a little upset yesterday. His dad has planned a vacation, and he doesn't really like to travel."

Pauline, the salon manager, stared at her from her glass-walled cubicle. Personal calls were for emergencies only. Hannah scanned the column of the carefully gridded schedule that had her name written in pencil at the top. Four more European facials and a body wrap. How could she leave? That was the main drawback of this job. In order to keep her clientele, she had to be there for them. You could not abandon your customers. Coming here was a treat for them. It was their time to talk to her as well as get the treatments that helped hold their confidence in
their looks together. No one else could take over; the other esthetician’s schedule was fully booked as well.

She would have to call her mother.

"I guess the best thing to do would be to bring him home until he settles down. I'll have my mother come." The last thing she wanted to do, involve her mother in Jason's problems after her recent speech about his lack of maturity. Her mother always compared Jason's unruly behavior to her sister Ann's boys, saying that they had never thrown tantrums like that. What did her mother know about living with boys? Hannah and Ann had no brothers. Did her mother think she was inept at parenting alone? Avoiding her was the easiest thing to do. If she didn't have to observe Jason's behavior, she couldn't comment on it. But now, she had to involve her again. At least this time the problem sounded like a physical one. Maybe he just had a stomach problem. The pediatrician could tell her what was wrong with Jason's diet and all of this would stop.

After she called her mother, Hannah went back to the make-up room and sat back on her rolling stool. Competence washed back over her as she lifted a cotton pad to Mrs. Moss's eyelids.

"Anything serious, dear?"

"Well, my little boy is sick at school," Hannah began.

"You don't have to leave right now, do you?" she asked, creasing her forehead. "I really want you to do my make-up today. You know tonight is the Breast Cancer Dinner at the Cincinnati. Or is it the Leukemia?"

"No, my mother's going to go," said Hannah, keeping the anger out of her voice.
"That's right. Mothers can come in so handy, now can't they?" she said, closing her eyes as Hannah worked the cream over the lids.

Why was it so easy to figure out how to satisfy people like Mrs. Moss when her own life was unraveling? Each of her clients was usually thrilled with the transformations she chose for them. Her make-up tray held a palette of about fifty colors. She never hesitated when she had to decide which color complemented each client's skin tone.

"You should only wear corals," she would tell a woman with underlying yellow tones. "Pink will make you go green." And the real trick lay in naming things so they would sell. Never call aqua "aqua," it had to be something more esoteric, like "teal haze."

After finishing, Hannah offered each of them the hand mirror so they could check out their new look from every angle. The more self-confident ones might check it from just one side, before handing the mirror back, and saying, "That's great, Hannah, just perfect." The more demanding ones like Vicki Moss would withhold their praise as they tilted their heads, checking every possible angle, before smiling and handing the mirror back.

Hannah had finished with Vicki Moss and started to prepare for the body wrap that would be there shortly when her mother called.

"Hannah, he's gone seven, no make that eight times since we got home today, and I really think--" she said.

"Mom, he's fine. He's just got a stomach upset. If he's still going tonight, I'll call Dr. Shaw. I told you it's just because things are a little tense right now. He's worried about going to North Carolina with his dad on Easter vacation."

"But worried is one thing and this ... well, Hannah, it's not only the bathroom, you know how he touches his chin to his shoulder."
"Mom, it's just a nervous habit; he's been doing that for as long as I can remember. The doctor said he'd probably outgrow it."

I talked to your sister and she thinks that we should--"

"Oh please, don't bring her into it -- she doesn't know what it's like to go through this."

"But anyway, nonetheless, you know she has two boys, and she said they never, well, I know you think I don't know anything about raising boys, but we, I mean, I really think we need to take him to a counselor, and if it's the money you're worried about, your father and I will . . ."

"I'll call you back, I have a customer," she said and she slammed the phone down without saying good-bye.

