LIVING WITH STRANGERS

By

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DEDICATION

For

DR. GUINEVERA A. NANCE

who shares with me a reverence for the quiet moments of daily life when one may see into the life of things;

and,

in memory of three men whose lives continue to lend meaning to the people who knew them, loved them, and miss them daily:

THOMAS BALLARD "TOMMY" MORRIS	1924-1992
EARL FRANK "SAM" MORRIS	1930-1988
ELMER "BANTY" SPLAWN	1908-1992

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INTRODUCTION

On my first writing assignment in Composition 101 at Auburn University at Montgomery, my English teacher wrote, "This is not an essay. See me."

I went to see her. She said that my work was non-responsive to the assignment. She explained that essays explore an idea stated in a thesis and that this controlling idea dictates the development of the essay. "You are writing a vignette, a scene," she said. "It's a good scene, but it's not an essay."

This diagnosis of my work troubled me because I am always disappointed that I cannot write something perfectly on the first try. So, I paid attention, practiced adhering to a form, and learned how to write a response to an assignment that could pass as an essay. But, I was never satisfied. When asked a question that required my written response, I wanted to tell the truth as well as I could; but the formal, traditional style of an essay with its prescribed components--introduction, thesis, supporting

arguments, and culminating conclusion--left me feeling dissatisfied.

I wanted to write something else. I wanted to write an essay that was truer to what I consider an authentic response, that came closer to saying what I meant. To fulfill this ambition, I set out to incorporate the elements of fiction in what most people consider to be non-fiction prose. I returned to the shape of vignettes because they allow for a multiplicity of perspectives to be present at one time.

Experimenting, I began to refashion these vignettes into the controlling idea of the essay and to build the body of the piece around them. I knew that I was playing with form, but I have never had a greater respect for form than for truth. To me, truth is not as manageable as a dictated shape wants to make it, because, ultimately, the meaning of a moment is much more fluid; it is as malleable as human perception.

Consequently, the pieces of work assembled for this collection reflect a shape that is not entirely traditional. At some point in the writing of them, I could have made them fit a formal category of style, and I do so when necessary. But as often as possible, I try to let the moment of meaning which triggered the writing of the piece find its own shape.

Sometimes, these pieces become what I think of as 'southern dialectics' or feel like an oral history that has

been written down. My editors call them stories or essays or columns. Whatever the categorization others choose to give them, these stories are true--that is, I'm willing to call them true. They are as true as reported personal history can be with all of the disclaimers about memory's artful maneuvering understood.

Daphne Simpkins

November, 1993

TRUE CONFESSIONS

TRUE CONFESSIONS

I come from a family of girls, sisters who have always had secrets. These are secrets we tell only each other, but first, we extract the usual promises of a close-mouthed reception. Like most women must, we have become expert listeners who don't preach.

These secrets range from confessions of drinking too much at an office party, to enjoying a kiss from a married man, to flirting with even more serious dangers like.....we decide there isn't any more serious danger than kissing a married man.

In these moments of conversation turned confession, we become heroines amongst ourselves, exploring the slight dramas of our daily lives. We are women who haven't slipped quite yet into middle-age and are pretending for a moment to move daily in a world of glamour and romance--forgiving each other the truth; that is, we all of us actually trod along in the slow, slow lanes of fidelity and household routines.

There isn't much of a trick to this nurturing of personas called heroic, to making these mostly false true confessions. It takes but a germ of truth and the rush of fantasy to bring our secrets to that point when they must be shared, and in the telling, the truth becomes larger than life--larger than the incidents themselves. In these moments we become heroines again. Harmless heroines. For we are not dangerous women: she-devils, Jezebels, Scarlets. We are grown-up girls who, when younger, didn't have the individual or collective nerve to sow many wild oats--and so now our wayward oats trickle from us in minor acts of rebellion, in over-eating, in the imaginative retelling of our largely quiet lives. We are girls together who can listen selectively, knowing that when Mary Ellen says her fingernails caught on fire and that she had to put them out in a mixed drink, that maybe one fingernail lit up--no damage was done.

These confessions replace the early dreams of becoming famous singers, or the mothers of brilliant children. In our stories, we are portrayed as heroines who really did have a dozen boyfriends, instead of girls who dated the same guy for five years and then married him. These guys were good boys, workers, young men who get excited over pole bean crops and the size of backyard tomatoes. They are our loves, the men whose company we still enjoy.

On the brink of middle-age, we talk about 'what if.' What if we had studied science instead of music, business instead of English, fallen out of love before we said, "I do." But these questions do not imply that we are dissatisfied or unhappy. The discussions remind us that we had choices, and we made them. What might have been isn't what we wanted. We have what we want, and part of what we want is who we are as sisters.

When we are together, we are joined by blood and memory in a sisterhood much older than feminism. It's an understanding that at times we complete each other. We believe in the identity of 'Us.' And when we are together, this identity can survive romance and excitement--even danger.....

I confess that the kiss from a married man was not stolen after all; it was given in the presence of his wife, who is a friend of mine. As for Mary Ellen, when she isn't setting her fingernails on fire, she grows purple tulips. Patty is thinking of changing jobs. Julie did accidentally set her backyard on fire a few weeks ago. The blaze began in her trash can, the result of live embers lifted from her fireplace. The fire scorched her grass and ruined her trash can. The next day, her story was reported in a forthright fashion in the local newspaper, and when I read it, I was not surprised that it was not at all like the story she had told to us.

DEJA VU, ME, TOO.

When my Aunt Phyllis began to describe an orange full-skirted dress that she wore to her senior prom, my mother took offense. "That wasn't your dress, Phyl. It was mine. I wore it to my senior prom."

Phyl argued. Mother glowered. Assorted brothers and sisters sitting around the table remembered the prom and the dress in question, and they were all in agreement with my mother. The jury of her siblings voted and agreed that Phyllis was guilty of trying to borrow a moment from my mother's life story and tell it as her own.

No one thought Phyl did it on purpose. Memory is a flawed record keeper, but there are hallmark moments in one's life, and those special moments rightfully belong to the person who lived them. I can understand why my mother wanted to retain sole possession of the memory of that particular orange prom dress, but I understand, too, how my Aunt Phyl could forget who wore the orange dress first.

Like my Aunt Phyl, I, too, am a younger sister.

It was the year I turned sixteen and went to get my driver's license. I passed the written exam, parallel parked without a hitch, but when I tried to answer the questions about my physical description, I got an answer wrong.

The examiner asked me what the color of my eyes were, and I said, "Hazel."

He looked into my brown eyes, and I saw the question written on his face. Then, I recalled who I was and how I looked. "I was thinking of my older sister, Mary Ellen. She has lovely hazel eyes. I've always admired them."

Among other things. Mary was a brilliant student, self-confident, talented, a gifted soprano in the girls' chorus, petite, which made her popular with all sizes of young men. She gave me my first pamphlet on menstruation and arranged my first double date--and she went along to show me how to order food in a restaurant. When my date fell in love with her, she told him she wasn't interested, and we moved on to the next project: cheerleader tryouts, for which she loaned me her favorite hiphugger jeans. They had gigantic yellow sunflowers on them, and when I wore them, I borrowed not only her clothing but some of her self-confidence. She shared herself freely, and I took her help because I needed it. When I think about those hiphuggers, I

know they belonged first to her; but the memories of them belonged to us both.

I think something like that must have happened with that orange prom dress that Phyl and my mother both claim. I don't believe Phyl was trying to live my mother's life, and I don't think the woman's any crazier than I am or a lot of younger sisters who grew up admiring and identifying with older sisters in perhaps quixotic ways. We loved them, we emulated them, we borrowed their clothes. Their garments which we wore in succession--because the best clothes are first loaned and then passed down--are all jumbled up now in recollected history and tumble out when the door to reliving a moment is opened unexpectedly. As the garment was loaned and later handed down from one sister to the next, the experiences attached to it melded together.

To recall a sister's dress or a special dance as one's own experience is not an attempt to steal a dress or a memory, and it isn't fair or even accurate to summarily dismiss it as sibling rivalry. The explanation is just as likely to be a much simpler heartfelt truth: younger sisters need and rely on older, wiser girls, our trustworthy, loving, big sisters, who proved themselves to be dependable friends. Our role models may have enviable hazel eyes or the right complexion to wear orange. Her name could be Lola or Mary Ellen. Whatever her description or her name, she gave of herself when she could, and she loaned her

possessions when we needed them; and always, she blazed a truer and straighter path for us to follow.

AT HOME WITH KATIE

My mother has shed ten pounds since she started keeping her new grandbaby every day. "A new baby can really take the weight off of you," she explains archly. My mother is wooing me into helping her keep Katie. Because I'm a chunky girl who could stand to lose ten pounds, my mother thinks that if I see some personal reward in babysitting, I will be more willing to take a turn keeping Katie.

"Yes, taking care of a little baby is better than an aerobic workout, and you don't even know you're doing it. The pounds just melt away," Mother adds, sighing with contentment.

This pitch is as hard-sell as it's going to get. My mother doesn't believe in pressuring; she holds out her reasons and lets me decide. It's effective. For even though I love being with my new niece, I don't mind the idea of shedding a pound or two. Indeed, lately I've been choosing low-cal lunches to complement the baby-care workout.

"You are looking good," I tell my mother, and she does. Actually, my mother looks great. Her complexion is rosy, her face thinner. She is more agile than she's been in years, and Katie's the cause. See Grandmother scoop up baby. See Grandmother snap open new diaper with one hand. See Baby Katie all fresh and clean.

I'd like to see Jane Fonda do that as quickly and as efficiently as my Mother can.

Daddy undermines Mother's sales pitch, "It only takes three adults standing on their heads all day long to keep a baby happy."

"It does not," Mother argues. She glares at him. I intercept the gaze and translate the meaning: Don't scare her off. She's our only back-up baby sitter.

I pretend not to read my mother's mind. Katie holds out infant arms to me and coos, "Oh, most favorite aunt, come and take me to your world where everything is an adventure." I've always been able to understand baby talk. It's not exactly the same thing as a maternal instinct, but it is a gift.

"If you will pack me a bag, I'll take the kid to my house for a few hours," I tell Mother casually. I make it sound as if
I'm doing her a favor. It is a brand of salesmanship I learned from her. I add temptingly, "You could take a nap."

"Sleep?" she asks, her left eye twitching hopefully.

"In your bed," I say.

"That's a deal," she agrees, throwing some bottles and diapers in the bag. As much as she loves me and the baby, I'm out of there in two minutes flat with the kid slapped on my hip. We're barely settled at home before the phone rings. It's Katie's mother, who works full-time and feels guilty about leaving her only child with us.

"Are you all right about this?" she asks, her voice is low, concerned.

I am the only woman in the family not to marry or bear children. This independent state makes me a question mark: Can she do it? Will she do it?

My sister remembers that when other women have asked me to baby sit, I have occasionally responded, "If I wanted to take care of children, I would have had my own."

This blistering response is pure self-defense. Because I work out of my home, people assume that I'm free all day long. If I didn't put up a sturdy self-defense, I'd spend my life in child care. But Katie is different. Not even my best friend knows how I feel about this child. I tell my sister, "We're both doing fine. Katie's on the pallet watching <u>Kitty Foyle.</u>"

When I speak, my niece nods to me that <u>Kitty Foyle</u> is a four-star movie just like I said it was. Then, she turns her attention back to Ginger Rogers, who has fallen in love with the wrong man.

"If you'd like to bring her downtown for lunch, I'll buy. The place up the street has a dessert cart with only chocolate on it. The food is fabulous."

"Not today," I say. I find it ironic that my mother promises weight loss if I'll keep Katie, while my sister bribes me with food when I do. "My hair is dirty, and I'm not dressed. We'll come another day," I promise.

On the pallet with Katie, I hold out my arms. She crawls up on top of me and lays her head on my chest. We watch peacefully. The time eases by. I enjoy having my day elongated. I didn't know being with a child slowed down time.

Katie brings this gift of time that no one has told me about. In gratitude, I tell Katie that Ginger is also a dancer. "We have her autobiography upstairs. It's autographed. I'll read it to you sometime. Ginger is most famous for dancing with Fred Astaire, but she did a great deal more than that. It's a sad fact-of-life that many talented, accomplished women are still only recognized for what they did in the company of a man. Ginger Rogers won the Oscar for playing this part, and you notice that Fred Astaire is not even in this movie," I say.

During the commercials, we walk over to the window, and I explain to Katie what rain is. I explain cats. I introduce her to the piano. I play my answering machine tape three times so that she can hear her mother's voice.

When the tape signals the end of the message for the third time, I say, "I'm not your mother. I'm your aunt. We're going to keep all of that straight."

An hour later, we sigh together when Ginger Rogers gives up that man who caused her so much trouble and chooses the right man after all.

"You don't have to get married to be happy, Katie," I say. "But if you are going to fall in love, it's best to choose a man who likes to work and thinks of other people besides himself." She is too young to hear about heartbreak so I ask her, "What will we watch next?"

Katie tears the top page off the TV Guide in response.

"How about Perry Mason? Now, there's a man who's smart and loyal to his clients, but you'll notice that he's been stringing Della Street along for years. You have to watch that kind of man. Perry Mason cannot make a commitment."

Before the program begins, I check Katie's diaper, feed her a jar of carrots, offer her a secret sip of Coca-Cola. She presses the cold glass against her sore teething gums and slaps me on the head with her fist in gratitude. I kiss her face, she holds mine.

The phone rings. It's my mother. "Are you all right?"

"The pounds are just melting away," I tell her. "You get some rest while you can."

Daddy calls out so that I can hear him over the receiver, "Keep her. We'll pay you cash money."

"Ssssh," Mother says. "Ignore your father. He doesn't mean that."

"I'm fine," I assure her. "Tell Daddy he can keep his money. Go rest your hands and feet."

"You're being awfully good about this," she whispers wonderingly, and hangs up.

"Aren't we being good?" I ask Katie back on the pallet. She brings her nose to my face and flutters her eye lashes at me.

"Ah, butterfly love," I say, and bat my eyes against her cheek. "But not too much. We don't want to get too thin." She laughs.

Fulfilling my father's prophecy, I stand on my head a moment to entertain her until Perry Mason finally comes on. Then, I tell Katie that her mother works in a law office. "She is a legal secretary like Della Street. It's a hard job. Not everyone can do it. She works there to get you health insurance and to have the money to feed you and buy your diapers. You mother loves you very much. Probably more than I do."

I'm not sure how that is possible, but it must be true. I go on to tell Katie about how the legal system works in America. She's very bright. I have reason to believe that she understands every word I say.

LITTLE WOMAN

She is a prissy girl, who in contrast to her finicky temperament, allows her long hair to fall continuously across her face. I watch her push the child-gold tresses back one more time as she eats her sticky grape popsicle.

"If you'll get me a rubber band or a barrette, I'll fix your hair so it will stop bothering you."

Her face goes stony. I have insulted her. I do not know which word I uttered that struck her wrong, but she is wounded.

"Have another popsicle," I apologize. She stares straight ahead, silently awaiting the return of her mother, who isn't due until tomorrow. Her child-sized hand moves stealthily across the remote control. The audio on the television increases, tuning me out. It is a game show where the contestants race around a grocery store putting food in their baskets.

A trio of boy cousins are watching with us, her younger brother among them. Ben says, "This is a really great show." Who has taught him to speak like Ed Sullivan? Why

do they all like this show? I do not ask either question aloud, because everyone seems miraculously content, and I don't want to change this.

And then the family beauty arrives. Lola Leigh has luxurious thick black hair that falls to her hips. She wears it loose, peekaboo style around her face. She is twenty-one, drives a red sports car, has a steady boy friend, is California tan. Occasionally, Lola Leigh sunbathes topless lying out on the family picnic table. When someone sees her, she shakes her cloak of hair, Godiva-style, and turns over unselfconsciously. The mantle of beauty drapes her gracefully.

For a long time, when Jan would come to visit, she would sleep with her cousin Lola, a girl she called 'The Teenager.' But now she can't. Lola is too old, too busy. Dressed in black biker shorts and a red tank top, Lola perches athletically on the back of the sofa where we are sitting. Her leg reaches out in a ballet move that her body recalls effortlessly, it seems. Jan deserts me, scrambling monkey-like to sit beside her idol, hanging onto the ledge of the sofa's back. Her father's white tee-shirt that she wears as a night gown makes her seem even smaller, her ten-year-old body shapeless.

Silently, I watch, see Jan smooth the hair back from Lola's impassive face. She repeats this feathery movement over and over again as if Lola is a doll whose hair needs

brushing. But it's more than just a little girl's affection. Inherent in Jan's movements is a longing for something she hasn't defined yet. She pets her beautiful cousin with strokes designed to absorb the older girl's beauty and self-possession, to take unto herself some of the very aloofness that now keeps this younger cousin at arm's length. It is an odd, still moment of wanting and not having for Jan, and for Lola, of having but not being able to give. Jan loves Lola with a searching hunger. And Lola loves Jan, but she doesn't want the burden of being her hero.

"Gotta go," Lola announces, when the commercial comes on. We are in the TV room and, like a movie theater, it attracts a transient crowd.

Immediately, Jan pads along behind Lola to the back door, imitating her walk. For all of her sex appeal, Lola has a pigeon-toed gait, yet another legacy of those ballet lessons, the theory goes. The ex-ballerina bends and kisses Jan and promises that she will see her tomorrow.

Our littlest woman tries to disguise her loneliness by staying longer in the kitchen. I hear her moving silently across the dark kitchen to the freezer. She is too short to reach those popsicles, but I don't offer my help because she likes to think of herself as being taller than she is.

A loud bang follows. I know instantly what has happened. The bucket of ice cubes has hit the floor. The boys race to see what Jan has done.

She is in disgrace on her knees grabbing at slippery ice cubes. Her hanging hair hides her eyes, but I know she is crying, mortified. The boys razz her: We will be drinking hot Cokes tonight.

Jan offers not one word of self-defense. I know without being able to explain it that the only comfort she has in that moment is that her beautiful cousin is not there to witness her clumsiness.

Silently, I begin grabbing at ice cubes grainy with sand. "Don't you boys want to see how that game show ends?" I ask. Reminded that there is something more interesting to watch, they leave.

Jan and I finish cleaning up in silence. When I empty the bucket in the sink to let the ruined ice melt, Jan throws herself against me. Her grief is explosive. She sobs, her whole body jerking. Part of her misery is embarrassment, part of it is missing her mother, part is that her beautiful grown-up cousin has, she thinks, abandoned her, taking with her the secret to finding her own beauty, her own sense of self.

I know those feelings. Lola Leigh does too. They are part of Lola's self-assurance now, what she has overcome and lived through to become who she is. I can't tell Jan that

what she is going through right this moment is part of that secret of becoming strong and self-assured, beautiful to others. The feelings are being born, but names for them are not part of the child's vocabulary yet.

I hold her. In time, Jan's sniffles abate. I get us each a popsicle, and we go back to the couch. We have missed who won the grocery store game. Bill Cosby comes on. Jan hides herself against my arm, watching. I feather-stroke the long wet tresses of her peekaboo hair back out of her luminous, vulnerable eyes. My movements are not unlike her own, the petting movements she offered her hero. Something in this motion gives her comfort. She allows it.

COMPANY'S COMING

"Edwina's on her way over with some money from her Bible class for you to deposit," my roommate said nonchalantly as she hung up the phone. Guin went back to the stove to start frying the tortillas. It was taco night.

"What?" I screeched. "Edwina's coming over, and you're standing there with an egg-turner in your hand going right ahead frying tortillas."

The kitchen smelled of freshly-cut onions and sizzling hamburger meat. The counter was laden with toppings: chopped lettuce, sour cream, grated cheese and two different bottles of hot sauce. Guin likes her sauce hot. I like mine mild.

"You want me to call her back and tell her not to come?"

I looked at her stupefied. I've only known my best friend for fifteen years, and it was hard for me to take in the fact that she had lost her mind in just that split second.

I steadied myself, speaking slowly as I would to a crazy person who can't hear very well. "No, Guinnie, I don't want you to call Edwina back. I want you to just finish cooking up those tortillas and go ahead and eat your dinner in peace while I straighten up the house." That was the content of what I said, but the tone of my voice implied otherwise.

Guin was unperturbed. She had seen me get this way before.

"I don't think Edwina's planning on coming inside the house," she called after me.

Too late. I was already sprinkling Comet cleanser in the toilet bowl and squirting Ly-Sol in the sink.

I ran my usual gamut then:

Carried the shopping bags we'd acquired at the mall that afternoon and dumped them at the top of the stairs. Plucked the brassieres (mine) that are always hanging on doorknobs and hid them in a drawer. Threw scattered dirty socks (mostly mine) into the laundry room. Hid the six pairs of walking/running/dress shoes (ours) we keep near the doorway in the already jam-packed hall closet. Picked up the throw pillows off the floor and put them back on the couch. Straightened the coffee table. Grabbed a clean Kleenex from the box to dust off the table top.
Turned off the TV so it would look like we never watch <u>that</u>!
Wondered how we managed to drop so much popcorn on the

floor--scooped up those dead kernels. Stacked the copies of Newsweek and U.S. News & World Report (hers), hid the copies of TV Guide and The Disney Channel Guide (mine) under the newsy mags, and then pushed the chairs against the dining room table.

"Are you going completely crazy?" my roommate asked, having by now fixed her plate replete with two beautifully topped tacos. She settled herself at the table. I sniffed greedily. Panicking makes me hungry. Guin tried to talk me back to reality. "I don't think Edwina's planning on coming inside the house. I told her we were about to eat tacos.

"You're the one who's eating tacos."

"What are you doing?" she asked, sitting down at her regular place at the table.

"I'm saving my reputation. Our reputation I might add." Well I did add that, didn't I?

By then I saw Edwina's car pull in to the driveway, and I hurried outside to greet our guests: Edwina, her husband, Bill, and her grandchild, Laura Lee.

Guin followed, letting her tacos chill out.

We made the usual small talk with our guests. I took Edwina's money from her Ladies' Bible Class. (I'm the women's club treasurer.) She also gave me a bill to pay for the new study books. We made more small talk. I invited them to come inside to eat Guin's tacos. They turned me

down and left. They weren't even parked in the driveway five full minutes.

Back inside, I heaved a sigh of relief and fixed my plate.

"Now, see," Guin said. She couldn't help herself. "You got all worked up over nothing. There wasn't anything to it."

"You don't even understand what just happened," I said.

"I do, too," she said, munching calmly. "You got mad at me because you wanted me to tell Edwina not to come over. She just said she was coming over. She didn't ask me if we minded."

"That isn't it," I said.

"Oh, yes it is. You just don't want to admit that you go crazy when company's coming over."

"You're the one who's crazy. You don't even know when you're in trouble."

She decided to give me the silent treatment. We sulked until after the dishes were stacked in the dishwasher, and then Guin broke the silence.

"I'm sorry you got mad at me, but I really couldn't tell Edwina not to come over when all she wanted to do was hand us an envelope."

"I didn't want you to tell her not to come over. I want people to come over. I like company. I really do. I just want the house to look like two sane people live here."

"Well, that's half true," she smirked.

"One of us cares whether the house looks okay and one of us doesn't," I sniffed.

"I do care," she said. "I'm the half that didn't go crazy, and the house looked perfectly all right to me."

"I don't know how you got raised. I've seen your mama's house, and she'd know what I was talking about."

"All right, what are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about a woman from our church coming to our house and looking around and seeing the foyer crowded with shopping bags. The den looking like we just had a party in there. The kitchen smelling of onions and fried hamburger meat. The kitchen floor needs mopping. The carpet vacuuming. What if she'd wanted to go to the bathroom. Do you know what it was like in <u>there</u>?" I was getting worked up again.

"But she didn't need to go to the bathroom. They didn't even come inside the house."

"But she could have....." I said, "and if she had, she would have seen our house all messed up, and she would have told other people at the church, and everyone would know that we live like piglets."

"We don't live like piglets," Guin answered, unperturbed. "We just live, period. And I don't think she would notice all that, and if she did, I don't believe she'd think it was worth talking about. Have you considered that your thinking may be a little sexist in its stereotyping of what women talk about."

"Sexist nothing. Men and women both talk about stuff like that all the time. It's what separates us from the animals," I argued.

"You just go crazy when company's coming over is all," she rebutted. "You always have. But, if you're on the verge of getting your sanity back, I'd like to call my mother now."

"Let me call your mother," I said, picking up the phone. "I'll explain all of this to her, and maybe she can explain it to you."

"You hand me that phone right this minute. Don't you tell my mother anything about anything," she warned me.

I dialed. It was ringing.

"You just remember, <u>your</u> mother lives right next door to us. I can go over there any time I want to and talk to her all I please, and believe me, there's a lot I could tell her."

I thought about that.

"I have seen inside your bathroom cabinets," Guin reminded me. "And you keep all your clean clothes on top of

your bedroom dresser where you also throw your dirty ones. I could tell her that. And a lot more. She'll geeeeet you," she hissed.

We understood one another after all. Her mother answered on the fourth ring. I handed Guin the phone.

YOUR MONEY'S WORTH

"How much did you pay to rent these two deck chairs?" I asked Guin.

It was a cold day on the beach, and she rolled over so that the brisk wind from the Gulf hit her back. She mumbled, "You don't really want to know."

I did, too. However, I tried to read. Two pages later, I was still freezing. "Aren't you cold?"

She was, but she didn't want to admit it. Guin had paid good money to rent these two deck chairs for a full day of reading on the beach, and she was intent on getting her money's worth, even if it killed us both.

I looked down the beach where rows of unoccupied deck chairs faced the water. I wondered why Guin hadn't considered the implications of those empty chairs before coughing up the big bucks, whatever amount it was.

Optimistically, the beach boy continued to put out more chairs. It was off-season and cool, but he was topless and wore tight-fitting shorts. He had a suspicious tan. When

he caught me staring at him, he smiled and pushed up another over-sized umbrella, making his muscles flex.

"Is he the one renting the chairs?" I asked Guin. "Cause I can see how it happened. Small, but built," I commented. "You're really not cold?"

"Okay, it was a lot of money. I can't believe I spent that much money to rent two deck chairs on a day as cold as this."

"Forget it. Bad bargains are a part of being alive."

"I know better."

"I know you do. Remember me? I was there the day you told that mechanic it was worth having your car break down just to see his smile, and that was before you got his estimate."

"Larry has a beautiful smile," she said, turning over. Her own smile mimicked a faint imitation of Larry's. There's no telling how many spark plugs Larry has sold with his smile. I know I've bought my share of Larry's auto parts, and I do not regret a one. There are some things worth paying for, but freezing to death isn't one of them.

"Tell the truth. Aren't you cold?"

"Freezing," she finally admitted.

"We don't have to stay out here just because you rented these chairs."

She shivered in response.

"Must be a pretty good book you're reading there," I observed drily. "It's got you all a-tremble."

"It cost five dollars for the first hour..... and.....I can't tell you; it's a terrible amount of money, and we've only been out here forty-five minutes."

"What's money? Here one day and gone the next, that's money."

"I gave him ten dollars for the whole day."

"Ten dollars! That's not a lot of money. It's not like that time you paid seventeen dollars to attend a cocktail party where, suddenly you decided you were on a diet, and ate only two olives. Eight-dollars and fifty cents an olive--now that's a lot of money, but ten dollars for two deck chairs on the beach during the off-season is like placing a bet that you lost. Forget it."

My words were enough to get her moving. She trod on ahead of me, kicking up a whirlpool of cold white sand while I reminded her that she had also spent thirty-nine dollars once on a chance to go to Hawaii. By the time we got back to our room, she had grown quiet again.

We read in silence till sundown, and then I went out on the balcony to see the view, because I like to get full value out of a hotel room. I could see the water and the beach.

"Your friend with the muscles and the tan was as good as his word. All the other deck chairs have been put away.

No one rented them, I guess. But look at yours. Two deck chairs, ten bucks, all day. If it weren't so dark and cold, we could go out there right now and sit on those chairs. That's what I call getting your money's worth."

THE BELLES OF CLOVERDALE

"Up close I look like a frog, but from a distance I'm kind of Hollywood."

My friend, Betty, was speaking; and, standing close to her, I saw that she did have bulging eyes, okay, somewhere in between frog-like and Susan Sarandon. Nevertheless, Betty's very attractive, with her own brand of beauty that she calls Hollywood. I call it pizazz.

I have other friends with less glamorous appeal. They are the sturdy, hardworking belles of Cloverdale. We meet for dinner periodically, rotating homes, trading stories of work and success, and when we end up on a Friday night in old Cloverdale, conversation invariably includes our absent friend Judy, a girl who grew up in the neighborhood where southern belles retain a certain amount of fame.

Judy is now a writer in Washington, who, in spite of her accomplishments, is still legendary here for her beauty. This assessment is unfair to Judy's many admirable attributes. She has a doctorate and is a very talented teacher and writer; but her most noticeable characteristic

is not her brains but her arresting good looks. Hers is the remote blonde coolness often associated with Grace Kelly but which, around here, we call the legacy of Zelda Fitzgerald. Judy has it. A long time ago, I asked Judy what it feels like to have that kind of power associated with beauty.

She said, "It fell upon me when I was in junior high, and I carried the reputation for the next twenty years. I've used it when I needed it," she admitted with a shrug. Judy often speaks about her life that way: Manna in its varying forms fall upon her.

Recently, I asked Judy what beauty had done for her lately. She surprised me, answering solemnly, "I've laid my beauty down. I don't use it anymore. Haven't you noticed?"

I would no more say yes to that question than I would tell Betty that she has frog eyes. At dinner in Old Cloverdale last night, I did report Judy's news, however: "Judy says, she's laid her beauty down."

Nancy, who is more famous for her good sense and hard work than her beauty (though she is not lacking in the latter),
slapped the table in disbelief and said, "Yeah. I saw what kind of trouble beauty was going to give me when I was three years
old, so I laid mine down, too. Just tell me this," Nancy asked, "Did Judy look the same to you?"

Judy had already asked me that, and I had not answered her. I felt uncomfortable when Nancy asked, because although Judy did look the same, something had seemed to be missing in her: It was as if she had turned something off. She was still Judy, though, the absent friend of this disheveled group: Beauty's mascot. We are a comfortable crowd of women: We show up for dinner looking whatever way we were dressed when it was time to get in the car. Sometimes we wear the works; other time, were are naked of lipstick, bra-less, our rounded bellies not disguised or held down by girdles. We all have the same hairstyle: blow dry.

Susan, our hostess for the evening, answered for me. "Judy looked absolutely fantastic. She had one of those irregular, blunt, swinging haircuts that looked just right on her. I think she got it in France."

This tidbit sparked a dialogue about haircuts, as if we would find the source and secret of beauty in this one choice of grooming. It is an irresistible impulse to track the trail of beauty, to describe the nature of it. As if by identifying it, we can lay hold of it--or perhaps beauty will fall on us like manna from heaven. Maybe that is why we insist on keeping the legend of Judy's beauty alive, because it is important for us to know where it is and where we can go to study it, or perhaps to refresh ourselves in

it. Maybe it is this persistent interest which wore Judy out, and why now she claims to have laid it down.

WHEN GOD SMILES

If he hadn't been so beaten up, he would have been handsome. However, time and hard work had taken a toll on him, and as a consequence, he was merely ruggedly attractive.

His skin was a weathered tan, his blue eyes well-creased from squinting into sunlight. The hair had once been blonde but had grown sandy with time, and it had thinned. On the chair beside him was a hat like Crocodile Dundee's. Like Paul Hogan's, his body was lean, for hard work had cost him weight. I could tell from his conversation that he was a roofer.

Beside him, his son sat waiting his turn to take the driver's license test. They talked quietly.

"How old do you think that woman is?" He asked his son, nodding toward an attractive lady across the room.

Shrugging his shoulders, the teenager grimaced at the question. "How should I know?"

"You could guess," his father suggested.

"I don't know anything about that."

"Aw, come on. Think."

The blonde woman whose age was being determined was also chauffeuring a teenager, a girl waiting her turn to take the driver's test. Oblivious to this pertinent clue, the recalcitrant boy clamped down his lips and stayed mum.

My curiosity whetted, I scrutinized the blonde in question. Her brown leather sandals framed delicate feet with pink polished toenails. A diamond tennis bracelet accentuated a thin, tanned wrist. A French manicure hinted that she did not scrub toilets for a living. Belted white shorts and a crisp navy blue blouse complemented a tidy, aerobesized figure. I did not see her as sexy, but she was attractive in a prosperous, well-groomed way.

The boy's father persisted in his inquiry, "Would you say she's younger than I am?"

"How old are you?" The boy asked dumbly.

"You know how old I am," the father said. "I'm forty-five. Would you say she's over forty? Take a good look at her."

The boy shrugged again and looked instead toward the test-giver to see if staring hard could force his turn to come so he could escape the inquisition.

The weather-beaten man finally answered his own question. "We went to school together. That's how old she is. Graduated high school the same year. But look how

she's held her age. When it came to aging, God smiled on her, and He did not smile on me."

Hearing that, I wanted very much to jump in where angels fear to tread and tell this guy that I thought he was pretty good looking in a beat-up sort of way, but a possible misinterpretation of my unsolicited opinion kept me from it. He might think I was flirting with him, and my intention was not to flirt. He might accuse me of sexual harassment, and pausing a moment to consider whether my attention was tainted with lust, I concluded that my conscience was clean--it was not. I found him good looking in the same spirit that he appreciated the tidy blonde. It was unfortunate, I thought, that he could be so complimentary of the woman, and, simultaneously, so harsh when judging himself.

And, aren't we all?

In this burdened body-conscious, politically-correct society, simple discourse has become as dangerous as walking through a mine field. Only the explosives that may go off are not just the predictable behaviors of imperfect people who may well be hardhearted or discriminatory, but the tortuous self-consciousness of people who are being taught to judge themselves so critically on a daily basis.

I longed to say, "Man, that lady hasn't been laying shingles on roofs out in the hot sun for the past twenty years. Your body looks like it has, but your worn,

toughened appearance is no less attractive in its way than her rested, well-groomed one."

But I didn't, of course. Sitting next to the blonde, I felt miserably self-conscious and did not want to invite a comparison by this man who was obviously attuned to and appreciative of good-looking women. Next to her, I did not feel good looking.

She had that well-tended look that I have always wanted and have never taken the time or spent the money to achieve. For so many reasons born of self-consciousness, I did not speak.

The room lapsed into silence while the father and mother waited on their son and daughter to take a test that would be a rite of passage on the way to the greater liberty of adulthood.

Those of us who already had the pieces of paper that permitted us the great freedom to pursue happiness along with the other liberties of adulthood sat quietly and self-consciously in our chairs.

MY MOTHER'S HOUSE

MY MOTHER'S HOUSE

In my mother's house, there are many rooms. None of them are mine. I live next door to my parents in a small town where the drug business is catching hold and dangerous men on the run are occasionally chased through our backfield by plainclothes cops holding walkie-talkies.

Bad guys use my creek as an access to marked homes, something we didn't consider when my family looked at this property and thought, "Ah, this creek will keep idle traffic out of our yard."

After I was robbed, the cops found the storage building where stolen properties had been stashed. My stuff was not there, and I didn't care. After being dispossessed of my possessions, items I once considered valuable lost their value, became no more to me than expendable knickknacks.

This new knowledge came the week my parents went to meet a new grandchild, and I was left alone not to protect their home but to sit by their phone to take messages about an ailing aunt. At first, I felt like a sentry on duty, and then oddly, like a burglar in my mother's house. I ate her

oatmeal cookies, drank her coffee, got bored with stealing her snacks and decided to be a good daughter instead. I got out the vacuum cleaner and a dust cloth, turned off the TV, and began to clean house.

We used to do this every Saturday, my sisters and I. It all came back: My body remembered before my mind did where the wax was, the spare can of Comet, the Windex. My regular job was dusting the china cabinet, where the valuables were stored, but I did my sisters' jobs first. I scrubbed the bathrooms, cleaned the mirrors, stripped the beds, and put on fresh sheets. I felt somehow that in doing my sisters' jobs, I was stealing some of their knowledge of who we'd been as a family and what had made our house a home. I could hear my sisters' voices again. In different rooms, one of us would start a song, and from the four corners of the house, our girlish voices would rise blending in a sweet harmony. We were a natural quartet: one soprano, two mezzos, and an alto. When we weren't beating each other up, we were singing.

Finally, I went to it: the china cabinet, my job. It was loaded now with souvenirs, memorabilia from weddings and anniversaries. No longer just the safe place for crystal and china, this cabinet has become the hiding place for clues that tell the stories of our lives together. No burglar in his right mind would stoop to steal these non-pawnable treasures.

I had always hated this job on Saturday mornings--removing each breakable item to dust underneath and stack them again. I remember more than once just dusting around the contents. My mother never came along behind me with a gloved hand to check on my work, but I always felt that she knew when I had cheated on my job. Come Saturday, I couldn't wait to dust--to erase my guilt until the next time I gave in to temptation. I suppose this is what we learn in our mother's house--not to cheat but to play fair, to do our jobs, and to sing when happy.

Finished, I slid the familiar glass doors into place. My fingerprints were captured on the glass. That hand print seemed to attest to the fact that for a while that morning, I, too, was a burglar, casing the place for memories and clues about who we had been together, taking with me whatever I could. I discovered that what we had been as a family could never be taken from us by the passing of time or purloined by any other kind of thief.

By the time my parents returned, the cabinet would be dusty again, and my mother would never know I had been there dusting, had done my job once again, and done it well. Carefully, I removed the only evidence of my presence, erasing my hand print with one swipe of the cloth.

DANCING NAKED IN THE MOONLIGHT

"What would make your mother dance naked In the moonlight?" I asked Annell, my hairdresser. Business was slow at the salon that morning, and I was bored. Annell was, too, but she was trying not to show it in front of a paying customer.