She could not afford any more personal phone calls today. Maybe she should take Jason to the pediatrician tonight. It could be as easy as changing his diet. Dr. Shaw could give her a neatly printed diet and she would adhere to it just as diligently as she did to her appointment book here on the desk. Just cut out salt or sugar or something and he'd be fine. A counselor wouldn't have to tell her what was wrong. Even if they told her he had ADD or ADHD or whatever initials they could come up with, he'd still be Jason, and the most they could do was sedate him, pump chemicals into his body -- the body that never rested. When he was a baby, even when his stomach stretched taut with milk, he never rested against her in that contented daze Amy had. He was the never-satisfied baby, always twisting against her, throwing off his blankets. She dialed the pediatrician with her back to Pauline.

"Can you bring him in around seven tonight?" asked the calm voice of the office assistant.
"Tonight would be fine," said Hannah. Should she call her mother back? No, it could wait until she picked him up. Sometimes when she was here, the outer world just didn't exist. It faded beyond her reach, blurred like the colors on Amy's project.

When Hannah got home, she saw that her mother had gotten Jason to calm down. He lay spread out over a floor pillow, watching his favorite video, Star Wars. He didn't see her at first, his attention riveted to the screen.

"Jay look, your mother's finally here," she said, her mouth beginning to draw in tight, like a piece of silk with a pulled thread.

She's going to make me pay for that hang up, thought Hannah, noticing that more white seemed to be taking over Emily's smooth bob. If her clients could see her mother, thought Hannah, they would be so jealous. Emily's hair had faded from its former auburn luster to a smooth shade of copper threaded with silver. The soft bob grazed her chin and set off her still-milky complexion. Her mother had always adhered to a rigid beauty regime, cleanser followed by toner. Soap never touched her skin. Hannah had first become fascinated with creams and potions when she investigated the array her mother kept on her vanity. Odalisque perfumes in glass bottles cinched at their center like a woman's torso; lavender colored toner in a frosted container; small rounds of Charles of the Ritz face cream. Hannah loved to uncap all of Emily's lipsticks, releasing each of their perfumes right under her small nose.

"Jason! How are you feeling?" she said, as she stooped down beside him.

Jason looked down at the floor, pulled at the button on the pillow.

"School was stupid today," he said, looking past her to Emily. Gram, get me a Coke!

"I really don't think you need any caffeine right now," Emily turned to Hannah. Jason ran to the bathroom. He yelled over his shoulder, "I want a drink!"
When the door had slammed, her mother looked at her and Hannah felt so ungrateful. Her mother and father had helped her so much throughout the divorce, never questioning why she had decided to ask Adam to leave after their lack of shared interest made them live separate existences in the same house. Adam sat on the couch, night after night, alternating between the remote control and the phone. The children came to her with their homework and needs. Since the divorce, Adam had been forced to take a more active role as parent, but he didn't understand Jason's failings. "I think we should be more strict with him," he would tell Hannah.

"Mom, I'm sorry about the phone call, but you know I can't get into these things at work. I scheduled an appointment with the pediatrician for tonight."

Jason opened the bathroom door and walked back into the kitchen. His eyes looked far away and Hannah reached over and patted him on the shoulder before she walked across the room and sat down across from her mother. She lay her head down on her folded arms. If only I could just be the daughter again, she thought. Being the mother was hard, especially now. Their family had always been so quiet. After school, she and her sister would sit around the table and have a snack, always speaking in even tones to each other, minding the manners their mother constantly reinforced. A storybook existence compared to the one she felt trapped in now, where something as simple as meatloaf touching potatoes on Jason's plate could send him howling from the table.

Hannah heard a loud rumble and jerked her head to attention. Jason had jumped toward the top of the refrigerator. As she rose, he catapulted himself from the ground again and managed to grab the large plastic bag. There was a sickening crackle and then a loud crash.

Amy's project! The ocean floor.
"Jason, what were you . . ." Hannah got up and went over to where Jason lay thrashing around.

"The Coke, I know you hid it! I want Coke!"

"Get up and let me see," said Hannah, opening the bag. Inside, Amy's project had split into two neat sections. The clay had hardened enough that the impact had cracked it right down the middle. What would Amy do when she saw this?

"What is the matter with you? Why is it always what you want? I'm sick of you!" she screamed, yanking him by the arm towards his bedroom.

He shrieked, "Co-oke, I want my drink!"

"You're not getting any, ever!" Hannah felt herself crossing a line, the good mother line. Leave the room before you hurt him.