To be friendly, she entertained my question while Pat, a pretty blonde stylist in the next station, jumped in with her answer: "Nothing on God's green earth cold make my mother dance naked in the moonlight. Nothing."

I looked in the mirror, caught Annell's eye, and she agreed, mouthing the word: "Nothing."

Inexplicably, the older woman sitting in Pat's chair answered softly, out of sync with the casual exploring of the question, "Financial security." But we understood among us that she was answering for herself and not her mother.

My father reports, "In thirty-eight years of marriage I have never seen your mother naked."

This comment is a joke.

My parents have four daughters, but the joke emerged because I recently made the boast, "If I sell my novel, I'm gonna dance naked in the moonlight." My mother frowned. She's got nothing against moonlight, I presume; she just doesn't like to think of me getting naked to do anything.

"You better watch out what you wish for--you might get it," she prophesied. Her warning reverberated as the voice of experience.

"I'm not afraid," I reassured her, then reevaluated my boast. I could handle success, and dancing, and moonlight, and nakedness. But, remembering the cellulite that dimples my behind, I wavered.

I'm a modern woman who never did burn her brassiere. Occasionally, I still try to wear one but invariably stop at the first traffic light and wriggle out of the thing. (Houdini and his straight jacket don't have anything on me.) But I know I'm not the first woman to shed her inhibitions for comfort's sake, nor the first person to desire to dance before God in an act of celebration of life's joys and the pleasures of accomplishment.

Once upon a time, the Biblical King David discarded much of his royal dignity. You remember the story: David's wife, a tight-lipped, unhappy woman, disapproved of such foolishness. So does my mother and Annell's and Pat's. Which leads to the question: What wish come true would ever incite any of our mothers to recklessness? And, more

specifically, my mother, who contents herself with the morning crossword and lives her life on the edge by refusing to give up caffeine and cigarettes?

In short, could anything ever make my mother say, "I'm going outside to dance naked in the moonlight?"

I look at my mother, and I can't imagine it. Has she ever been that happy? Does her life even suit her?

I can trace the beginning of my mother's career as a mother back to a specific snapshot we have of her. The photo haunts me with its stark juxtaposition: a young, pregnant girl and the fledgling fruit she has just planted.

Dressed in one of her husband's white T-shirts, Lola Morris has staked a claim in life by planting that tree. She is establishing herself as a fruit-bearer, a woman with a green thumb who has a way of bringing forth life. In time, she will bear four daughters. And although the broader question can never be phrased perfectly, I asked her if her daughters were the fruit she meant to bear.

"I love all my girls," she answered me, eyes focused on a crossword, evading my question.

She's good at this.

"What would you have liked to have done if you hadn't had your hands full with four girls to raise?"

She sidestepped my question. "Well, your daddy never has liked me going off from home, but there was a time when he got it in his head that I should go to work and we would

have two paychecks coming in. You girls were big enough to see about yourselves some, and I went to work for the telephone company.

"I had a good shift. I worked from one in the afternoon until ten at night, and if I got off later than ten, they would send me home in a taxicab. I loved riding home in the dark in that cab," my mother confided.

"They made me a trouble-shooter at the phone company. I had a way with the board."

"You liked it?

"Oh, yes. I got to talk to Bob Hope one time. I helped him reach his party. I liked talking to so many different people all over the United States.

"Anytime the phone lines weren't busy, they would send some of the girls home. They called it a furlough, and your daddy would tell me every day when I left for work, 'Now, if they offer you a furlough, take it. Money's not everything.' That's what he'd say--and you know him, your daddy likes money."

My consciousness-raised sensibilities were provoked by this remembered chauvinism, but mother didn't see it my way. "If I took a furlough, I'd have to pay for the taxi ride myself, but I'd go on home and there you would all be waiting for me by the front door in those pajamas with the little brown rabbits on them.

By that time there were four of us wearing rabbits, and mother didn't go on to say how that made her feel. Crowded? Resentful? Wishing she were back in that taxi headed in the opposite direction?

I waited for her to complain, but she didn't. "Do you ever wish you had stayed with the phone company?" I asked.

My question jarred her in a way that was not easy to identify. I could almost see her as that girl again, next to that peach tree before her own future had blossomed. She has become a gardener who understands that the weather can have its way with a young girl's will--that some fruit grows ripe, and some does not.

"There was a time when I wanted to be a lawyer, but my family couldn't afford to send all twelve of us to college."

"It's never too late," I proposed. "Women go back to school all the time." Could a college degree inspire my mother to some reckless act of celebration?

"Are you crazy?" Her response was automatic, unthinking. "Why in the world would I ever go back to school?"

"Well, you might," I shrugged. "You just might have dreams your heart makes when you're all alone," I suggested.

"I'd be crazy to go back to school now that I can live my life exactly the way I please."

It pleases my mother to drink black coffee and work her crossword puzzles. She likes to watch "Wheel of Fortune"

and other game shows. She plays dominoes on Friday nights. She's proud of the hydrangea bush that dominates her front flower bed and of the fruit trees that live and die in her backyard. She loves her children and enjoys our company.

For her, the notion of fruit-bearing as a political position is a silly one. Like so many of her friends, she doesn't fit in either the feminist camp or that other group misnamed traditional homemakers.

When she quit wearing a brassiere, she offered this explanation: "I'm not going to keep wearing something that cuts off my air around my middle."

"Would you wear a bra if you ever made it on 'Wheel of Fortune'?" I asked, not letting die my dream of knowing her dreams.

"I wouldn't have the nerve to go on TV," she said.

"Come on," I teased her.

She stared over my shoulder out to the edge of the woods where her fig tree grows next to the plum and the peach. "Now, if I were really going to make a fool of myself, I'd want to do it on 'Jeopardy,' she admitted softly.

It wasn't dancing naked in the moonlight, but it was a start.

A PEACH A DAY

We were sitting in the living room at eight o'clock that night admiring my father's burn marks on his chest when Jody arrived. He stood in the doorway and crooked his forefinger at me commandingly. He knows I hate it when some man tries to tell me what to do, but because the day had contained enough tension, this once, I obeyed without argument.

I permitted Jody to lead me out to his car, from which he pulled a basket of gorgeous peaches, fat and round; and, I was soon to discover, incredibly sweet. But that was not his only gift to me that night. In addition to the peaches, he brought out the largest most perfectly shaped, sweet-smelling cantaloupe I'd ever seen.

He held this jewel out to me and said solemnly, "I saw this today and thought immediately of you."

Now, I'm insecure enough about the size of my behind (it's been compared to a watermelon more than once) to think maybe he was teasing me. But there was no raised eyebrow, no hint of razzing. It took me a moment to understand that

this fruit was his gift, a brother-in-law's expression of thoughtfulness and love not only for me, but also for our family on a day which had become part of the tradition of dealing with Dad's erratic heart beat.

We went back inside to join the other fifteen family members. Dad was sitting in his regular place on the couch. Mother was discussing Dad's irregular heartbeat with my long-distance sister on the phone. Children and grandchildren kept milling in and out, stopping to place well-meaning hands on Daddy's heart to check the rhythm, and Daddy kept looking up through his one good eye as if to say, "I'm still here."

It was the same childlike look of helplessness he'd given me earlier in the out-patient hospital room where he'd waited for the doctor. There, they loaded my father one more time on the gurney and rolled him and his wildly ticking heart off to the paddling room. He had pulled the hospital sheet up to his chin and closed his eyes, resigned to having his heart first stopped and then restarted. ("Jump-started," he calls it.) I'd hated that--seeing the resignation which hid his fear, and so I'd hollered after them, "That's precious cargo you've got there."

"Why don't you and your mama go to lunch?" The nurse advised. Another nurse concurred, urging, "Yes, this would be a good time for you two girls to go have lunch."

Who could eat? Yet, Mother and I obediently left the hospital for an hour and found ourselves plates of curried chicken salad and hot bread, and we ate it though I have no memory of its tasting good or bad. I remember making small talk, wondering what my mother was feeling, while we both spoke in deceptively normal tones to nearby friends.

By the time we got back to the hospital, they had put the electric paddles to my father three times and rolled him back out with a burned place on his chest, the traces of sodium pentothal leaving him giddy. He awoke with the inexplicable desire to tell everyone his favorite cornball jokes from Reader's Digest. He kept asking us periodically if he was talking too much, and we kept telling him, no, no, talk to us.

Every now and then, he would tell the newest visitor, "They had to pop me three times today. The last time, it was only twice." Would there come a day when his heart would require four jolts of electricity, five?

I didn't have the strength to think that far ahead. None of us had the energy to cook either, and among us all, Dad was the only one hungry. On the way home, we stopped and bought fried chicken and, taking our normal places in the TV room, ate it with cold, butterless corn bread. I played fitfully with the food while smiling and talking, thinking over and over again--my Daddy stopped breathing

today and someone shocked him three times to reset his heart.

Then, Jody arrived with the peaches. I ate the first one to be cordial. It was beautiful to look at, so pink, so sweet. It was the only food I'd eaten all day that I was able to taste. The fragrance of that first peach filled the roomful of people with an appetite to sample the fruit.

The next peach was picked from the basket. Jody went and selected one for Daddy and led him to the sink, where they first admired the size of it, and then Jody peeled it carefully. The thin skin stole none of the perfect fruit with it.

As people came and went, Jody would call out an invitation to eat a peach in that same commanding way that he had imperiously crooked his finger to me. He ordered them one after another, "Have one of Daffy's perfect peaches." It was as if he didn't want to take credit for their perfection, so by making the basket of fruit a gift to me, he could shrug off the uncomfortable role of benefactor.

I stayed in the kitchen that night, the token hostess of the evening's bounty, admiring the peaches aloud as I helped to pick and then hand them out. We took turns at the sink with the paring knife, trading comparison bites and slurping, putting the little ruddy, pink hearts of the fruit aside on a paper napkin to dry. The plan was to plant a tree that would produce this perfect fruit that had

rekindled our appetites and reminded us that, besides the bad days, there were also good ones ahead.

When the farewells began, there was only the perfect cantaloupe left to take home with me. This gift I cradled in my arm on the way out the front door, hiding it so that no one left sitting in the living room would absentmindedly compare it to the size of my behind. The peach pits are hidden behind the window curtain. They will dry in the sun on my mother's window sill. Not too many days from now, when the burn marks have faded on my father's chest and the ruddy peach pits have dried out, I'm going to stand in this doorway where Jody stood, crook my finger at my father and tell him to, "Come on." And together, in anticipation of the many good days ahead, we're going to plant them.

CAN YOU HEAR ME, BROTHER WOODROW?

"Why does that fellow on the TV keep asking, 'Are you ready, Brother Woodrow?'"

All of us sitting in the den turned to Daddy and looked at him as if he were crazy. In my family, this response is the way we keep one another from going over the edge--we glare at goofy behavior and follow up this discipline with ribbing and jibes. In a family as large as ours this is almost a full-time occupation; one of us is always going kind of crazy.

"That's Hank Williams, Jr. on the TV, and he isn't saying, 'Are you ready, Brother Woodrow?' He's saying, 'Are you ready for some football?' It's Monday night. Monday night football. Get it?" I explained.

"Well, I wish they could get someone who could talk plain. I don't even like the way Hank, Jr. sings," Daddy grumbles.

We turn up the TV so Dad can hear. Hank, Jr. comes on again in a few minutes, and this time, Dad repeats the correct words with him.

One by one, we can't help it, we start to laugh.

Mother turns to Dad and asks, "Are you ready for some popcorn, Brother Woodrow?"

More laughter. For the rest of the evening, we tease Dad about getting hard of hearing by asking, "Are you ready, Brother Woodrow?"

He takes it, this teasing. Maybe, too well. Underneath all this tomfoolery, we are seriously trying to tell him that he has a hearing problem. So far, he hasn't heard any of us when we've tried to hint that his ears aren't what they used to be.

I pretend to just think of this bright idea. I say, "Hey, Brother Woodrow, why don't you let me call the Speech and Hearing Clinic over at the college in the morning and see what they charge for an exam?"

Because he is the center of attention, he shrugs good-naturedly, okay, why not.

I have been trying to work up to making this suggestion for weeks, and it was just that easy.

I call the clinic the first thing in the morning. I learn that my father is not unusual at all. Most people will admit to almost any physical failing except deafness. I learn that deafness can happen to anybody, young or older. Ninety percent of the cases can be corrected.

Jubilantly, I call Dad to tell him that I can get him an appointment next Friday. I soft soap him: "Whaddya say, Brother Woodrow? I'll even buy you lunch."

He is not charmed by my proposal. He is a different man today. "Do you really think I need to get my hearing checked? I mean, I know it has probably slipped a little, but I can hear pretty good." His voice is hard-edged. He is not inviting teasing this morning. "Tell me honestly, do you really think I need to see a doctor?"

I gulp. This opportunity to get him some help is no time for feminine tact. "Daddy, I've been standing right behind you talking and you don't hear me."

"Are you joking?"

"No, sir. I am not."

On the phone with Dad, we move from being buddies to that miserable plane of existence called role reversal. Increasingly, my thirtysomething friends report the same tension: aging parent ignores the changes of his body, forcing an almost grown-up child to assume a parental role.

I am not qualified for this job. To complicate the issue, I, like my three sisters, have never outgrown hero-worshipping my father. We know this is hopelessly out-of-date thinking probably chuckfull of dire psychological implications, but we can't help ourselves. We love our father with a devotion that surpasses any rational explanation.

Simultaneously, I grow angry with this man I adore when I let myself think about how he is putting off correcting his hearing loss. This mulish response is so unlike the man I know. He's the guy who brought home an eye chart when I was nine years old and figured out that I was flunking in school because I couldn't see. For weeks while failing in school, I had lived a tortured existence of self-questioning. I thought I was stupid. My test grades were constantly proving that I was, and then my father showed me what was wrong by asking me to read some letters from across the room. I was so relieved and embarrassed to be named nearsighted instead of dumb that I screamed and locked myself in the bathroom.

I remember being in that bathroom alone, a washrag stuffed in my mouth to muffle my crying while I looked at my eyes in the mirror and wondered why they had gone bad on me. I figure my father has known a few confused moments when he's studied his reflection and wondered why it no longer conformed to the image he has of himself as our protector.

Oh, Daddy.

I hung up the phone and picked it right back up. I called Julie, my sister.

"He's changed his mind about going to the hearing clinic."

"Bragged on him too soon."

"I don't know what to do next. I want you to encourage Mother to stay on his case."

"She's already talking at the top of her lungs."

"He tunes her out."

"That's one of the problems. We don't know how much of this is him tuning us all out and how much is ear trouble."

"He might just need to have his ears cleaned. It could be that simple."

"We'll work on him. We'll get his bones over there. You're doing the right thing. Keep it up," Julie told me.

Words helped. I needed her encouragement that I was not being presumptuous. And a nag. Underneath it all, I'm afraid that if I'm the one to convince my father there's something wrong with him, he may not like me as much anymore. Maybe this isn't so serious, I tell myself. Maybe, he'll outgrow this.

Later that day, I wander over to Dad's for afternoon coffee. Matthew, Dad's grandson, comes in from school right after I get there.

"How you doing, Pa?" Matt speaks loudly. He's learned that he'd better. He's gotten in trouble more than once for supposedly not saying hello or good-bye when he comes and goes around here.

"There's a cold orange drink in the refrigerator for you, son," Dad tells him.

As Matthew moves around the room assembling his snack, he tells us the details of his day. He mentions the bus ride, the amount of homework he has to do. He sits down next to his grandfather.

"So, son, how was your day?" Pa asks.

Matthew looks at me and rolls his eyes. "Pa, you're getting deaf as some old man. I just told you about my day."

Daddy looks at me to see if Matt is playing some kind of childish, mean-spirited trick on him. Guilt floods me. I am torn between sparing my father's feelings and protecting Matthew, who is innocent here.

"Matthew just told us that he had a good day, but he's got a lot of homework," I say loudly. "You didn't hear him."

Dad rises up like we've conspired against him and goes into the other room and gets on the couch with his dog. He turns up the TV. We shuffle in after him.

He scans the TV channels. "I can hear that," he declares, stopping at Headline News. "I can hear that. And that. I don't think my hearing's that bad."

"Dad, I fell off my bike the other day while you were getting in your mail, and I screamed for you to come and help me and you just waved at me," I say. I had not meant to tell him that.

He looks confused by what I've said. Dejected. On the verge of being defeated, and I am responsible. I shouldn't be saying these awful, cruel words to my father. Yet, I cannot stop talking. "What if Mother were to fall down?"

"Your mother never falls down."

Matthew, bored with the conversation, gets up.

"You leaving, son?"

Daddy doesn't hear Matt say good-bye.

I go over and kiss my father and hug him and tell him I'm going to break his bones if he doesn't let me take him in to get his hearing checked.

Mother comes in, hears me, and laughs. "You still working on your father?"

"Yeah, but Brother Woodrow won't listen to me."

"He'll get around to hearing you one day," she predicts.

I stand behind my father and pull on the lobes of his ears threatening other catastrophes if he doesn't do what's good for him.

My father sits in front of me, holding the remote control for the TV, scanning the channels, tuning in and out randomly. Later, he doesn't hear me when I say good-bye.

THE LEGACY OF A VERY HANDY MAN

As I pedaled off on my bicycle to fetch the day's mail from the post office, my father, who had just pumped up my tires with his own air compressor called after me, "I hope you don't break down between here and there!"

It is just a two-mile ride to the post office, but no matter the distance I'm traveling or the current circumstances, that pessimistic parting shot is always my father's idea of a proper farewell: a doomsday good-bye. I can almost hear him praying behind my back whenever I leave him: "Lord, be merciful to that girl. There's no telling what could happen to her out there."

Dad's attitude is based on seventeen years of working the graveyard shift as a trouble-shooter for the local air force base. Before that he managed an apartment complex. Before that, he sold insurance. His work experience added up to a solid belief that the worst often happens, and so he devoted his life as a father to preparing his four daughters for the various afflictions and plagues he either remembers or can imagine.

They are considerable.

At eleven-years-old, my oldest sister, Mary Ellen, was issued a small hatchet. She was in charge of it. It went under her side of the bed. Its purpose? To chop a path through the bedroom window if the house caught on fire during the night and Dad wasn't there and Mom couldn't get to us. (Mom had her own hatchet.)

Dad's idea of a useful Christmas present one year was to give us girls each a can of shaving cream and a new safety razor. Another time, these gifts of shaving cream were accompanied by purse-sized billfolds containing different sized screwdrivers. No sexist, the next year, he gave us portable sewing kits.

In our thirties now and having been exposed to most of Dad's survival sermonettes more than a few times, we are subjected to subtle test-taking. It's done very cagily, but the underlying question is always the same: Are his girls going to prove to be good Boy Scouts--always prepared for the nasty surprises that life has to offer? By our preparedness we will justify his life's work as a father.

At the annual lighting of my furnace, on the very day before cold weather is predicted, Dad shows up early in the morning, refuses my stall of an offer of freshly brewed coffee and asks me, "Where are your matches, your flashlight, and a 9-inch candle?"

Like a nurse assisting in surgery, I pull these items from a drawer next to the room where he'll be working.

Dad smiles. He is a fulfilled father at that moment.

The glow doesn't last.

"When's the last time you oiled these hinges?" The question is accusatory. I shrug and answer him with a question, "Last year? About this time?" I'm not into hinges.

"WD-40," he requests, shaking his head, and I'm off to the kitchen, where, I find my can of WD-40 hiding underneath the sink, camouflaged by a stack of old rags. I leave the door ajar hoping that Dad will spy those old rags--he loves them so.

"I don't supposed you have the straw that comes with it," he says, his voice changing. He is preparing himself to be disappointed. "It helps to aim the lubricant if you have that straw."

Smugly, I fondle the tiny plastic straw, pulling it gently free from the inch of tape I've used to secure it to the can. Our eyes meet, and he nods approvingly. It is a rare moment of pleasing a parent.

For there are too many times when I feel like a disappointment as a daughter not to have exercised more of what I have learned from Dad. Living next door to him, I find it temptingly easy to call him up for favors rather

than do a job myself. I have been listening to his survival lessons for over thirty years now and I can prove it.

Here are a few of dad's tips, just as he told them to me.

*Always open the nozzle of a garden hose again to relieve the pressure after turning off the faucet. The water pressure can build up from a residual drip and burst your hose.

*Carry a jug of water in the car. You never know when you'll break down on the road. A person can live for days without food, but for only seventy-two hours without water.

*There's hardly anything in the world that doesn't work better if you put a little grease on it. It's grease, not love, that makes the world go 'round.

*If you smell escaping gas in a room, open the window immediately and unplug the telephone. A spark from a ringing telephone can set off a gas fire.

In addition to a litany of survival rules, Dad offered this standard advice for gift giving. Prior to Father's Day and Christmas, he always advised, "Honey, when you need to buy a present for a man for his birthday or any other occasion, don't buy him a shirt or a tie. Show him you've got some sense. Go to the hardware store and buy him a big roll of silver duct tape. There's not a man alive who doesn't want a big roll of that."

YOUR CHEATIN' HEART

I can still see a woman I have been taught to call Teet standing by the kitchen window on Saturday mornings pursing her lips. She dabs her forefinger to the tip of a tube of burnt-orange lipstick and traces her mouth. The residue is massaged into high round cheekbones underneath blue cat-shaped eyes.

At the age of ten, I am entranced with watching my grandmother get ready to take me shopping. We head off "like ladies" on foot to downtown Montgomery, down the street Martin Luther King, Jr. will make famous. We window shop a while and go in Belk-Hudson. She makes small talk with sales girls, always introducing me as "Jerry's little girl." My mother explains to me that she doesn't want people to know she is old enough to have a granddaughter.

Each week, my grandmother buys me presents. The gifts are always deliciously female. A kelly green dress that laces up the bodice with a shiny chain. A gold-colored nightgown with billowing sleeves trimmed in thin delicate

lace. Vanity Fair slips. She charges everything, signing my father's name with practiced ease.

After shopping, we have lunch at a downtown bar, where she orders a beer and slips a coin into one of those little juke boxes attached to booths. "That's Hank Williams," she says while she hums, 'Your cheatin heart will make you blue. Your cheatin' heart will tell on you.' That man can sure sing," she tells me. She plays this same record on a player at her house at night when I sleep over. I do not understand why she wants to spend money to hear it again.

Before the food arrives, my grandmother says, "Are you going to tell your daddy that I took a drink?"

"If he asks me," I say.

Her blue eyes flash angrily. The pretty thing she bought me is supposed to be good for my silence. I do not tell her that before I left home that morning, Daddy said that I must tell him if Grandmother has a beer with lunch. They have an agreement that she won't drink one when she is with me.

"Can't you just tell him that we both had a Coke?"

"No." I shake my head. It's all very matter-of-fact to me. I do not understand the tension and tempers that surround this topic. "Daddy knows you drink beer," I add.

Oh, but I have made her very mad.

Sometimes she finishes the beer. Sometimes she makes a big show of not drinking it. If she has the money, we take

a Red taxi back to her apartment. She always knows the driver's name; he always know hers. I see her wave a hand for him to shush when
he attempts to say something. I do not know what kind of secrets this driver and my grandmother have.

I began to understand that Teet had a drinking problem one Saturday when she disappeared from her apartment on Alabama Street. I looked for her. She was not in her apartment anywhere. She wasn't outside by the trash cans or across the street at the Scott St. Grocery. I did not know why I thought to go there, but I found her in a deserted building next door, a six-pack of beer at her feet. She was hunkered over like an animal in hiding. She did not look like herself. Her hair was uncombed. She did not have her lips on. I backed away without speaking.

And then I told my mother.

After that day, we don't go shopping on Saturday anymore. We don't go to her house for Sunday lunch either. No more banana bread. Now, we rarely see her. I hear about her as if she's a distant relative, rather than someone who lives in the same place she always did.

One day I hear that her jaw is broken. She fell. The police find her another night, beaten up, walking around stark naked. They call Daddy.

While he's gone to fetch her, I remember how she looked so alone in the deserted building. Out of the blue, I

recall that she would spend long periods of time in our laundry room folding clothes. Once when I went in, she pushed a glass behind the box of detergent. I didn't pay attention then, but now that hidden glass makes sense.

Maybe I should have said something to her. Something more to Daddy. I feel that in some way I am responsible for how things have turned out.

I hear that Daddy has taken her somewhere to dry out. Some doctor tells my father that she is not an alcoholic. "Just an old-fashioned drunk," the doctor says. "A party girl."

My father is unfamiliar with what all that means. He hates alcohol, hates talking about it, does not allow it in his house. "What difference does it make what name you call it?" he argues. I have never heard him sounding so tired. One more time, he claims he's "given up on her."

When I am twenty-one, I see her weaving past the office where I work. "That's my grandmother," I say to everyone. I am not at all embarrassed that she is drunk because I am so glad to see her.

Grabbing my purse, I hurry outside and offer her a lift home. Without speaking, she gets in my car. I head up Dexter Avenue. I tell her everything about all of us and how we're doing. I want her to notice how ladylike I am, how neatly dressed. At her apartment, I walk with her up to the door and make sure she gets inside without breaking her

jaw. This encounter is my chance to make it up to her somehow. I do not know exactly what I mean by "it," but I am excited to be with her again. I expect to be invited to come inside like always.

I am her granddaughter, the one she loved once upon a time.

In the doorway, she finally speaks. Her speech is slurred. "Thanks, honey. Whoever you are. You been nice." The door is closed in my face. I never get to say good-bye.

This time, I do not tell my parents that she's been drinking.

WORD OF MOUTH

WORD OF MOUTH

My father phoned me early in the morning crying. When I asked what was wrong, he answered, "Nothing. Just checking on you." Then, he asked me to come and see him later.

"I'll be there at my regular time," I promised.

"I love you," he said, and he hung up.

Tears streaming, I decided I could not wait till afternoon coffee to see my sweet Daddy. I dried my eyes, pulled on my jeans, and went down to his house, but he was already gone.

My sister, Patty, was home. "What's wrong with Daddy? I asked.

"Matthew came down here late last night and told us that you were on your back porch crying your heart out. Dad is worried sick about you. Mother made him take her to McDonald's for breakfast to get his mind off you."

"I wasn't crying on the porch last night," I said, stunned. "I went outside to stretch my legs. I did see

Matthew, and he looked like he thought I wanted something, so I waved to him to go on."

"He told us you were shaking and sobbing and having a fit," she said.

"I wasn't having a fit. I've been living a perfectly dry-eyed life until Daddy called me this morning crying and telling me he loved me."

"Your father does love you," Patty assured me. "We all love you. You can tell us anything."

I couldn't tell her anything because there was nothing to tell. Instead, I tried to explain again how the misunderstanding must have been triggered, "I went outside to stretch my legs before going to church, and Matthew saw me. I guess walking around looked like I was having a fit to him, but I wasn't. My eyes are red this morning because when I heard Daddy crying on the phone, I started to cry."

"I hear what you're saying," affirmed this sister, who studies psychology. "Now, what's really troubling you?"

"What's troubling me," I said, growing exasperated, "is I can't go out on my porch without having to explain myself. Will you tell Daddy that I'm all right?"

Patty nodded vaguely.

"You won't be adding your two cents worth of some other explanation?"

She shrugged noncommittally. It was the ambivalent shrug of a therapist. It means: 'I believe everything you say and I believe nothing.'

"Look," I said. "I was not crying out on the porch last night."

"If you say so." She smiled tolerantly and began to sweep the kitchen.

I retreated out the door. "Are you going to tell Daddy what I've said?"

"I shall tell him the truth," she declared, and she closed the door after me.

Later that afternoon, I went to see Daddy to find out what kind of new story he'd been told, and he greeted me with, "There's my little girl. You look beautiful. Are you losing weight?" (This compliment from the man who once told me my legs looked like two tree trunks.)

My mother added her welcome, "Honey, lime green becomes you. Your complexion look so peachy."

Patty said, "She's beautiful inside and outside."

When they didn't think I could hear them, they huddled together and whispered conjectures about what was wrong in my life. I heard them talking, and I wanted to reassure them that I was fine, really, but before I could launch another denial, my sister, Mary Ellen, arrived and declared that my latest story was a jewel, so devastatingly lyrical

it could be poem, and that my hair was looking full and shiny. "Are you losing weight?" she asked.

I saw then that the battle for truth was lost, and in the realization, I grew teary-eyed because though their concern for me was misplaced, it was real.

Since they wouldn't believe otherwise, I confirmed that--sniff, sniff--life was awfully hard, but with my family beside me, I believed everything would work out fine. They heaved a collective sigh of relief, which was followed by a brief sermon from my Patty, our psychologist, who explained that love, concern, trust, and the ability to communicate with each other is what makes us a family.

I agreed.

BORN LOSERS

When film-makers from Hollywood invaded the city next door, my family didn't consider trying out for any of the parts available. We knew we wouldn't win. We come from a family of long-time losers. We don't win sweepstakes, we don't win at cards, and we frequently don't win in love. (The exception to this is home-pregnancy tests, which do usually come out positive.)

"Jinxed," my father says. "Born under an evil star."

"Not necessarily," I argued.

"Just because you always find a parking place in front of Foodworld doesn't meant you're lucky," he sniped at me. "A lot of people find parking places all the time."

I didn't argue with him because parking the car is a sensitive issue with Dad. Three months ago my parents lost a thousand dollars in front of Foodworld. The money was in traveler's checks, but that didn't make the shock of losing such a large sum any easier to bear.

Dad described how it happened: "I knew better than to buy American Express traveler's checks, but that was all our

bank offered. I stood right there at the teller's window in the bank and I said, 'Please, don't sell me any of those checks that Karl Malden talks about. Everyone I see on TV who buys those checks never gets home with them.'"

My folks didn't either. He and mother lost them at Foodworld before they ever made it to the house. The experience put Mother in bed for three days, they cancelled their vacation, and Dad refuses to shop at Foodworld anymore, claiming that whoever found those checks was still buying groceries with his money.

Mother whispers mournfully whenever Dad repeats the story, "If your father could just have found a parking place it never would have happened. You know I never lose money. But him, he circled and he circled and he circled the parking lot trying to find a place to roost. Finally, he got in one of his snits and pulled up in front of the grocery store and just let me get out. I was in such a hurry that the checks must have tumbled out of my purse, and I didn't see it happen."

"It's not your fault," Dad speaks up, absolving her of guilt. "It's mine. I know I was born under an evil star."

No one argues with him.

To some extent, we have all inherited some of Dad's bad luck. Last week, he recommended I go to a new car wash that had just opened. Knowing better than to take his advice, I went anyway. I barely got out of there alive.

When Dad needs to speak to someone on the telephone, he knows now just to hand one of us the phone because he never gets anything but a busy signal. I've been in his presence when the phone has gone dead in his hand, only to come back to life when someone else picks it up.

I do not know what all this bad luck is about, except that we, as a family, know better than to hope for glamour and star dust when Hollywood comes to town or even the town next door.

"Two boys from my class went over to Selma and tried out for that film," my sister said. Mary Ellen teaches English at the local high school. The aspiring actors were her students. "They tried out for the parts of twin brothers. Identical twins, you got that? These boys are not even related, do you follow me?"

We nodded silently, a chorus of blinking, envious unlucky people.

"Did they win the parts?" Dad asked.

She snapped her fingers. "Just like that." The director said they had the look he was after for his remake of Invasion of the Body Snatchers.

"What look was that?" I asked, trying to figure out how to step into the mainstream of good fortune that passes us by daily. She ignored the question, adding, "They're going to play two pod people."

"Are they going to be two people in a pod?"

"No, they're going to have their own pods."

I didn't think that having one's own pod was quite as good as having one's own dressing room, but it was more than any of us ever hoped to have. We know our limitations, we know our luck; other people have it and American Express traveler's checks. We never leave home with either of them.

SWEET DREAMS OF A CRUISE

It was pouring down rain the morning I was scheduled to drive my folks to the airport. They were catching a plane in order to catch a boat--their first cruise. Daylight Savings Time had just kicked in, so it was also still dark.

My dressing time was brief. I drew on a pair of Bon Voyage eyebrows, pulled on a weatherproof parka, grabbed an umbrella, and headed down the short road to my parents' house, where no light shone to indicate that they were even awake. I knocked aggressively, determined that they were not going to miss their plane.

Dad answered the door, his face drawn. Behind him a single light burned softly. "We hate like the devil to drag you out on a morning like this," he apologized, as if there was an emergency happening and not just the beginning of a vacation.

"I love to be up this time of day," I said, waving gaily at the moon over my shoulder. "It makes me feel as if I'm getting a head start on the day. You ready for

adventure on the high seas?" My tone was jolly, too forced. I determined to fix it before he noticed that I was scared of sending my parents off into the world without a protector, that is, me.

He reached for the aspirin bottle in response. Mother accepted another dose and together they sipped Coca Cola. They moved woodenly, mechanically, as if they were two grammar schoolers headed to the first day of school.

"I'll take care of everything while you're gone. Nothing will change. Home will be right here when you get back."

They would be gone four days, which is three days longer than any trip they take by car. They have a hard time staying away from the house. But I am not the one who sent them on this trip. They said they wanted to go, asked me to arrange it; but once I did, they began to sort of blame me somehow for banishing them from the familiar, the comfortable. They were not on the boat yet but they were already homesick.

"Our room will have a bathroom, won't it?" Mother asked again.

"Oh, yes. And, you should have a window."

"A porthole," Daddy corrected me. His eyes glinted for a minute, and I hoped that a spark of enthusiasm was lighting there. The spark faded quickly, as some unspoken fear dampened it out.

"I see you're wearing your new shirt," I observed, though I also noticed that he was not wearing his new navy blue skipper's cap, which I bought him. He was wearing an old baseball cap with the words Coronado Beach Club on the crown. He did not belong to the club, but the cap was bought on the island off San Diego where he had served for a while during his stint in the army. He was wearing it for sentimental reasons. And for courage. Perhaps it made him feel like a soldier, but this wasn't war: it was vacation.

"You ready, Mother?"

"I don't know if I'm going to be able to breathe in this brassiere."

"Take it off," I advised her. "What difference would it make? You'll never see most of those people again."

She ignored me, heading to the bathroom for one last pit stop.

"I better load up the car," Dad said, as I grabbed the bigger suitcase and headed out the front door. "Don't you do that. You'll pull your back out."

By the time he issued his warning, I had the trunk unlocked and his bag installed. Two more awaited me. While Dad fidgeted with an uncooperative umbrella, I loaded the rest of their gear. When I returned for him, he moaned, "I'm just not the man I used to be."

For an incredible moment, I wondered if I were. Was it too late to avoid my fate? Steadily I had grown to take on

more and more of what had once been his (their) responsibilities. I am capable, and I am strong. Very strong for a woman. Motivated by love, I often perform Herculean daughterly tasks to keep my parents moving, moving toward better health, toward more rest, toward optimistic, happier attitudes. The first two are easier to arrange than the latter. I was hoping this cruise would help some. They needed a change, so they said repeatedly, and I agreed.

Doors closed. Seat belts fastened. Mother lit up a cigarette while Dad shifted from left to right to see if he was blocking my view in the mirror. "Your head's okay," I reassured him, nosing the car through the dark and the rain toward an airplane that must first land in Atlanta.

"Are you sure we can find the other plane we have to catch?" My mother asked.

"There is a person waiting just as you exit who will tell you where to go. You'll be fine."

I am not sure if I am telling them the truth. I just had a hard time getting them in the car. I do not know if they can negotiate the airport.

"We didn't eat breakfast. They're going to feed us, aren't they? Your mother made me drink that Coke, and now I'm nauseous."

"They will give you something on the next flight. On this first one, you can get some milk or coffee."

"I'll take milk. Should I tell her as soon as I get on the plane?"

"An attendant will come by to check your seat belt. Tell her or him then," I advised.

"What are you going to do today?" Mother asked me, forcing her voice to be chirpy, alert.

Before I could answer, Dad said, "Promise me you'll just go home and not leave the house the rest of the day. This kind of weather is tailor-made for accidents."

"I don't really have anything to do that will make me go out again," I confessed. I was not promising anything, but it sounded like it: I have become schooled in evasive answering.

"I bet you're going to go home and make a whole pot of coffee and watched Bewitched," Mother predicted. Her tone changed from forced perkiness to forlorn wistfulness.

I have not watched Bewitched in years. She is speaking for herself--what she does each morning.

How can I help them to relax and enjoy themselves?

I recall what the travel agent told me, and I repeat it to them. "Sharon says that if you don't have a good time, it's because you have stayed in your room and watched movies the whole trip."

"You mean there's TV on board?" Mother asked, incredulous.

"Once we go on this cruise, we don't ever have to take another one," Dad announced.

"Why did you want to go on this one? You sound like you're being tortured," I snapped.

"Your mother and I have always dreamed of going on a cruise, and we decided now was the time to do it, or else."

"Or else you'd be home watching Bewitched and drinking coffee?"

"Not me. I'm going to have a glass of milk. Your mother made me drink a Coke, and it has upset my stomach."

At the airport, I looked around for a machine that sells milk, but there isn't one. I am afraid that this first short flight will not have milk, but I push this concern away by helping my folks redo their name tags, which they have done wrong. The ticket processor helped, his eyes never meeting mine.

I accompany my parents to the gate where their plane is waiting. Dad and I sat down to wait for the boarding to begin. Mother headed to the smoking lounge. Nervously, she lit one cigarette after another. She is not adjusted to the idea of non-smoking flights.

Dad complained about his stomach. He fretted that Mother was taking too long. He asked me if he should fetch her. I attempted to soothe him, "We can see her from here. Look. She's all right."

Mother returned and smiled brightly. I smiled a reflected version of this false cheer. The attendant called for the first boarders, and I escorted my parents to the plane. Finally, boarding passes in hand, my parents filed away like children on a drill.