Her mother was right behind her. "Hannah," she said, "Hannah." Slow tears ran right through Emily's carefully powdered face. She felt her mother's arm go round the two tensed blades of her shoulders.

"Leave him be, come on, I'll make you a cup of tea," said Emily. Jason lay on the bed, holding onto his Curious George stuffed monkey.

"Mom!" he screamed as she turned away, "Mom! Do you, do you still love me?"

Hannah looked at him, a nine-year-old holding a stuffed monkey. All of her anger washed away in one salty wave.

She scooped him into her arms like he was a toddler, holding his straining body tight.

"Of course I do, Jason," she said, "But sometimes your actions, well, they hurt other people."
"But, I didn't mean to, mom, I just wanted to get that down," he said, calmer now that Hannah had become more composed.

"What are we going to do now, Jason? Maybe we just need to figure out something new for you." Amy could stay with her grandfather tonight. She wanted Emily to go with her. No need to tell Adam until they found out more about Jason's problem. If more needed to be done, well, she would wait until that became a fact.

* * * * *

At the pediatrician's office, Jason sat between Hannah and Emily. A young mother read a Dr. Seuss book out loud to a fever-blushed boy who sat curled in her lap.

"Just shut up," said Jason, looking at the two of them, "Green eggs are stupid; there aren't any green eggs."

"Jason," said Hannah and Emily almost in unison.

"I'm sorry," said Hannah, "he's not himself today."

The young mother closed the book and set it back on the table. "We'll read a book when we get home," she said to her son.

Amy was never rude like this. A divorce couldn't cause people raised to be polite to forget their manners, could it? If they weren't called soon, she feared she would lose her nerve and head for the door. The miniature table and chairs the doctor had set up to amuse the small children bothered her as did the picture of Peter Pan, his smile changed to a leer. Pamphlets stacked neatly in a tabletop display advised parents never to shake a baby and to always use car seats.

That had all been so easy for both her and Adam; Jason had been strapped into a car seat from his first trip home from the hospital. Adam had been faithful to the custody arrangements,
even if somewhat distracted when he had the children over to his new townhouse. Amy said that Jason mostly watched videos while she and her dad played cards or board games. "Dad doesn't try to include him anymore because he says Jason has got to learn to sit still. When he acts up, dad just tells him to go in the other room," said Amy. "Not like you, always making a big deal about letting him in on everything even when he doesn't want to be." She knew there was no chance of physical abuse going on there under Amy's watchful eye.

"Jason Gould?" called the nurse.

Be honest, don't gloss, she thought as they rose to go into the examining room. No more excuses for Jason's behavior. If it was diet, fine, if there was another step she had to take, well she would deal with that when it happened.

In the examining room, Jason ran under the examining table when Dr. Shaw opened the door to the tiny examining room. His bulk, wrapped in a white lab coat, filled the room.

"What can we do for you today, Jason?" he asked in a voice so soft you had to listen closely to make out the individual inflections. Surprisingly Jason surfaced and hopped onto the examining table.

Hannah heard herself explaining all of the symptoms of the past few days with no expression. Her voice droned on and on in her ears, as she reported the bathroom problem.

Dr. Shaw prodded Jason's stomach with his beefy hands. His fingers worked deftly, almost daintily.

"Hey Jason," he said, pulling him back to a sitting position, "what do you say you go back out to the waiting room with your grandma there, and uh, get a sucker or two, so I can talk to your mom?"

Oh boy, thought Hannah, here it comes. She sat up as straight as she could in that chair.
"I couldn't find anything physically wrong with Jason. But the repetitive behavior concerns me, I think that we might want to do some further investigation with a specialist," he said.

"Do you think it's ADD? Is there something I can do?"

"I do think he seems a bit hyperactive, from what I've noted on his chart in the past, but I think that the real red flag here is that he keeps repeating the action of going to the, uh, facility, without using it or needing to use it. Have you noticed any other repetitive behaviors?"

The chin to shoulder touching, she had to remind him about it.

"Remember when I called you about that chin to shoulder thing?"