I walked away and did not look back. At home, I called my sister to tell her that our parents were on their way to the Bahamas.

She moaned. "I can't stand it. Do you think they'll be all right?"

"I guess. Someone is supposed to tell them where to go and what to do the whole time. How could they get lost?" I repeated what Sharon said about why they might not have a good time.

Three days later my parents returned. They were late. They missed their flight, but Delta had put them on the next one home.

They explained that they split up to go to the bathroom in Atlanta and got lost coming out. "That lady didn't give us good directions, or we didn't hear them very well. Your mother got kind of upset. She started to cry, but I bought her a Sara Lee coffee roll and a carton of milk, and she got all right."

"I told him to call you to come and get us. It's not like Atlanta's in the middle of nowhere."

"I'd have been right there," I promised her. "It just two hours from here." (It's three hours, and I do not know why I instinctively lied.)

"We only had to wait an hour."

"I am never going on a plane that goes through Atlanta again. We went down a long escalator, and then we rode around on a train for a long time looking for a concourse. What is a concourse? Ended up where we started."

I ask about the food.

"They had anything you could want to eat. You could order anything on the menu, and double-portions if you were that hungry. I ordered double strawberry shortcake."

Mother interrupted. "The meat was tender. I had a piece of tenderloin that was this high. It looked small, but by the time you cut it up and chewed piece after piece, it was much bigger. And, we gambled. Your Daddy won twenty-five, maybe thirty dollars on the slot machines with one quarter."

"We watched other people play blackjack. You ought to see how fast those dealers' hands move. Shoot, they were so fast that they actually changed dealers on us, and we didn't see it happen."

"That is fast," I agreed. "What did you think of the barbecue on the island and the prices of the in-port shopping?"

"We didn't do any of that. We never got off the ship," Mother explained. "We were afraid we wouldn't be able to get back on it."

"They had some boats traveling back and forth, but we didn't want to risk getting lost."

"Or sunburned."

"We watched the people coming back, and they looked ruined."

"You never got off the boat?"

"Wasn't any need to. They had anything you could possibly want right there on it."

"Every time we left the cabin a steward came in and emptied the trash can and put out fresh ice. You could pick up the phone day or night and order a pot of coffee. Before you had the phone down good the man was there knocking on the door, and you never had to tip him."

"After dinner you'd go back to your room and there'd be a chocolate mint on the pillow and a card that read, 'Sweet Dreams.' That was some of the best chocolate I ever put in my mouth."

"And the movies on TV were all the Oscar nominees. Every time I turned on the set I saw Al Pacino. You know that movie where he played a blind man."

"How was it?"

"I don't know. I never saw the whole movie all the way through."

"It's because we had a window in the room. It was big, like a picture window. You could almost reach out and touch the water. It was pretty. In the Bahamas, the water is real blue."

For a moment I envisioned the Bahamas. The water. The different possible adventures. The romantic descriptions in the brochure the travel agent sent us when my parents began to consider the trip.

"The weak part of the trip was coming home. That's when we weren't sure what we were doing."

"It wore us out. We had to find our bags, and they weren't in the same place. We put them on one bus, and we got on another bus. We weren't sure our bags were headed home."

"And, then we missed the plane. You mother got upset until I bought her a Sara Lee coffee roll and a carton of milk." Dad leaned over and told me softly, "She was getting ready to cry."

"I would have come and gotten you," I told him one more time.

"No need to. The airline put us on the next plane. We wouldn't have gotten held up if the lady had given us good directions. Or we didn't hear them right."

"Did your stomach straighten out?"

"It never got real bad, but it never got better either. There was a cafeteria on that ship where you could eat all

you wanted night and day. I went there the last day and got two take-out breakfasts, but your mother wouldn't eat any so I ate it all."

When Dad left the room, Mother confided, "Your father wandered around in the airport for twenty minutes, and I couldn't find him and he couldn't find me. That's why I was about to cry. We didn't get off the ship because we weren't sure we would be able to find out way back on."

"That's okay." I told her. "You enjoyed yourself, didn't you?"

She wouldn't look at me directly. "Every time we left the room someone came in and emptied the trash and put out fresh ice. At night there was a piece of candy on the bed and a card that read, 'Sweet Dreams.' It was funny having someone do that."

THE SUNDAYS OF SUMMER

"We don't know what's got into her, Tommy. She's been shoveling dirt to fill in the potholes in the road and picking up sticks in the woods."

"Baby," My uncle said, turning to me. "That's something men are supposed to do."

"Yes, sir," I agreed. "And, if I could find one to do it better than I do and as cheaply, I'd turn the work over to him."

They all nodded approvingly. I had not lost my mind yet. I smiled my good niece, sensible daughter smile and began to unload my cart load of sticks while they said their good-byes. My uncle had driven out for an afternoon of Sunday visiting, and now he was leaving.

After he drove off, Mother said, "We've still got some coffee inside."

"Wouldn't mind a cup," I admitted.

"Don't you snap off your fingernails doing that kind of work?" My mother asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Broke them all off right down to the quick. Can't have fingernails and do any real work."

"How much longer you figure on working the woods and fixing the road?" Dad inquired.

"Let's see," I calculated aloud. "I've lost nineteen pounds and I want to shed another eleven. At five pounds a month, I figure two more months.

"That's all right then, as long as you've got a good reason to be out in the heat," my father approved.

We go inside where the fragrance of brewed coffee commingles with the lingering aroma of my uncle's signature scent, Old Spice cologne. Quite suddenly, I miss him--I wish I'd come inside before he left. My mother pours the coffee; her spoon hovers nostalgically near the sugar bowl. She knows I'm dieting, but she thinks it's a sin to drink coffee black. She asks, "How about a good old heaping spoonful of sugar?"

"Thanks, I could use the energy," I say.

Happily, she adds sugar (I am forgiven the abuse of my fingernails), stirs vigorously, and brings my cup to me.

"You've done some fine work out there," Dad commends.

"It feels good," I confess. "Makes my muscles feel solid. What have you been doing?" I say, and I slurp. (I come from a family of slurpers.)

"You know us, we stay pretty busy. Been talking with Tommy all afternoon. Have you seen your sister?"

"Not since yesterday. Probably see her in a few minutes checking on her fruit trees."

"I think she just planted those trees so she would have an excuse to be outside," my mother says innocently. She knows that my picking up sticks and filling in potholes is not a weight loss plan but, like my sister's fruit trees, just my reason to be outside on a summer day.

I do not mind that Mother sees through me; she often understands me. I slurp her sweet coffee in gratitude.

"You gonna work some more today?" Dad asks.

"Not this evening. Gonna head home. Got a book I want to finish reading this evening."

"Always in a hurry," he chides.

"Learned my bad habits from you, Dad," I tease, kissing the top of his head.

I take my cup to the sink, and pivot slowly, taking pleasure in the late afternoon sunlight as it falls in through the panel of kitchen windows. My parents glow in it. It falls upon their lovely, homegrown faces. Their hands rest together on the
tabletop. Like the hospitality of a summer day, my parents' shadows cast upon the wall appear larger than life--welcoming and long lasting.

"Thanks for the coffee. When you cook some pinto beans, let me know, will you?"

"Might have to call you on the telephone."

"I don't mind," I promise.

I head down the dirt road. Mary Ellen is sitting in her swing and she calls, "You want a cup?"

"Why not."

When she returns, we sit and slurp together. She taps the ground with her foot, establishing a gentle rhythm in the swing.

"Time sure goes by fast, doesn't it?"

"Sure does," I agree. "We better stop and enjoy it before we wake up dead."

She murmurs something inaudible. The sky gets pink, then grey. We swing together in silence as the summer day ends.

IN TWO SHAKES OF A LAMB'S TAIL

It was rib-eye steak night at my sister Mary Ellen's house, and I could tell before the Worstershire sauce ever made it to me that Mama had something on her mind.

Finally, right after the baked potatoes had been passed out and the butter and sour cream were making the rounds, Mother cupped her hands formally in front of her as if to ask the blessing; but instead, she accused one of her daughters of being a bowl thief.

"I hate to have to say this, I really do," she began, sweeping our faces with that penetrating brown-eyed gaze, "but I have a deluxe Rubbermaid serving bowl with a snaplock lid, and I can't find it anywhere."

Daddy interrupted Mother. "There'll be no questions asked," he assured us. "I'm sure one of you just borrowed the bowl and forgot to tell your mother. But, she's going on a trip with her girlfriends next week, and she needs her bowl."

"They know I'm responsible for bringing the spinach dip," Mother said, and her tone was less prayerful.

This offense committed against her was more than a simple theft. Her honor as the spinach dip queen was in question if she didn't have the perfect bowl to carry it in, and the fact that one of her own children would put her in such jeopardy was on par in her mind with what King Lear's two viperish girls did to their parent.

The room fell silent as we supposedly contemplated our consciences, but this awkward silence was soon broken by my nephew, Matthew, who obviously sympathized with mother's plight but did not understand the implications inherent in the alleged crime. He only knew that someone else had lost something, and he had, too.

"Talk about things disappearing," Matthew said. "I cannot find my sheep's tail. I've looked all over the yard for it."

(Matthew belongs to the Future Farmers of America and is raising a sheep as a project.)

"I thought you wanted your sheep's tail to fall off," Dad remarked. "What was it I heard about your putting that special

rubber band on it to cut off the circulation so that it would fall off?"

Matthew nodded yes vigorously. "That's right. I did that. You remember."

He is young and does not yet understand that remembering something before it disappeared is not the same

thing as coming up with a clue that will aid in finding it again.

I felt sorry for him, so I added a two-cent memory. "I saw your sheep and his tail a few days ago. That tail was hanging straight down the back of your animal, and it didn't sway one iota. It looked like a dead tail to me."

"The tail is supposed to die and fall off. And it should be out in the backyard, but I can't find it."

"Your sheep probably buried his tail. You'll never find it," Mother said, impatiently dismissing Matt's problem. She was intent on solving her own. "What I want to know is, where is my bowl?"

None of us would look Mother in the eye when she asked that question. I don't know why my sisters couldn't face her, but I could not look at Mother because my biscuit-making bowl has been missing for a long time, and I figure she might have taken it.

I'm loathe to accuse her or any of my sisters of being a dish thief, because I was raised to believe that stealing a woman's bowl is akin to borrowing her last pair of designer panty hose or using her lipstick that she has just managed to make match the shape of her lips.

"I just think it's curious that one day I have something and the next day I don't," Mother summed up bitterly.

At last, she picked up her steak knife and began to saw through her piece of meat. It was cold, and the cutting was tough work. Determined, she kept at it. By then, none of us had much of an appetite, and we fiddled with our salads.

Something in Mother's tone triggered a gallant impulse in Dad, who stopped altogether being our protective father, and once again assumed his position as Mother's hero.

"This reminds me of those days when you girls still lived at home, and I could never find my scissors or my scotch tape or glue. When I asked any of you where something was no one had
ever seen it." Just remembering the good old days made Dad bitter. "Those things didn't just walk off by themselves.

"There is another solution to the mystery of things disappearing." I offered my explanation tentatively. It was a theory I had been cogitating on for some time, and I was ready to try it out. "Is it possible that one of us has multiple personality disorder?"

They didn't know what I meant at first, so I offered a synopsis of the book I'd been reading that was making a big impression on me because it fit so many inexplicable circumstances of my life.

I explained. "In Mary Higgins Clark's newest mystery, the main character gets kidnapped as a little girl and is abused and because the stress is so awful, her personality splits off into different people, and later in life one of

those split parts of her gets accused of murdering her English teacher, and her own sister thinks she could have done it, and the poor girl can't defend herself because she has no conscious memory of what the other personalities do."

"I thought when you outgrew Nancy Drew we wouldn't have to listen to any more stories at the dinner table," my oldest sister, Mary Ellen, complained.

"None of you girls was ever kidnapped," Mother interjected, sounding regretful. "Furthermore, none of my girls would dare to have multiple personalities."

"The only reason I bring it up is that the other day I was trying to get my income tax information together, and I went to find my record of contributions to the church where I knew I put it, and it was gone."

"That happens to me every year," Dad said. "I call myself putting everything in the same place, but when I go to look for my receipts, they're not all there."

"I don't guess it's likely that two people in one family would have multiple personality disorder," I conceded. "There must be another explanation." Still, I studied my sisters to see if I could tell whether they were hiding some other kinds of mischievous, secret women behind their eyes. Reading my mind, they faced me unashamed, unafraid of what I might see. Actually, I was the first to look away; and when I did, Matthew said, nodding at me, "There's your bowl thief right there."

"I did not take anybody's bowl," I denied, shocked by my nephew's accusation. "I have my own bowls. I own two Rubbermaid bowls myself with matching lids."

"What color?" Mother asked softly. Her brown-eyed gaze pierced me.

"What color was yours?" I asked, drawing back. I knew what her question implied.

"You first," she ordered.

"One is red, and one is yellow."

She chewed a bite slowly and then told me, "My bowl is yellow. When did you buy your so-called yellow bowl?"

I had no memory of making the purchase, and I could not explain why I would have bought two bowls of different colors.

The silence was unbearable. I broke it. "The yellow Rubbermaid bowl is mine, but you are welcome to it."

"I guess I am," she said, settling back.

"See there," Daddy said. "I told you we'd find your bowl."

I could feel some inner part of my personality attempting to split off as I was falsely accused of a crime I had not committed. My own mother was stealing my bowl, and my father was backing her up. Suddenly, I understood why Hamlet, whose mother had helped to rob him of throne, became famous for his haunting mantra, "To be or not to be....." The poor boy was probably on the verge of

splitting off into any number of other people when Shakespeare killed him off.

While my family drifted into a lighter, casual conversation, I, abused, maligned, robbed of my bowl, took the higher road of martyred silence and, holding tightly onto my identity by keeping a firm grip on my knife and fork, resolved to finish my dinner nobly, heroically, as if I had nothing to hide.

This course of action was not easy, considering the intense, accusing, as yet unasked questions about a missing sheep tail still lurking in my nephew's eyes.

CAUSES OF EFFECTS

No one announced when I walked in the door last Saturday night that there was trouble. I found that out for myself. My fingertips grazed the bottom of the ice maker's bucket, and I felt a good inch of standing water. I closed the freezer door and sat down, pretending that I didn't want anything cold to drink after all.

My actions did not go unobserved. My Aunt Phyllis, who had just arrived from Pennsylvania, confirmed what I had already deduced, "The refrigerator is broken, but no one will say it out loud yet."

I was not surprised. Sometimes, when an ill tide turns our way, my family goes collectively mute. I watched for some sign from my mother that she was aware the appliance on her left was not working, but she was preoccupied with counting pork chops.

"I'm not here to eat," I reassured her.

She heard that. "You could eat a little something."

"No, ma'am. You go ahead and have your dinner."

The diners fixed plates and drank glasses of tap water. No one mentioned the lack of ice. It was only after Dad had gotten his strength back from the pork chop and lima beans that he was able to ask me, "Do you think too many people have been opening the ice box? Could that be the reason it isn't chilling properly?"

I responded truthfully in an even tone, "Oh, I think it's something more, because there is water standing in the freezer."

Then, in a whisper loud enough to be overheard, Dad reported to me that he believed someone had fooled around with the temperature knob inside. His unspoken question lingered in the air. Logic told him that before our visiting aunt arrived the fridge was working; now that she was here, it was broken.

Was there a connection? Had Aunt Phyl fiddled with the knob or simply jinxed us by coming for a visit? As Dad struggled to define the problem, my aunt heard Dad's question and considered silently the implications.

After a moment's pause, Phyl announced solemnly, "I do not touch other people's knobs."

Her brief speech stirred me to say the words no one wanted to hear. "The refrigerator is broken, and it is not going to fix itself."

It took my saying that aloud before Daddy could actually face the truth, but there is a proper pacing to

solving a problem and grieving that there is a work to be done is a natural first step. He demonstrated that he was finally ready to take on the burden of solving the problem now by asking everyone to leave the room.

Of course, no one left the room except Phyllis, because she does not know that we never leave the room when Daddy asks us to. We just get still. Then, while we were pretending to be invisible, Dad went to the garage and got his portable air compressor and plugged it into the kitchen outlet.

Right away, the air compressor blew out a fuse, but no one complained. That cause and effect was understandable. Indeed, fixing the fuse inspired confidence, for it proved to us once again that we could diagnose trouble and correct it. Hope grew in us while we sat still and quiet, as if sitting in the dark was the same thing as making progress.

The power back on, I switched Dad's plug to another outlet, while he removed the grill from the front of the fridge.

When I saw what he was up to, I rose and got the vacuum cleaner. We worked without talking, without discussion, trusting the other's instincts.

While Dad aimed the nozzle and blew all kinds of stuff out from under the ice box, I sucked up the flying debris with the vacuum cleaner. As I worked, I did wonder how what

we were doing could fix the refrigerator, but I have learned through the years to be content to work on faith.

Reading my mind, Dad explained, "I saw someone else blow dirt out from under his broken refrigerator once, and it fixed his ice box."

Mother spoke up, as if she and Daddy had actually discussed this remedy, and I knew they had not. No one had even mentioned that the fridge was not working until I arrived. "Your Daddy would have blown it out earlier today, but the vacuum cleaner bag needed replacing." Mother can explain Dad's behavior when he cannot explain himself. This remark was one of those occasions.

"Don't worry. I can change the bag," I said. Swiftly, I removed the lid and the overfull bag with the ease of a grease monkey changing a flat tire.

When it was obvious that I was finished, Dad knelt down beside me and said, "Let me help you."

"Already done," I said, slapping the hood back on the belly of the cleaner.

"You're fast," he said, but what he meant was, 'I can't change the bag without causing some other kind of trouble, and so I waited for you.'

"How's the ice box? Any cool air blowing yet?" I asked, shrugging off his praise.

Before he could answer, Mother interrupted excitedly, "Look. Here's my missing domino. I've looked all over the

kitchen for this double-six. I haven't been able to play dominoes in weeks."

We had all been a witness to the evaporation of this dotted bone, and though a half dozen of us scoured this room on hands and knees, we had not been able to make it reappear.

The loss of it had been confusing. We had been unable to understand why something so undeniably concrete that had just been present among us could so fluidly slip away. We all felt the same way about the refrigerator. No one believed that it was really broken--there was just something amiss. Such are the nature of problems. Mother did not go out and buy a new domino set, knowing that the missing piece would reappear in time. No one called the repairman, because collectively, mutely, the members of the clan believed that there was some ritual to perform that would trigger the reappearance of ice.

It was that moment when the domino reappeared that I knew that the refrigerator was fixed. Though I could not explain how blowing out dirt from under the ice box would have anything to do with making it chill again, I knew that the weekend had been saved and that my aunt's reputation as a jinx would be minimized. For, as I assembled the equation in my mind, although trouble had arrived with her, it did not stay.

Mother hurriedly stashed that lucky game piece in her special wooden box, and Daddy the air compressor. On his way out the door, he issued his instructions: "Now, if you will all keep your hands off that ice box door and give the water a chance to freeze, we'll have ice soon."

The room came to life as order took the place of chaos. Phyllis joined the circle of our clan at the table to listen to stories of how other challenges had been met successfully and how we learn how to face trouble in ways that are not immediately recognizable.

Dad returned to find us waiting, and while we waited for the refrigerator to come to life he told the story of when he was a little boy and was dared to pull a dead crocodile out of a pond with a long-handled rake. "Only the crocodile just looked dead! The second I slipped that noose around his neck, he came to life," he explained.

When I got the chance, I asked my father if the men who had given him the rake and asked him to pull out the crocodile had promised him a reward for retrieving the carcass or a share of the profits from the sale of the valuable skin. He confessed to me that he had not thought that far ahead when he was offered the challenge. He said that he had done it for the adventure of seeing a crocodile up close. His reward had been experience alone: the lesson he had learned was that appearances could be deceiving.

I considered for a moment the many ways that we gain experience and the inherent deceptions of its appearance. The lessons of it are stored away in memories, often seem only incidentally linked to solutions to previous problems, are vaguely associated with people or places whose names we can't remember. The details of the original experience are out-of-sequence, almost forgotten--some emotion it produced forges up into the present to move us to act. This response is evoked in us by some internal catalyst, and then, without really knowing what we are doing or why, our bodies often go to work before our minds can create a system of logic to explain what we are doing. When we finally face the reality of a problem to be solved, we move forward as if feeling our way along a path blindfolded and almost automatically repeat motions like blowing out dirt from under an ice box because somebody else did it once.

"What did you do when you realized you had a handful of live crocodile?" I asked politely, finally pouring myself a glass of hot Coca-Cola and taking a long swallow. I was surprised: It tasted pretty good hot.

"What would you have done?" he asked, turning the question on me.

I didn't answer him. Words would have been redundant, as they so often are when a question arises that requires action for its solution. Everyone in the room knew the

instinctive response to holding a rake attached to a live crocodile.

The hum of the working refrigerator filled the vacuum of our silence and lent its simple meaning to the tale.

WELCOME TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD

WELCOME TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD

In Montgomery, Alabama, we have a railroad and a river, but neither one divides the city into easily identifiable sections called the right side and the wrong side of town.

This Southern city has always accommodated a variety of neighborhoods. Houses were separated by natural landmarks: a row of azalea bushes or two dogwood trees. Nothing so impregnable as concrete walls.

Residents knew the shortcuts, too. Worn paths linked every home on a block with an intricate maze of crossways that were not maintained by city workers but by the very people who used them: children running barefoot.

Yards were well-kept, landscaped or decorated. Some people opted for flashy pink flamingos. A house on Haardt Drive boasted two stone white lions. Mrs. Green had a legendary hole of quicksand in her back yard. Amy Livingston lost one of her tennis shoes back there, or at least that's the story she told her best friend at the time.

Only one family had a swimming pool, which was shared by the neighborhood, and there was no such thing as skinny

dipping in it. Dr. Welch, the neighborhood dentist, behaved scandalously by giving out caramels at Halloween. And the Farrior boy, a teenage heartthrob, was memorably kind about giving a small, solitary girl a solid push in her rope swing on his way to school.

I remember Pete.

The lives of Southern neighbors were as naturally intertwined as honeysuckle growing up through a bed of ivy. And the community of a neighborhood could extend its boundaries of welcome to strangers--odd birds who roamed the streets selling their wares from door to door. In our neighborhood, there was a little hunchbacked Avon lady and a blind Fuller Brush salesman, the father of one of my girlfriends at school. The Cat Woman lived unmolested with her brood of felines just four blocks from Governor Wallace. People growing up in Southern neighborhoods were accustomed to living with these characters, who could easily star in a Flannery O'Conner short story or a tale told by William Faulkner.

Homegrown Southerners, while recognizable, are a difficult lot to pigeonhole. We are not necessarily moneyed people, barn burners, or even all born-again Christians. We do know quicksand when we see it--and when we don't. We also know how a neighborhood differs from the newest concept in residential development: the planned community.

These cities within a city are rising up across the nation with fenced-in, prefabricated personalities and are dubbed such marketable names as Halcyon, Bellwood, and Arrowhead. In the South, specialty shopping centers complement these communities and have romantic names like Zelda Place and Twin Oaks. Peripheral streets are dubbed Fitzgerald and Gatsby Road.

The better schools are built near or within these communities. The homeowners were targeted and seduced by a network of financiers: real estate syndicates that specialize in creating communities for people whose educations and pocketbooks fit the preferred resident profile. One major syndicate head explained the concept that shapes these communities: "We don't build and sell homes anymore. We create and market lifestyles."

One must question whether the well-constructed personalities assigned by marketing executives to planned communities can be lived as a lifestyle. It is a simple matter to name a newly-created street Old Maple Road and then plant some maple trees on it, but this act does not create a tradition. It only evokes atmosphere.

The self-defined creators and marketers of planned communities are mistaking image for substance--lifestyle for living. That doesn't mean that the product is fatally flawed, but there are some obvious aspects of a syndicate's "planning" that can be regarded as less than halcyonic.

Driving through a planned community, one might first encounter a guard's house. The guard has been instructed to keep out stray people like the occasional Avon lady or the Fuller Brush salesman.

The houses are harmoniously laid out on narrow lots and painted complementary colors and shingled in matching roof tones to offset the close proximity of each family dwelling. What might have been a garden is now a rock bed, which requires no maintenance. Front yards consist largely of circular driveways. Privacy fences are uniform wooden slats and are much less colorful than old-fashioned rows of azalea bushes.

Whatever planned communities become around the nation, they are, by their intention and appearance, mocking the nature and heritage of our neighborhoods and the traditions sung as Southern. They are ensconced behind inhospitable concrete walls as well as the controlling walls of economics, both of which will keep the unattractive odd bird outside, forced to search for and ring more hospitable door bells.

Teenage boys and old black men lugging lawn mowers in hopes of making an extra dollar mowing a neighbor's grass will not dare to approach these foreign thresholds. Footpaths won't develop because the grounds must be protected for possible resale value later.

In a planned community, no young man like Pete Farrior will be able to pay any memorable kindness to a little girl spinning aimlessly in a rope swing hung from a tree in an open field because there are no open fields in planned communities.

Within the boundaries of a planned community, Amy Livingston would never dare suggest that Mrs. Green had quicksand in her back yard.

Great white stone lions would be redundant.

AT HOME IN THE WOODS

"There's a man running through the woods, and the police are chasing him. I'm not sure what he did. But anyway, lock your door."

I hung up the telephone and went outside to warn my sister, who was feeding the cow. I didn't have time to tell her anything. She screamed, threw down the bucket of feed, and ran headlong toward her front door calling for her son, Matthew. I watched as a man dressed in plainclothes ran full-speed through her backyard.

The horses in the next pasture started galloping as he neared them, and I looked around for some kind of weapon to defend us all.

"Are you the police?" My roommate called out to the running stranger. The man holding a walkie-talkie stopped at a barbed wire fence that lined the ditch, which separated our field from the two-street subdivision in front of us. He was speaking into his device as if telling secrets. He nodded curtly, yes, Jack Webb-fashion.

My roommate turned, her hands positioned aggressively on her hips. "He says he's the police."

"Yeah, Daddy just called to say that the cops were hunting for somebody."

By this time, my nephew was near the plainclothes cop, and my sister was standing poised by the front door. She had already gone inside to call Daddy, who was coming down with his gun, in case this was the bad guy in our back yard and not the good guy.

I stood there for a minute wondering how the police could be actively chasing criminals through my back field, a place I had chosen because it was quiet, set off by a creek running behind us and a ditch in front. As it turned out, those two selling points for me were also selling points for criminals, who used them as thoroughfares for robbing houses, drug selling, and just sitting down by the water sipping beer and whittling. I found a chair and the wood shavings not long ago.

"What did he do? This guy you're chasing?" I asked.

The policeman didn't have time to answer me. He was speaking into the microphone, and I saw through the space between the houses that a patrol car was pacing itself according to this cop's directions. "We've got him cornered," he bragged.

My friend raised her eyebrows. Last year, a suspected murderer ran through these woods and hid out in a dog house

for three days before the police finally flushed him out. This guy might secret himself away just as easily. The backyards of the houses in front of me are decorated hidey-holes, including wrecked cars, sheds, storage buildings, freestanding garages, woodpiles, hen houses, peacock cages, and other assorted animal pens.

My nephew asked, "What did this guy do?"

The policeman answered, more out of politeness than because he felt he owed a citizen an explanation. After all, he was using our ditch, our creek. "We don't know what he did. We were patrolling the area and when this guy saw the patrol car, he took off running lickety-split."

"So you chased him?"

The policeman nodded.

"What did he look like?"

"About six-one. Black guy wearing a blue-checked shirt. He was just a couple of minutes ahead of me. He crossed right here," he said, indicating a place where the barbed wired was pulled apart.

Matthew turned and repeated the description of the suspect to the rest of us. We had all been out in the back yard for the past half hour, but none of us had seen a man on the run.

And suddenly the chase lost interest for me. I walked over to my sister and sat down. "Just some guy that took

off running. Could be just some black guy who's afraid of the cops. He might not be guilty of anything."

"He probably did something though. Why else would he be hanging out near the creek?"

"We need to do something about that creek." That is my litany of self-defense.

Saying those words is the only action I ever take. I look about me in wonder that crime is a problem for us. Migrating birds stop here to feed. We are a haven for the blue birds. Squirrels outnumber all other wildlife, even though a local man slips over with a BB gun every now and again to shoot himself one for supper.

The sound of a gun going off in this town isn't unusual at all. Not long ago, I even heard a machine gun. I called the police and reported it and was told, "Oh, that's just that old so-and-so who lives on your corner. He called us this morning to tell us he was going to shoot it a while. He just got his gun
out of the shop. Let him fire it a few more times. It'll be over soon."

The cop was right. I haven't heard the machine gun since. At least not out loud. My memory plays the sound of it over again occasionally, as if to say, "One of your neighbors owns a machine gun." The mental tapes I play have other messages of alarm. "Criminals run through your backyard. Here come the police again."

I'm told that private planes land about twenty miles from here dropping drugs. I believe it, though when I look around me it's not easy to imagine it.
Police guilty enough to scare the innocent into taking flight.

Two patrol cars ease down our drive now. They stop and talk to my father, who lives in the first house on our 14-acre section of property. They head toward me.

I step over and check inside my car to see if the suspect is hiding there. I check my storage room. I don't want to be accused of aiding and abetting.

"Ma'am," one of them calls to me.

I pivot slowly, not eager to talk to the police. No smile of greeting comes to my face. I adopt that wooden look of suspicion one so often sees on the 6 O'Clock News when the
neighbors of the victim are third-degreed for details of a death, an explosion, a burglary.

"Have you seen anything....?" he begins his inquisition in that neutral tone.

I was expecting just those words, but still they startled me. Incongruously, because it felt to me that I had seen something, I shake my head no.

THE EGG HUNT AND I

The day before Easter about fifty or more small children from my church and neighborhood gather at my house for the annual Easter egg hunt. This annual hunt is a collective enterprise. A committee of women fill the plastic eggs and deliver them early. Then, my best friend, Guin, and I hide them.

We are token hostesses, supplying the acres of hiding places, and, more important still, a house with three bathrooms. Mothers and fathers alike roam about, stopping to sit on knolls and beneath trees. Widows and single men, who are bored on that particular Saturday come too. Everyone is welcome.

I stand by the back door and direct the steady stream of traffic to the bathrooms, hold out trash bags for the empty Kool-aid cups, and go after the ointment when some child has gotten into an ant bed. Occasionally, I collect some tired mother's baby who is too small to participate in the hunt, and I wander around with this napping bundle drooling upon my shoulder.

When I sit down, another child or two comes over and rests against my arm and tells me some secret that I'm not allowed to tell another living human being, or, most especially, his or her mother. I become for a while some kind of priest to certain children who feel a need to confess their innermost thoughts. Their confessions vary. Sometimes they tell me that they have slipped out late after bedtime and been playing with some child next door at midnight or that their mother or father forgot to pick them up at a ball practice. There isn't much to be said. Sometimes their words to me feel no stronger than the faint spring breeze that never fails to come the day before Easter. My replies are usually kisses imparted so softly that the child can barely discern the movement of my lips in that baby-fine hair.

We rock, we swing, we talk, we sip red Kool-aid, we collect the eggs again and again comparing, candy hauls. The notion of time speeding by goes on holiday. I take my own basket around and slip extra sugar eggs into the baskets of children who didn't find anything. These same children are the ones who do not find very many eggs year after year.

Toward the end of the two hours of playing in the sun, Bubba and Rachel Jones show up late and wonder how they could have gotten the time wrong again. Bubba asks Guin if she finds many eggs after the hunt while she's mowing the lawn, and she says, "All year long." This remark strikes us

all as very funny each year, and we laugh, looking off across the field.

When the hunt is finally over, everyone cleans up and more hugs and kisses follow. Becky, the chairperson of the hunt, will ask if we can meet again same time next year, and Guin and I nod yes. We never even discuss it; we both just say yes.

Usually, the last person to leave is the preacher, who sometimes salutes Guin or kisses the side of my face the way I kiss the heads of little children. It is at that moment that I always recall the only Easter egg hunt I went to that wasn't staged at my grandmother's house. When I was nine, my Sunday School teacher invited six of her students over to her backyard where there were not only eggs hidden about but a stuffed bunny, a chocolate bunny, and a golden egg with a dollar bill inside.

I didn't find anything that day, but I watched those children who did. What did they have that I didn't have? And why did one lucky girl find all three big prizes? I thought that day that the Easter egg hunt was an omen for my life. I went home with an empty basket, believing that I was going to be one of those unlucky people, who for the rest of her life, would never know the thrill of discovering any hidden treasures. Year after year, on the Saturday before Easter at two o'clock in the afternoon, I rediscover that I was wrong.

LUNCH AT THE MAJESTIC 5-0

When The Ponderosa Club burned down on Main Street, my friend and I joked that we had missed our chance to go ballroom dancing. That's what the sign out front would blink on Saturday nights: Ballroom Dancing Inside.

It was an incongruous invitation. The building was small, windowless, rectangular in shape, and built of recycled cinder blocks painted white. The sight of it did not invite dancing. That would have to be a pretty small ballroom, I thought, and hot and sweaty inside.

There was never a real chance that I would ever stop at the Ponderosa. I considered it off limits to me because it appeared to be what I was raised to call "a joint." Not a place for a woman self-conscious about acting like a lady or just someone who had enough sense to stay out of a place that might suddenly burn down.

But as I passed it Saturday after Saturday, I would think of the music playing inside, and I would imagine what I might be missing. Almost immediately, I began to sweat, and ladies don't sweat. They don't go to joints either. I

never stopped at the Ponderosa, and when the club did burn down one night, I simply turned my curiosity toward the entertainment possibilities offered just across the street at Nasty Feet's. This other joint provided recreation to what is considered the black part of town, but it didn't last long either. Nasty Feet's dissolved, and before I really knew what was happening, the Majestic 5-O appeared.

The new restaurant became itself slowly, evolving across the street from the remains of a ballroom dance floor I never danced upon--never saw except in my mind. It, too, is a modest establishment of red brick, but it has windows. There is a big chimney, and smoke from a barbecue pit issues forth from it. The aroma is tantalizing, as is the sign out front, which boasts: Hamburgers & Trimmings, $2.

Now, that $2 hamburger attracts me much more than the invitation to dance ever did, because there are no sit-down restaurants here in my town. We have quick-stop stores that serve burned coffee and hot dogs that have rotated on a trembling spit since the earth was made that first week. I've no appetite for any of that.

All I really want is that hamburger. But I don't stop. It seems to me that I don't even have the choice, and I'm not exactly sure why.

Maybe because as a single woman I still get uncomfortable going inside restaurants alone. Another reason: The Majestic, like the Ponderosa and Nasty Feet's,

is also described by my friends as a joint. One side of it is a lounge where a band plays on the weekends, and I believe they serve alcohol. My grandmother was a drunk, and I don't like to be around people who drink.

This irrational response aside, why can't I stop on a week day for lunch? I have a reason for pondering this question. I gave a lady a lift one time to a part of town considered black, and when I got outside to visit with her kinfolk a while, the police showed up and told me I was looking for trouble. Then, the cops escorted me home.

The flip side to this story is the one my father tells about going to his friend Harry's church to witness the baptism of his twin daughters. On their way up the stairs to the front door, a little boy greeted my parents with the refrain, "Ain't no white people inside."

My mother laughingly reported the young boy's discomfort that they were integrating his church, and I suppose it was another shock to the child that my parents were named as the twins' godparents. My parents' willingness to appear out of place in a church did not extend to dining at the Majestic. Whenever I mentioned all of us going over there for lunch, they shook their heads no. "That place is a joint," they said, and they looked at me in much the same way I imagine the little boy at the church looked at them. They didn't say it, but I knew the refrain: Ain't no white people in there.

And I wondered why we all thought that. The Majestic 5-0 is right down the street from the video store, where I go all the time. It is spitting distance from the post office. From the florist, from the bank. Everybody shops in these stores together. Surely, I could stop and have a hamburger without suffering some dire consequences other than, perhaps, heartburn. I decided that the history of my life and this state was making a mountain out of what should be a simple appetite for a hamburger. A hamburger would keep me from going hungry at school, and, frankly, the price appeals to me: I can afford to pay $2.00. It is logical for me to eat there--it is right on my way. Where have I heard those reasons for wanting to eat at a lunch counter before? I see that in an odd twist on history, I am presently engaged in wanting to desegregate what my friends and I consider to be a black restaurant simply because I'm hungry. All I have to do is stop the car.

And after months of having an appetite to try the food at the Majestic, I finally did. I went to have my hair done, and after two hours of being marinated under a plastic cap, I was starving. I didn't want jiffy store food; I wanted some good cooking, and I wanted to sit down and eat it. I got in my car and I went calling on my neighbors.

By the time I pulled up in front of the Majestic, it was late for lunch, about 1:30 pm, and there were no other cars parked outside. The staff was chatting, the

receptionist was having her lunch, but the food on the buffet was still steaming. A large fellow at the door seemed surprised to see me, but he welcomed me. I had my pick of tables, and, being a practical woman, I chose the table nearest the homemade rolls sitting on top of the buffet.

Fried chicken, peach cobbler, fresh fried corn, and collards cooked in a fine pot liquor were all waiting. There was so much more offered than just a hamburger, and it was better food than I ever dreamed of finding in this small town of mine.

I guess the ladies in the back heard me moaning because a girl named Juliette came out. She sat down across from me at the table and asked me how I liked the food.

"I could make a meal off these greens and rolls," I answered.

"Mama taught us to cook collards," she said, looking uncomfortable. I wondered for a moment if she thought I was patronizing her. I wasn't.

"How long you been in business?" I asked, barely taking time between bites to talk.