"Oh my, my, my," he paged through Jason's file until he found the notation. Let's see that was just about a year ago. And he still does it?"

Hannah nodded, her eyes beginning to burn. Just tell me.

"Ms. Gould, I think we are going to have to consider a few other possibilities here."

Hannah put her chin into her hands and stared down at the confetti colored carpeting, trying to block out the room, Dr. Shaw, this day. Her voice sounded muffled, like it came from a place deep inside her when she asked, "Like what?"

"Now, Ms. Gould, we'll look into many areas at this point. Some of Jason's behavior could be symptoms of Autism, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, or Tourette's Syndrome."

But Hannah couldn't really hear him anymore. Her knees had changed into wooden joints. She forced them to straighten so she could stand and accept the referral he was writing up for her. His voice kept going without any acknowledgment from her. Her eyes had left his face and were searching for the door, the way out.
Her mother sat in the waiting room, the bowl of suckers on her lap. Jason was trying to decide which flavor he wanted next. Emily looked up at Hannah, her eyes searching Hannah’s face. And then, almost imperceptively, the dark cloud in Hannah’s head passed over Emily’s face. Her features steeled when she read what Hannah’s wet eyes had revealed.

Two weeks later, Hannah took Amy to lunch to discuss Jason’s problems. She, Adam and Jason had visited Dr. Calla Fleisch, the psychiatrist Dr. Shaw had recommended. They had just begun the testing process and she wanted Amy to understand what she herself was still trying to comprehend. Dr. Fleisch said that it was essential that Amy be included in the process, so she could understand her own feelings in relating to her brother.

Hannah planned the lunch at one of Amy’s favorite restaurants so she could discuss Jason in private. A server wearing a court jester hat led the way to their table. Upended domes of stained glass lamps hung from the ceiling, sending out light filtered through blues, plums and reds. Once, when the restaurant first opened, Hannah had come here for lunch with a friend. Her friend had asked if the waiter knew how to make the sauce that smothered her chicken. Without smiling, the young man had answered, “Yeah, you mix packet ‘a’ with packet ‘c.’” Was that what she needed to talk to Amy about now? How they were trying to find out what recipe they needed to make Jason’s life better?

The first meeting with Dr. Fleisch had been encouraging. Hannah found she could talk to her very easily, and Dr. Fleisch explained each step of the many testing procedures to Jason as well as Hannah. Jason seemed to but she still wondered if giving a language to Jason’s behavior would make any difference in their lives.

Dr. Fleisch said that once they had a true handle on the situation, they could decide the best course of action that would help Jason with his daily struggles.
After they had placed their order with the turban wrapped waiter, Hannah said, “Amy, I wanted to talk to you about something very important to our family today.”

Amy leaned toward her mother and smiled.

“Are we getting a puppy?”

“No, Amy,” Hannah said. Great now I have to work from that disappointment. “You know we can’t have a pet right now. This is more serious. It’s Jason; he needs our help and understanding right now.”

Amy sighed loudly. “Jason, Jason, always Jason.”

“Your brother is seeing a special doctor to help us find out how we can help him be,” Hannah struggled for the right words, “be, more, easy to get along with.”

Amy looked down at the table and began smoothing her napkin. “Mom, what is wrong with him?” Hannah reached across the table and hooked her index finger under Amy’s chin so she could look into her clear green eyes.

“That is precisely what we are going to find out,” she said in the same voice she used at the Spa.

Do you think this will make any difference mom? Will I still have to hide everything from him?” she asked. Amy looked confused; she began twirling a wisp of hair that had sprung out from her temple.

"The answer to that is, well, I don't know."

Amy looked down at the cherries floating near the bottom of her dark cola drink. She plunged her spoon in and tried to capture one.

"Mom, how am I supposed to feel? I mean, I feel bad that he has a, a problem, but he's still Jason."
"You are absolutely right, Amy. Jason will always be Jason," said Hannah. "But I think, if we all realize, that—"

"But, mom," said Amy. "Sometimes, like when he broke my ocean, I just hate him."

"I know, and that's okay. I have those feelings too. I want you to meet Jason's doctor so he can tell you what to do with those feelings."

"Me, why me? There's nothing wrong with me," she said. Hannah felt like she was at work with a difficult client, selling her a new product. Had she learned to use that distancing she used there on her own children? If she really believed in Dr. Fleisch's pronouncements she would feel better about convincing Amy. Right now, she went through the motions, because it was all she had left to do. All that any of them could do right now was to wait while Jason went through the battery of testing and watch to see what would happen next.

"I won't make you go, Amy, but I want you to think about it. You know, Dr. Fleisch reminds me of grandma in some ways. She wears those same beautiful painted silk scarves like grandma likes--right over her lab coat. She really wants to meet you.

"Okay, I guess," said Amy, meeting Hannah's gaze.

Hannah relaxed into the padded vinyl booth. Jason's future spread out before her like a map with no legend. His prognosis lurked behind every corner they might turn, taking him away from her and making him into an even more noticeably different person than he was already. She didn't have to pretend anymore. She didn't have to feel guilty anymore. For whatever reason, Jason had this disability and he lived in a world she could never visit. It was a world with its own language and customs. It was as far away as the ocean floor; it was as near as her daughter's steady gaze, locked on her from across the table.

END
RIPPED AWAY

Oxford Street--one of London's main arteries--its sidewalks bled with tourists out for a stroll: a look-see. Newspaper hawkers held up their papers and screamed headlines at them as they walked by. "ENGAGED POP PRINCESS BRITNEY SPEARS STILL SEEKING PRINCE WILLS!" Red double-decker buses teetered by; their windows framed the wistful faces of tourists gazing out at the bright window displays of the shops. All of the shops, now mostly franchises, installed in the bottom of buildings dusted with the patina of centuries. Sony Electronics; Monsoon Clothing; The Body Shop; Crabtree and Evelyn: Go three blocks and the same stores replicated themselves again like a strand of DNA. Tucked between the predictably chic chains, souvenir stands held painted tea sets, Union Jack flags, the Crown Jewels on a key chain. Their racks of postcards spun round with palm-sized cut outs of Prince Charles' jug-eared head.

Sean wanted to buy all of it and lay it at Abby's feet. Walking with Abby down Oxford Street, Sean felt his blood gather and beat in his temples. Abby clowned, rudely stuck her hip in front of his, almost tripping him as their legs wound round each other. He faked a fall; she stuck out her arms to catch him. People stared.

Abby and he had been seeing each other for just a few weeks. He knew little about her. He had been to her apartment only once when she had invited him up for coffee. She had a bright red couch and two green chairs. In the kitchen she had shelves that held small groupings of things she collected. While she made the coffee in a small glass press, Sean pickled up a small plastic toy. "That's "Hamburgler" from the McDonald's Happy Meals, she laughed. "I'm a vegetarian now, but those remind me of my childhood. Another shelf held old cookbooks. "Those were my grandmother's," she said. "Check out the gender stereotyping." Sean opened
one titled *Hearth and Home*. A line drawing of a woman with curlers in her hair and two children hanging on her apron strings announced a section called “Mother Tested Meals.” The coffee had been a little gritty, but wonderfully strong.

All in all, the apartment reflected Abby’s position as a twenty-something just starting out on her first real career after college. She worked as a research assistant in Sean’s department at Coconut Brands, the firm that Sean had been with for twenty-three years—almost as long as she had been alive, he thought. Sean had climbed to his position as executive manager of international advertising for the company, a company that harvested and marketed fruit from Central America overseas and in the United States. They had traveled here to attend an advertising conference.

Abby saw a retro shop and beckoned Sean to come inside. Sean hesitated at the door, the mannequins in the window wore the clothes of his youth: Wide collared shirts tucked into polyester pants with belled bottoms.

"Come on, what are you waiting for," she said, hooking her index finger through one of the belt loops on his jeans. She pulled; he followed.