"Two years or so," she said. "There's a lounge next door. It does pretty good. A lot of people from Montgomery come here on Fridays for the cat fish, but we're glad to see a local person come in."

Just then, the owner walked through, and the receptionist, who was still eating, called out to him that I was a local person, a first-timer. He smiled at me, studied my face a moment as if he might never see me again, and went on.

"I hope y'all make it," I told Juliette, as she excused herself to return to her work in the kitchen, "I'd hate to miss out on future opportunities to eat food this good."

A week later, I went back for more.

This time I went at noon, and there were a number of people inside eating. The first person I saw was the little old man who runs an auto parts store. He's a local character and hangs what I think of as dirty photos on his wall: calendars with half-naked women. I guess he thinks that his customers are all going to be men and that men who work on cars want to see pictures of scantily clad women. I didn't return to his store because of the pictures, and I imagine other women might feel the same way; so it is possible that his customers will all be men. That some men still see women as sex objects is supposed to be as out of date as segregated neighborhoods.

I sat down at the table across from a character, but as soon as possible I insinuated myself into the line of hungry people at the buffet. I think some of the other diners were Air Force personnel from Montgomery, because I recall a reappearing blue uniform. The people who run the dry

cleaners were eating, too. A man who made a pass at me at a party ten years ago was there also with his wife, and he and I pretended we didn't recognize one another.

Something in me recalls that there was a nice medley of black and white folk eating together, but I didn't count heads and I didn't count color. I had the vague feeling that the black people were professional-looking business sorts, and that the white people were, like me, local characters with distinctive reputations.

We diners at the Majestic 5-0 shared the common bond of being hungry and wanting our lunch. The food was good. I moaned my way through a plateful of assorted vegetables and had seconds on the collard greens. I finished with the peach cobbler and the naive notion that I was going to desegregate a black restaurant at the same time. My misconception that I was the only white person wanting to eat there was a myopic one, but I don't spend a lot of time punishing myself for recognizing that I can be as nearsighted as a little boy greeting white people at his church.

THE SOUND OF MEN'S VOICES

Somehow I landed myself in the middle of a men's choir Sunday morning. Generally a co-ed group, we sing together on a volunteer basis; only this morning I was the only woman who volunteered.

From my center of the choir loft, I looked out and saw my unfaithful singing sisters, Doris and Wilda, still sitting in their pews, and I glared at them. They smiled back sweetly, willfully oblivious to the position they had put me in by simply staying in their seats.

Just when I was about to plot my revenge against those two Christians for causing me to feel out of place in the middle of all these men, I felt the warm breath of a strange man on my right as he whispered in my ear, "It's so good to have you up here with us today."

I looked sideways to see who he was, admitted privately that he looked familiar, but I didn't know his name. I catalogued his physical attributes while searching his eyes for reasons to resent his overture of kindness. He had brown button eyes, teddy bear ears, and a cap of furry hair.

Sitting down, we were the same height. I checked out his legs, saw he had pudgy thighs similar to mine (I don't hold pudgy against anyone), saw he was wearing the familiar blue pinstripe polyester suit complete with Sansabelt slacks that all the men here wear, and drew the unavoidable conclusion that standing up, we would be the same height.

Seemingly oblivious to my scrutiny, he increased the width of his smile and handed me a hymnal, adding to his welcome, "We really need you here today." His eyes averted momentarily to include the men who were sitting to our left.

Not disciplined in accepting graciousness from strangers, I answered with a warning, "Wait till you hear me sing. You may change your mind."

I have a low voice, and I knew that my Marlene Dietrich register would meld uncomfortably well with the guys' voices, and for an instant, this bothered me. I didn't want to sound like one of the boys. It's one thing to sing a harmonious alto with the girls; it's another thing to sing a decent tenor with the boys.

Nervous and self-conscious, I felt my throat tighten. My tension didn't ease as I checked the hymn numbers and saw that we were beginning with "How Great Thou Art," which is the Christian equivalent of the "Star Spangled Banner."

I have about five dependable notes in the lower register that I can count on to be true to me, and the first song required the use of two generous octaves and the

ability to slide up and down the notes in a hurry. My panty hose began to pinch as I considered how high I would need to sing if I stayed with the melody. It was either the harmony or lip-syncing. My pride kicked in: I decided to sing.

There was no way around it. I was singing in a sea of baritones, five men with voices much deeper and richer than mine. In the midst of them, I sang out, sounding almost like a soprano by contrast. Indeed, the sensation was so unfamiliar, so unexpected, so sweetly new that I reached for notes I otherwise would have pretended to sing. And I hit a couple of them in a falsetto that Tiny Tim could have easily accompanied with his ukulele.

For a brief spell of time, next to these guys I sounded like someone I'm not--a soprano--and I enjoyed this unique gift their presence gave to me. I've always envied those warbling women who could sing along with Jeannette McDonald. Suddenly, in the company of men, I knew what it felt like to be one of them. It was an authentic moment of release.

Like many women these days, I am on my guard so much around men that I had forgotten that they could be welcoming allies or that harmony could be had in their presence. In singing the same words at the same time with them, I was reminded of the sweetness of unity, the encouragement of harmony, the refreshing idea that we need not always be engaged in the unending parry and fence movement called the battle of the sexes.

What began in the choir loft as fear and self-consciousness ended in pleasure and satisfaction; and when the last amen faded, the man on my right leaned over to me again smiling and whispered in my ear, "You have a nice voice." I was surprised. And pleased. And grateful. And eager to sing another song.

But what I said was, "Thanks. So do you."

A CAROLING WE WENT

My best friend blackmailed me into going caroling with her church choir last Christmas. I owed her favors so I agreed, pushing up the choir's body count by my bulky presence.

With a tight smile frozen on my face, I joined the caravan of cars that make this annual pilgrimage to visit the poor and the sick. Shivering and irritable, I stood on unfamiliar front lawns and rang door bells of dark houses, where the people inside were watching Dallas on TV and sipping beer.

We silently agreed not to notice the confusion of these sleepy shut-ins, who invited us to come inside with our baskets of oranges and apples bruised by too many hands in the sorting. We sang off-key our made-up lyrics to different carols, applauding ourselves if we all managed to finish on the same word.

Our best number was "We Wish You a Merry Christmas," and I think it was our best because it signaled the end of our visit.

Duty done, we raced to our cars, cranked them up and forged back into unfamiliar streets, honking and waving like children let loose from school, while under our breaths we counted down our missions of mercy: "That's number six, just three more houses to go."

At one of the last stops, we were greeted by a bundled-up lady with bad teeth and a broad smile. "Welcome to my chamber of horrors," she whispered softly, standing in her darkened doorway. She wore a knitted cap and a man's denim jacket over her blue terry bathrobe. It was 8:30 on a Friday night (just thirty minutes of Dallas left). Her house was freezing cold; her rooms unlighted and scary. Even her floor heater was black. Our teeth chattered as we assured her, "Oh, no, don't bother to light it just for us. We're fine." We lied right there to her face.

We sang faster and faster, while she watched us pretend not to be freezing; her mittened hands clapped in time to our makeshift music. Laughter brimmed in her blue eyes as we muddled through our love offering. I avoided looking into her eyes because I could feel that shrewd gaze roving over me, over us, searching our faces relentlessly, I thought, for the eyes of just one good man, one good woman.

"You're looking in the wrong place," I muttered to myself, while studying her rugless, hardwood floors. My breath froze and hung in the air, giving shape to my clouds of doubt about the inherent goodness of our caroling troupe.

At the end, she wished us a merry Christmas too, and clapped her hands again, almost dusting them off as we took our leave. I feigned a kiss that didn't quite make contact with her powdery face and hurried after my band. I let myself hope that the next visit would be much less chilling.

Mr. Leonard was asleep when we arrived. We woke him up to listen to us warble. He returned to his battered sofa in the den, over which hung a portrait of his beloved cocker spaniel. The dog's bed was off to the side of the sofa and empty now. It had been for weeks. The pooch's green corduroy cushion still showed the shape where the old man's faithful companion had once slept.

"Don't mention the dog. Sandy's buried out back," the leader of our group whispered. His warning circulated quickly amongst us, but that didn't matter, for this experienced old-timer had cagily turned off his hearing aid when he recognized who we were and what we were about to do. I could read his mind, I thought, "Uh-oh, the carolers again."

Nobody's fool, he cheerfully waved us to begin. Then, he mocked us to our faces by beating out a peculiar rhythm

of his own with a skeletal hand. It became an ironic accompaniment to our rendition of "Silent Night."

I applauded the old fellow, hawking my first attempt at a public "Amen!" in his honor. By the time we were back in our cars and headed breathlessly toward the final target, I felt that I had the notion of Christmas caroling figured out. To me, it seemed a pretty, picturesque act of appropriate yuletide charity. It looked good to be caught caroling. It would look good on one's resume in heaven. But did it do any good? I thought not. It was busy work that, I suppose, meant little enough to the people we were disturbing, but was enough of a strain on us carolers to feel like a sacrifice.

And then Shirley opened her front door, and my theory that caroling was a waste of time evaporated in the face of that woman's genuine welcome. She beamed and hugged each one of us, all strangers to her. Then, she led us through the narrow hallway to her father's bedroom. There, we sang our short and inharmonious repertoire of the season's songs: "Jingle Bells," "Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem," and "We Wish You A Merry Christmas."

We were about as off-tune as we had been the whole evening, but her father did not seem to mind. He offered me a weak handclasp of thanks--the closest he could come to an embrace, but I could feel it: his gratitude, his desire to be hospitable. And I saw, too, that his charity was, in

many ways, greater than my own. It must take great character to receive love so badly given.

"We don't get much company," his daughter explained, waving an arm to indicate the boundaries of her life. She was serving her eighth year as a full-time nursing daughter. Her jail was a cracker-box stucco house that smelled rank with sickness and stale gas heat. Here, her father was dying a slow and lonely death. He would not live longer because we had been there. Shirley would not magically be transformed into a career woman or a matron with a new and healthy family of her own.

At our most valuable, we had been a diversion: a group of awkward well-wishers who left behind our good intentions and some bruised fruit.

We took with us the conclusion that life doesn't compare favorably with the romanticized scenes we cling to and sing about and hope for at Christmas when we watch old Bing Crosby movies like White Christmas and mail out Currier & Ives greeting cards. We came face to face that night with the flip side of comfort and joy, and we left with questions: Could my home ever grow that cold or stale? My table be so sparsely laid? My health fail me to that extent?

Could my ambitions be chiseled down to the challenge of surviving one day at a time? Would I ever be so lonely as to find desirable the music of unschooled singers and

rejoice at the sight of a basket of mauled fruit? Would I ever need the kind of courage it takes to throw open my front door and say to strangers, "Welcome to my chamber of horrors?"

It took just one night of caroling for me to become acquainted with the people on whose behalf the imitation Santa Clauses ring bells once a year for small change in front of K-Mart. The Salvation Army feeds many of our poor people year round. The Community Christmas Chests collect food reserves and used clothes for them.

They are the poor who are always with us and whom I have dismissed, vaguely irritated, because I couldn't get into K-Mart or Wal-Mart or Foodworld without being pestered by that incessant ringing bell of a Santa Claus whose beard didn't fit.

I regret the small change I haven't given to those Santa Clauses of Christmases past, and I regret the many other opportunities I haven't willingly taken to offer the diversions good will accompanied by bad music often desperately desired.

As this holiday season approaches and I am tempted once again to bemoan the lack of Christmas spirit about me--and in me--as I begin to condemn advertisers and preachers for blackmailing us into acts of charity, I will hold fast to the lesson I learned when a caroling we went., I will view with gentler regard the picturesque cards that clutter my

mailbox each year with good intentions. I shall hold them up for comparison to my memories
of reality among the sick and the poor. And I will remember that no carol or cliche which offers even the most casual of good wishes, no act of charity, however imitative or badly performed, is ever unnecessary or too small.

THE WAY TO EASEDALE TARN

THAT MISSING PIECE OF NORA'S CAKE

Whenever someone dies in our town Nora, my parents' friend, takes over one of her famous tube-shaped apricot nectar cakes with a fat piece missing. Nora does what every other cake baker would like to do: she samples her cake before she gives it away. That way she can fall asleep that same night knowing that there wasn't some dark, damp uncooked spot in the center which proved either that she was an impatient cook or that her oven had cooked too slowly.

I know this about Nora's apricot nectar cakes although she isn't a friend of mine directly. My mother and dad tell me Nora does this for every reception that follows the funeral of a friend. She baked one to take to my uncle's funeral last year, but I didn't taste it. My folks say it's fruity, tart though sweet. They should know; the number of funerals Nora and my folks attend is considerable.

Funerals are a mainstay of social life here in our town and the subject for many a conversation in my parents' home. My sixty-two-year-old daddy and my fifty-five-year-old mother are big believers in being prepared for death.

They've owned burial plots for years--are two of a very few number of people (I'm sure) who have owned spare burial plots, which they have given away through the years to a couple of needy dead people. Their tombstones have been up long enough to have vines growing over them. The only things missing from the granite slabs are the dates of death. I'm reminded frequently that this pertinent information will have to be added afterwards. I do not like to hear this and try to change the subject. My parents never do. They welcome the opportunity to explore the options inherent in the after-death experience.

A couple of months ago, an audacious funeral salesman made the mistake of going by my parents' home on a sales call. My folks invited the funeral salesman to come inside.

Comfortably situated on the sofa, they interviewed the funeral salesman aggressively, compared what they had already reserved for themselves to the package he was selling, received willingly his brochures, and sent him on his way. Then, because they are thorough investigators, they paid a surprise call on him at his business establishment, the funeral home. They were shocked at the high prices of his poorly constructed caskets and full of self-congratulations that they had foreseen the terrible future of funeral costs long ago and bought the only real insurance--a prepaid funeral. They left certain in their

souls that the funeral salesman's proposal was, if not crooked, certainly over-priced.

Throughout the week, they warned all their friends about that guy in the dark blue suit going from door to door in this small town attempting to prey on people who would eventually die. They warned me. No one is going to be able to come to our town and get away with selling an over-priced funeral. There are just too many comparison shoppers here, although my parents, the youngest of their crowd, are the acknowledged experts on funeral preparedness.

"You wanna go out and see where our plots are again?" My father inquired once more.

"Nope. Sure don't."

"The time's gonna come and you're not gonna remember where to plant us."

I laughed. "I don't know why you're going to so much trouble. I'm just going to plant you out in the backyard anyway so I won't have to drive into town to put fresh plastic flowers on your grave. I'm thinking I'll put you right out back underneath the magnolia tree. There's plenty of room for both you and Mama. I may not even have to buy flowers. Those magnolias will bloom and get ripe and fall right on top of your graves. I tell you what: I'll even turn up the TV at five o'clock so Mother can still listen to <u>Jeopardy.</u> "

What could be more natural?

Sometimes, when my father initiates this dialogue, I change the plan and say, "I'm gonna stick you out there alongside Still Creek so you can keep those beavers that you like so well company."

My father hates it when I describe my alternative scheme, though he plays along. "Now, don't go be doing that. We'll be washing up every time those beavers rebuild that blasted dam and the rains come in too heavy."

I click my tongue sympathetically. "You never have been much on swimming."

We laugh again, and Mom and Dad file away the details of our conversation so they can tell them to Nora who will enjoy the story. They fret though that I haven't actually heard any of the real plans they've been making.

I have. And get this: My dad insists that when his time comes a recording of Jeannette McDonald and Nelson Eddy singing "Sweet Mystery of Life" be played. He's not joking. He loves that song.

And I do know right where those grave plots are, and I recall that we will have to order the grave opened; but we must not let them do it on a Sunday because grave diggers get time and a half that day. I do know they've saved an extra grave plot for me; and when they remind me, I take the cue and assure them chirpily, "I feel just fine. Couldn't feel better." They like to hear the report of my good health. None of their friends will ever admit to feeling

well, and when I do, they have good news to pass on to their friend Nora.

"Our baby's just fine, Nora. She's doing just fine. She says she's gonna put us out by the creek when our time comes."

This very morning, Nora and Mom and Dad attended two funerals. They went over to the funeral home at ten to pay their respects to a departed church friend and discovered that their insurance agent had also died and was going to be buried an hour later. They just stayed on for that one.

Usually, while they are away at one of their gatherings, I read the obituary of the newly-deceased; and today I saw that the father of one of my high school friends had also died. I recognized all of the names of the survivors and wondered if Luanne had to help choose the coffin and buy the concrete vault. Did Luanne know about the grave diggers?

Suddenly, I hoped her mama had a friend who would take over a warm cake with a piece missing: a hole she wouldn't try to disguise by pushing the ends together. I wanted all grieving people to have friends like Nora who represent that sweet mystery of living called love.

It seems more and more fitting to me to think of that missing piece of Nora's cake as an undisguisable void in a circle of friends and relatives who faithfully move from house to house in times of mourning, remembering who their

friend was, what he did on his off days, what she liked to cook and wear, and how she couldn't resist putting on fresh eyeliner while the collection was being taken up in church. I'll recall how everyone who partook of that apricot nectar cake time after time was participating in a silent communion, as if with every sweet bite they could rob death of some of its sting.

When Nora's gone, I'll remember her cakes and her husband who demanded his share of a warm piece first as his price for having to live with the tempting smell of it baking.

When my parents are gone, we'll have the stories of their love to tell, of their funeral preparations to recount amongst ourselves, recalling with affection how once they bested the final enemy, not death, but that over-priced funeral salesman.

I shall remember glumly reading the announcement that Luanne's father had died, ignoring the part that said he was sixty-two, the same age as my own dad.

When my Dad came home from that double funeral, I told him about Luanne's dad and about how Luanne and I were best friends in 8th grade. Dad remarked, "I hope that man had a concrete vault already bought. You know the price of concrete has gone sky high."

"I doubt if Luanne gives a damn about the price of concrete," I said. My father cannot imagine anyone not caring about the price of concrete.

My mother stole a minute away from watching Jeopardy to tell me not to say "Damn" out loud in her house, and then she settled back for Double Jeopardy, a sturdy woman unafraid of death. She is at peace about how her daughters will live with grief. She and Dad have done everything they know to teach us how to accept the unacceptable.

They have already paid the bills.

They have set good examples of being faithful friends to their friends.

They have shown us how to mourn--by remembering the good in each other, making light of the bad, and by laughing at the absurdities of human nature. All we girls have left to do is order the dates inscribed on those tombstones already standing on the grave plots they've owned for years. Then, I imagine we'll listen to Nelson Eddy and Jeannette McDonald sing "Sweet Mystery of Life" one more time and wait for the magnolia tree to bloom.

What could be more natural?

TIME STANDS STILL

"If Bill were still alive, we'd be celebrating our fiftieth wedding anniversary," Thelma told me. "We were married at Christmas time right after the bombing of Pearl Harbor."

The recent anniversary of World War II was on Thelma's mind because she had a brother who was serving in Pearl when the air strike was made. The anniversary of the war was all over the news. However, memories of the national significance of Pearl Harbor were eclipsed for Thelma by the more important memory of her wedding to her husband, Bill, dead now since 1977.