Inside the shop, Sean noticed that the soundscape of music did not match the time period of the clothes. The music assaulted Sean like no other music he could recall: sharp blasts of discord layered with shouting. The faces and tongues of the men and women who worked in the shop were threaded through with metal rings and studs. Next to them, the clothes looked innocuous. He remembered scrubbed face girls with long straight hair in the seventies, going bra-less under halter-tops like the ones that hung on the racks before him. A picture of Phoebe, his first wife, rose unbidden. Phoebe—they had been divorced for about five years now—when she was in her twenties and had worn these short skirts and loose tops.
Abby’s fascination with the shop was contagious as she went from rack to rack exclaiming over the clothing. He resisted his urge to tell her about the memories the clothes invoked for him. He lumbered on behind her browsing, and he was glad that his white baseball cap hid his thinning gray hair.

Abby fingered an embroidered peasant blouse and hunted for the price tag.

"Let me," Sean said as he reached for his wallet.

Abby looked up, held the blouse close to her chest.

"I have money," she said, "I don't need a sugar daddy."

"But I want to buy something for you while we're here," he had insisted. "Let me buy you something to remember the trip by, a gift, from me to you."

"No," Abby said. "I wouldn't feel right about that."

Sugar daddy. Is that what offering to buy a gift meant to Abby? Maybe she was the one who was uncomfortable in this relationship. Was she embarrassed about the age difference? His first wife would have been thrilled to be showered with gifts, but Sean hadn't felt inspired to give her anything those last few years. The cards and flowers that marked anniversaries and birthdays had become meaningless. Flowers offered to the grave of their burned out marriage. He had been happy to want to get something for Abby, to celebrate the spark that she had planted. He just wasn't sure what his role in this relationship was supposed to be.

Every time he thought he had gained some ground, Abby would upset his comfort level. Last night, they had made love in his room. Right after, she had jumped up, gotten dressed and insisted on going back to her own room.

"I'm always like this, it's nothing against you. I just like my own space," she had said, throwing on her pink and red chenille robe and walking down the hall to her room. Sean thought
about all of the new rules dating called for now, and decided that it was wearing him out. He fell asleep without her, mildly discontent.

Back in Sean’s room after their shopping trip, Abby leaned her back against the tall window frame. She sat on the ample ledge that looked out over Kensington Church Street. She had drawn up one of her legs so that her bent knee made a triangle that framed the view of the clay chimney tops across the street. Sean paused a moment, taking her in like that first breath a swimmer grabs upon surfacing.

Sean thought maybe he should suggest something to do that evening. She was probably expecting him to try to take her to a fancy restaurant so he could show off his expense account. Sean had formulated a more exciting plan. He’d show her that he wasn’t trapped in some bourgeois routine.

He walked to the night table and picked up the "Original London Walks" advertising brochure. He unfolded it and scanned his finger past "The London of Dickens and Shakespeare," past "The Westminster Nobody Knows," until he found the one he had circled earlier that day.

"He came silently out of the midnight shadows of August 31, 1888," Sean read, ‘Striking terror at the hearts--and throats--of drink-sodden East End prostitutes. Leaving a trail of blood that led . . . nowhere. Jack-the-Ripper!’ He looked up from the six-fold brochure at Abby and smiled. "Let’s do this one, Sunday night, meets at the Tower Hill Underground tube stop, 7:30."

"I don’t know, Sean, that sounds kind of creepy to me, visit a bunch of murder sites in the dark?" asked Abby, gathering her long, apricot hair into a spiky bun.

"But it’s Jack the Ripper, you know they’ve never solved the crime. It’s always fascinated me. And we’ll see a side of London we wouldn’t choose as a regular tourist attraction, the old East End. And the guide, this Donald," he picked up the brochure again and read, "is
internationally recognized as the leading authority on Jack the Ripper. He is the author of the pre-eminent book on the Ripper, the best-selling *The Complete Jack the Ripper.*” It sounds Romantic."

"Romantic?" she said. "All right, sure, if you want to, it's the least I can do after dragging you around shopping all day."

There it was again--the implication. That she needed to--to drag him--because he was too old for her.

At 7:30 sharp, they emerged from the London Underground rail system and waited in the bricked courtyard with a group of about twenty people. Quite a few of them were Americans, easily discerned by their tell tale gym shoes and stretchy warm up suits. A few teen age-boys, pimpled and pasty faced, clutched a Game Boy and wrestled for turns with it. Each of them wore over-sized Nike shirts, the "swoosh" branding their chests.

Sean noticed that the native English people never wore such bright and unstructured clothing. The men seemed fond of suits topped with tan or black trenchcoats, and the women favored black tailored slacks or skirts with high-heeled leather shoes. He looked at Abby and smiled. She looked smart, stylish and yes, young, in the clothes she had purchased that afternoon. He took a picture of her with the turrets of the Tower of London looming as a backdrop. He felt more and more like he might need to prove to himself later that they had made this trip together.

A rather short man with a head of curly brown hair and a large jaw appeared. He walked in a circle waving the "London Walks" brochure over his head. "Here for the tour?" he asked in a ragged Cockney accent, as he began collecting fees.
One of the women standing near Sean and Abby said, "Oh good, it's Donald, he's terrific, he's so dramatic."

Abby huddled close to Sean as the tour group began walking. Following Donald, they passed crumbling brick apartment buildings and deserted warehouses. A rat ran across the path in front of Donald, and he took off his cap and bowed to it. "If you had been living here in the time of our man Jack, rats were no big deal. If you were hungry enough--as most people were--you might even find that they would make a tasty dinner," he called back to the crowd.

Abby shivered at this, and Sean placed his arm around her shoulders and drew her closer. He was glad that the tour had allowed him to take on the role of protector for her.

Donald stopped in a courtyard below two apartment buildings, ran in front of the crowd and positioned himself on top of a park bench.

"Welcome folks, to the best show in town, the Jack the Ripper walking tour," he fairly shouted at the crowd. Sean strained to keep up with the fast clipped syllables that Donald used as he gestured to the crowd to come closer.

"In the 1880's, something evil walked the streets of London, preying on shall we say 'ladies of the evening,' or 'tarts' if some prefer. In these very streets of Whitechapel a killer roamed, the first recorded serial killer of modern times. And his identity has never been clearly decided. His murders were brutal and swift, and for that reason, many believe that the killer possessed specialized medical knowledge of the human body. Perhaps he was a doctor or a mortician."

A man to Abby's right muttered under his breath, "He was a surgeon. Somebody needs to do their homework. He was a surgeon."

Sean studied the man. His hair was neatly trimmed and he wore a suit under the slightly rumpled tan trench coat. His first thought was that maybe this man did know more about Jack than the tour guide. But as Donald continued speaking, proposing several possibilities for the identity of Jack, the man became insistent. His voice rose as he kept repeating, "He was a surgeon, everybody knows he was a sur-geon."

Abby whispered to Sean, "Let's move away from him," and they did as the group surged ahead and began walking to the scene of the first crime. Sean and Abby waited until the man began walking before they joined the crowd.

"He's scaring me," said Abby, as they walked single file through an alley between two narrow buildings.

"It's okay, don't worry," said Sean. The night air was balmy, and the half moon that hung overhead reminded Sean of a button slowly escaping from its neatly sewn buttonhole. He didn't want anything to ruin this adventure for them.

A British woman walking in front of them said, "Where is he taking us? The back of beyond?"

When the crowd stopped in front of a deserted warehouse, the man in the trench coat sidled over to stand next to Sean and Abby again. The press of the bodies around them prevented an escape. Abby looked up at Sean, and he shrugged his shoulders and whispered, "I'm sure he's harmless, just a know-it-all."

Sean noticed that the man was staring openly at Abby, his mouth twisted down at one corner. When Donald started speaking again about the first murder, the man began muttering in a louder tone. This time other people in the crowd could hear him saying the word surgeon over and over again. Donald appeared to be oblivious to his competition, until a young Englishman in
the crowd shouted, "Sir, Sir, sorry to interrupt, but there's a bloke here who's trying to carry on his own tour."

Donald stopped his speech and looked out over the crowd, "Well we can't have that now. Would everyone please refrain from talking during the tour."

Abby detached herself from Sean's arm and pushed through the crowd to stand outside of it. Sean, too embarrassed to move, remained. He looked over at Trenchcoat again, noticing that the man looked a little tattered around the edges. God, he thought, this must be Britain's version of the homeless, dressed up in a work uniform, but crazy as a loon. He looked down and noticed that the man's shoes were all run down at the heels, as if he had been wearing the same pair for years.

When Donald stopped speaking, Sean went over to join Abby. She glared at him and would not take his arm as they walked along to the next stop. This was really the limit. Sean's heart pounded and he sighted the man lurking behind the crowd. He was waiting for them to find their place, Sean knew, so he could stand next to them once again. Well, let him try, thought Sean, just let him.

Donald perched himself and began another oratory, something about thirty-nine stab wounds, intestines carted off as souvenirs. Sean only heard fragments because he was waiting for Trenchcoat to approach.

This time Trenchcoat put his hand to Abby's waist, leaned close and began to mumble. Before Abby could back away, Sean leapt onto the man. He felt one knuckle split open as it connected with Trenchcoat's front teeth. The man fell to the ground. It was like knocking over a tree trunk of rotted wood. Sean fell on him and the crowd surged to restrain him.

"Sean!" screamed Abby. "Stop it, leave him alone, he's just an old drunk."
But Sean couldn't stop. Trenchcoat's mouth bled, and Sean struggled to pin his shoulders back.

The teen-aged boys in the Nike shirts crowded in for a closer look. "Fight! Fight!" they yelled in unison, pounding each other on the back.

"Stop them! stop it!" people cried out.

"You're ruining the tour for everyone else," said one woman. Sean felt hands tearing at his back.

Donald intervened, brought his face down to shout at Sean. "Leave him be, or I'll call a Bobby. Is that what you want?"

Sean straightened, noticed that many pairs of eyes were trained on him like he was the criminal here. "No, but he grabbed my, my . . .," Sean looked up, searching for Abby, expecting that she would corroborate, offer the crowd the reason for his rash behavior. But she was not there. She had gone.

END
CONJURING OLYMPUS

Joanna stared at the reflection of her breasts in the mirror as she got ready for her shower. Her nipples looked like a pair of lopsided eyes. She imagined they sent her a secret message, "Us? We wouldn’t betray you." She picked up the letter from the mammography center she had carried with her from downstairs and reread it. She clutched it to her chest and breathed another sigh of relief. Clean for another year.

All week, before the letter came, she had conjured different scenarios for coping with news of an irregularity hidden inside like a dark seed waiting to germinate and consume her like so much soil. Would she be brave? Buy bright scarves and tie them round her bald head in a fierce bandanna? Or would she climb into bed and never get up? Make herself a tranquilizer cocktail.

She decided to offer a present to the breasts for being so dependable this year: A new bra, sporty, just a smooth cotton front with jaunty little gathers in-between. Maybe she should sing to them, light candles in front of them, and massage them with cocoa butter—anything to ensure their continued good behaviour. Especially since she secretly hated them.

Imagine if every month--everyone--both men and women, had to palpate some other body part, thought Joanna. What if everyone had to regularly examine their big toes? Amputation would certainly become a possibility. Your toe or your life? But cut off your breasts? Some women had opted for this, women with "histories of breast cancer in their families." But she doesn't have that in her family. Her mom is sixty-eight and her breasts are just fine. Michael would never understand.

"You want to what?" he would say, shaking his head at her, the cheek under his right eye twitching slightly.
If she did try to outsmart the breasts, she’d never have to go through the humiliation of a mammogram again. Her breasts are small; the technician had had to coax them onto the cold glass imaging plate just two weeks ago. Just look straight ahead, she had chanted to herself as the woman pulled on her breast, trying to get it to form a flat white triangle between the two plates of glass. Once the woman moved away from her, she was unable to resist looking down. There, she saw her flesh pinned in place like a dissection slide. A vertiginous wave passed through her, stealing her breath. A focal point, she thought, searching the room. Her eyes seized on the word Athena slanting up the side of the mammography machine in silver script.

Athena surfaced in her mind’s eye, her divine spirit enclosed in healthy flesh, ascending a long trail that would probably take her home to Mount Olympus. Athena’s chin lifted and she paused, sensing a change in the air. She drew out her spear and positioned it high over her head, drawing it into place with her wrist. Joanna watched as the spear arced into the air ahead of her, far out of sight.

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