I never met Bill, and Thelma does not mention him often. When she does, she offers an anecdote or two, something equivalent to a brush-up introduction. "Bill was always surprising me with something. He might forget my birthday, but he would have shown me he loved me a hundred different ways throughout the year."

Special occasions paled in comparison to the daily life with Thelma's Bill. "I have only happy memories," she told me.

I know what she means. There are people in my life of whom I have only happy memories. I'm sure unpleasantness occurred, bad things happened, but I don't remember them now. Like bruises, the wounds of history have faded; only memories of the good times remain.

"How did Bill die?" I asked her.

Thelma shook her head as if part of her still can't believe he's gone.

"We took him in for a simple hernia operation. While they were inside, they found cancer. They told us he had a year to live, but two weeks later he went into a coma. He died exactly one month later on July 18 at 12:55 am.

"You were with him?"

She nodded her head. I got up to pour us more coffee. "That's plenty. I was sloshing when I came in, but I just never can turn down a cup." Thelma is an easy guest, amenable, good-humored. That's why I kept pouring the coffee--to keep her.

"A year after Bill died I was in bed sound asleep when the silence of my house woke me up." When Thelma saw the look of curiosity on my face, she explained. "I have a pendulum clock I wind. It sounds on the hour."

"You had forgotten to wind it?"

"I got out of bed, and when I felt of the key, it was tight. The clock just stopped five minutes shy of 1 o'clock in the morning. I can't explain it."

"What was the date?"

"July 18th."

"The anniversary of his death."

"To the minute," she said.

I didn't dispute her word or her memory. It is possible that the clock jammed or was wound down and Thelma just didn't know it. What moved me was that the silence woke her up, as if in her sleep she was waiting for time to sound the anniversary that meant more to her then the beginning of a second world war. I thought about the history of our nation being tied inextricably to her own, and I mused that since Bill died we have fought again as a nation--have witnessed the dissolution of other countries. From now on, our country will memorialize Desert Storm. It will mean more to some families than others. But, for the most part, the large-scale events of nations cannot compete with the memories that make up our daily, personal lives, the hopes and dreams and personal vows taken that are woven into the love affairs that last long after one spouse has stepped across time's boundary.

I don't think Bill's absence made Thelma stop loving him. In a way that surpasses understanding, their marriage continues with every anniversary that Thelma mentions over a

cup of coffee to someone who never met Bill or acknowledges in the still of the night because her clock no longer proclaims the time. It is the silence that keeps Thelma company now; and for as long as she lives, that moment in time is a static event marked by a clock she's never wound again.

THE WAY TO EASEDALE TARN

Not many people have been to Easedale Tarn. Certainly more people have been to Disney World and Niagara Falls, have crossed over the majestic Mississippi River. Easedale Tarn isn't a grand site, is not larger than life as most scenic tourist draws tend to be. It is a modest lake situated in northern England, nestled in a valley where William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy picnicked and talked of beauty and made poetry out of their journey. Now, Romantics scholars and curious travelers hike that narrow ordinary path that leads from Grasmere Church to Easedale Tarn.

The lake is but a thimbleful of water by Mississippi River standards, would be largely forgettable if it had not been made famous by a poet, a lover of nature.

Not everyone can write poetry, so it has become a custom there to leave behind some mark of one's journey, to make some contribution to that mound of memories--to declare one's passing. Travelers add a stone to the ever-growing

pile of stones that marks the western boundary of Easedale Tarn.

Being unimpressed by Easedale Tarn, I left no stone to declare that I had hiked that ordinary trail. It is this ritual, which I did not partake of, that haunts me this morning. It is the day we will bury Howard, a lifelong friend who cared more for me than I did for him.

I make no apologies for not loving Howard. And I don't believe that he ever loved me....as say William loved his sister or nature, for that matter. It is only that since we were six and seven together, Howard knew me. As we grew up, he occasionally pursued my company, would stop by my house for a glass of iced-tea if he spied me out mowing the lawn. Later, Howard wrote me a couple of letters from college, and I guess I answered him--I don't remember. I recall that they weren't love letters. In time, we ended up in a church singles class together, went for ice cream one time, and parked behind the White House of the Confederacy when the azaleas were in bloom. There I pretended an attraction I did not feel. He understood without my telling him. This type of scene was never repeated between us again.

Then he married and seemed to move a way for a while, but I notice from his obituary that his residence is still our hometown: a forgettable little hamlet made notable by famous people who have not always revered nature.

Instead, the heroes here fought for and against segregation, staged dramas on courthouse steps, hurled insults at one another, lied and slandered and....well, no doubt you know who they are and what was done. I live in Alabama.

Howard and I inherited this place and its history, along with an affection for our neighbors and ancestors, who aren't much like the famous people associated with the State. We are hometown people who hold fast to the region, finding our schooling here, making our homes in our hometown, occasionally bumping into each other and one another's family members at McDonald's. We continued in the church, although not the same denomination. We would have grown old together in the way that lifelong friends do, accruing more and more stories about each other--these oral histories of our lives that mark the points of interest in a journey just as the stones commemorate a pilgrim's hike to Easedale Tarn.

I'm sure that one day Howard and I would have eventually taken another path that converged at one more crossroad, refreshed ourselves in the knowledge that we share something in our history, and a kind of love for our shared place that transformed an ordinary lake like Easedale Tarn into an eternal memory for William and his sister.

That vision of the South and its families is what I have left of Howard. He was part of my journey, part of

growing up: a home boy, who for as long as I knew him, wanted a family of his own. He left behind a wife and two children.

Howard will be buried in two hours, but I will not go to pay my last respects. Those were offered long ago in the azalea garden when I heard private words from him and shared a kiss I didn't mean. I will think of the last time I saw Howard, years ago now, dressed like Fitzgerald's Gatsby in a white suit and smiling broadly at me; it was the day he applied for a job where I worked. And before that, when he was sipping my weak iced-tea, and before that when he swam with me on a warm southern morning. It is not my custom to travel an ordinary path and mark it with a stone, but today I change my course. Today we bury Howard, and I mark it.

A HARVEST OF LOVE

His arm stops in a mock salute, his hand attempting to shade his eyes from a nonexistent sun. We are inside a nursing home, and there is no sunshine here. He calls to me with a fixed blue gaze, and I stared back unabashedly, forward woman that I am, trying to read his mind.

Mind-reading is my last resort. Elmer Splawn has Parkinson's disease and has lost his ability to walk and talk. He can barely eat now, has difficulty breathing. This one odd salute that comes upon him now and again is involuntary, the doctors say. His arm starts up and weaves, as if searching for a resting place.

"Take it on down," I say, and his eyes crinkle as if amused. For an instant, we are sharing a private joke. It is one of many that we've laughed together over through the years. This time, I smile and place my hand on his arm and push a little. The arm goes down. But as I connect with him, I allow myself to remember with my flesh the feel of his own before he became so sick.

This old farmer used to have muscles that were as hard as anything Arnold Schwarzenegger could brag about. And his embrace was a hiding place--the natural fragrance of his skin something cool and fresh and unsullied.

I stop myself: I have no right to remember Elmer's embrace this way. The scent of him, this knowledge of his touch, does not belong to me. It belongs to his daughter and his wife. But when I visit him, the many physical losses he's suffered evoke sensual memories I have of him and didn't know were planted in me.

This longing to communicate physically, to connect with Elmer, metamorphoses into urges that do not fit within the boundaries of our relationship. For I want to comb his Spencer Tracy hair, to press my rouged face against his once ruddy cheeks gone grey with age and illness, to smother him in an embrace that would be a poor imitation of his own from long ago.

Before going to see him, I splash on perfume in order to leave a fragrance behind of something more pleasant than the nursing home smells. When I get there, however, my role as visitor prevents me from burying myself against him, from bathing him in the scent of a world outside. I settle for tweaking the toes of his foot beneath a thin yellow blanket and staring steadfastly back into his unblinking blue eyes.

The doctors say his staring is one more uncontrollable effect of his illness. I call this fixed look his tractor

gaze, a habit of seeing and knowing born of plowing from dawn to dusk. When I'm with him, his eyes talk to me. I see him working his fields still, the sun bright and blinding overhead. That's when his arm goes up to shade his eyes against the glare.

But I do not say any of this out loud. It is no more my place to interpret Elmer's silences than it is my right to miss him so acutely, with a yearning that doesn't match the role I'm expected to play here. I'm the Visitor. Unlike the family, the Visitor has restricted rights--is expected to love a patient in proportion to the relationship as it was before he was admitted to the nursing home. No one suspects that love can grow in a place where so much dying is going on.

When this new rapture hit me, I was surprised by the force of it--by my healthy, growing love for this eighty-something year old sick man. I have tried to stifle it, to hide it, not to talk about it. It isn't like anything I've felt before. Certainly, it isn't pity. It's more of a romance quickened not by passion but by curiosity and a desire to follow him wherever he goes--to trail his footsteps to the end of that row I see him plowing.

I cannot explain how or when I stopped being just his daughter's friend, and became who I am today--this mind reader whose role as visitor does not allow her to serve as translator for this man who can no longer speak, but whose

silences say so much to me. In some mysterious way, I feel that we are chaste lovers who share a rapport that was born not in an instant--like love at first sight--but over time. Inexplicably, the expression of it is this mutual silence. For like Elmer, I am tongue-tied, not by a physical infirmity but by who I'm supposed to be--his daughter's best friend, a lifelong visitor in his life whom he taught once-upon-a-time how to enjoy the hospitality of a day.

The last time Elmer and I stood together in his corn field, he plucked an ear and shaved the kernels with his pocket knife, showing me the milky freshness that makes the difference in homegrown and store-bought. He cooked fresh corn for my lunch, and we ate in silence that day as we so often spent our summertimes together--mutely trusting in each other's good will and the changing of seasons. I take pleasure in remembering that Elmer has always trusted the silences of time and me. Better than anyone, a farmer understands the seasons of living.

In his eyes now--blue, unmatched, childlike eyes--I move with him among foreign fields. Together, we stand before golden fruits not yet tasted. He is not afraid. When no one watches, I lean to give him my kiss. I linger by his cheek, wanting to whisper words I've never spoken before to anyone. Instead, I withdraw into our communing silence, hoping that when he looks into my eyes, he can reap this harvest of love. It thrives mysteriously in this

amazing soil of silence we share: a field this old farmer planted long ago.

FOR A FAMILIAR FACE

"Please come and help me with the funeral," my best friend asked me.

"I'll be on the next plane," I promised.

Guin's father had died just minutes before, and she was alone with her mother in Texas. I hung up the phone, at first unable to plan what to do next. I cried, and then I took a shower.

Three hours later, my parents took me to the airport, where I kissed them good-bye and said, "Don't let anything happen to you while I'm away from home."

In the window seat, I stifled my sobs with queer jerks and tremors. I had never felt so alone. Death, so frightening in its finality, gave utterance to a new plea: "Oh, please, God, let me see a familiar face."

Changing planes in Atlanta, I scanned faces. Passing strangers looked the way I felt: tired, frightened, unsure of where they were going. Intent on reaching our destinations, we ignored each other.

Guin and her mother met me at the gate. In shock, they made small talk. We pretended that our mutual loss of Elmer Splawn had not been the first tremor of a continuing, emotional earthquake.

The funeral was still ahead. Casseroles and pies heralded its coming. We did not partake of those early dishes, putting off the knowledge that soon we would have to eat again. Filling time, we curled our hair and waited for the white limousine to call for us and take us to that pew where we would join with friends of Elmer to say farewell.

My composure slipped the moment we took our place before Elmer's casket. His profile was unfamiliar and undeniable. The earthquake came in full force to rock me, and the plea that was born in the voyage to Texas resurged in a rocking force. "Oh, to see a familiar face," I prayed, to replace this sudden appearance of death that was so unrecognizable.

The preacher rose, a country boy who had nettled me on Sundays past with talk that women should wear only skirts and not work outside the home. I raised my watery gaze to suffer through his eulogy. This man, who had oft-times spoken so unfeelingly, now stood with tears in his eyes, confessing to us with humble grace that Elmer had loved him when he was unlovable.

"Over the past fifteen years, I made every mistake a preacher could make, but this brother stood by me; and when

he lent his support, it was one hundred percent. He did not say what he did not mean, and when Mr. Splawn made a promise, this old farmer kept his word."

The preacher went on to talk about Elmer's life, his love for his wife, his pride in his daughter. His confession that he had also known what it meant to love Elmer steadied me enough so that I could remember. I listened, slipping off in memory to stand once again with Elmer in the corn field, to sit beside him on his front porch while the Texas wind dried my freshly-washed hair.

In those early days when Elmer's hand first started shaking from Parkinson's disease, I would reach and cover his hand with my own until the trembling quietened. Now, though I never would have thought he would be the person to lend me comfort, Elmer's preacher did the same for me.

My tears had slowed by the time this minister persuaded me that it was right to rise and say good-bye. I still moved like a passenger unsure of her destination, but as my eyes grazed the unfamiliar face of death, I drew needed strength in the knowledge that I was not alone in my love for Elmer--strangers to me had known him well, loved him as I had, understood the same unchangeable truths about him.

In his death, the earth trembled a little for us all; we experienced the separation from him all together, and all together, we said good-bye.

LIVING WITH STRANGERS

THE FRUIT IN ESTHER'S GARDEN

Esther's grey head with pressed curls moves from left to right slowly as she watches Guin, her daughter, mow the overgrown backyard.

This old Southern lawn is an expansive area marked with rambling growths because no one has lived here in a long time. An unlikely rose bush has dwindled to producing one flower, a few thorns. A hidden tea olive bush releases the fragrance of solitude, giving birth to contemplation and potent visions.

A friend of both women, I am welcome to help with the labor of reclaiming this space or simply to abide here--to enjoy the company of Esther and Guin as they rediscover each other. Three months ago, this 78-year-old woman courageously left her Texas home of sixty years to come and live next door to her only daughter.

This picture of joy and contentment is not the one painted by so many people who heard of Esther's move and warned me that the quality of my life was in danger because an old person was moving next door. News of Esther's coming

elicited caveats which varied in content but can be distilled into one maxim: You work yourself to death trying to please an old person, and nothing you do is ever enough.

People who did not know Esther could not envision her as some kind of person other than the kind that aging is supposed to produce. As if all old people are the same. As if all old people are too much trouble.

I am well acquainted with the care that aging and the deterioration of health brings, but there are also unexpected rewards found in a seasoned person's company. There are surprise discoveries not unlike that spindly rose bush, thin and thorny as it is, still producing a tender beauty. I see this kind of beauty in Esther Splawn, in her faithful acts of kindness to me, in her contributions to the fellowship of my home, my church, my neighborhood. She is a pure-hearted woman who does not take pleasure in deceit or meanness. She laughs easily, has a generous memory. She tells me stories I would not hear from anyone else. She recalls people long gone now and who live only because she does. I like to hear about them.

Contrary to the warnings that the quality of my life would be reduced by Esther's presence, my life has been enlarged because, upon occasion, I get to see the world through Esther's eyes.

It is unfortunate that no one remembers how when we were children the more playmates we had the merrier the

time. When we were all innocent, we did not fear new friendships; we welcomed them. Since Esther's arrival, I have remembered that I enjoy making new friends. More work, certainly. Added worry, of course. Loving others always means more work and worry. I have friends my age who are just as much trouble.

Esther reminds me of this--this old woman. She is more than an example to me, however. I do not see her only as someone old whose life is now part of history, a lesson that can be summed up by a moral. Esther embodies beauty, too, and her life bears the fruit that only authentic beauty and its truth provide, which is the gift of letting others rest. I do not work myself to death for her; I find rest in Esther's fellowship.

Each day, though half-blind and slow-moving, Esther takes a stroll around her garden, reports a new discovery, most recently a vine which we have concluded is the last stronghold of an ancient vineyard attached to the back fence. The grapevine produces a musky fruit, the meat unfamiliar and sweet. We call it muscadine, but we cannot definitely name it.

We instinctively want to celebrate the surprise of it, and we watch eagerly for more fruit to ripen so that we can come and taste the sweet produce of this old, old vine. The pressure to make something ourselves--to achieve--is

temporarily set aside as we wait upon the fruit of this vine to continue its mysterious ripening.

Moving in Esther's pace now, we enjoy the tempo of patience, residing all together in a state of grace discovered in this unlikely place in this fresh and undemanding time.

LITTLE LAMB, WHO MADE THEE?

In my family, we often repeat ourselves. A current event is shared, then shared again. As new members of our family or friends appear, the story is retold. Sometimes, I hear the same anecdote four or five times within an hour, but I do not tire of it. Instead, it is as if I am being fed, nourished by the ever-growing narrative of an experience that no longer belongs to one person but to all of us now.

In the retelling, the narrative changes subtly, is often embellished, sculptured and honed to fit the changing complexion of the audience. Indeed, the teller and the audience are not satisfied until the story is told just right, the truth of it achieved in all of the rejoinders, the laughter, or, if warranted, the commiseration.

Storytelling teaches us how to be together. But the mystery inherent in this coming together is not that we like or even need to repeat ourselves, but that the same people, raised to tell the stories of our lives, are capable at any

moment of experiencing an uncommon dimension that happens to us each alone and cannot be fully told.

These untold, largely untellable stories, have other tantalizing features, however. They produce effects; it is the effects that one ponders, playing them like puzzle pieces in an attempt to find order. The sequence of events is relived with the acknowledgement that the moment of knowing itself cannot be recaptured; it can only be referred to as a date, a place, a mysterious moment in history that keeps nourishing the present.

It happened to me recently in a barn.

My nephew's sheep had given birth, and Matthew fetched me. Without enthusiasm, I plodded through an overgrown pasture to an untidy place where animals drink from discarded bathtubs and the air was rank with refuse and sour hay. This barn did not appear to be a setting for experiencing beauty or timelessness. It was ugly, was shedding its red paint. A dead mouse had not yet been buried, and the sheep, four of them named William, Dorothy, Bert, and Fern, were not the docile, pleasant creatures associated with the fleecy fairy tale of that lamb-lover Mary. Matthew's lambs are large, goofy beasts who trip over themselves, have a tendency to get buckets stuck on their heads, and smell unpleasantly like the barnyard.

I stood in the breezeway of that rickety place, two sides of the barn connected by a vast hallway. It was a hot

day, sticky, and so rich with odors that I could not fully distinguish the sources of vital, earthy smells. The motivation for this pilgrimage, a newborn lamb, was so innocent as to be unafraid of my nephew or me.

Matthew scooped up his fresh produce and brought him out for my inspection. Just as he did, some ancient masterful movement swept me up as well. In an instant, I was no longer standing there beside this fledgling shepherd and his fertile flock; I was translated and released into a harmony greater than my own consciousness. I knew a kinship with that mysterious animal instinct to procreate and preserve its race.

I was no longer in the world of narration where there is a beginning, a middle, and an end. My whole being was instantly connected to timelessness. The event was multidimensional, immeasurable, surprisingly sensual, and the effect of it even now is like a fragrance wafting in my memory, nuzzling my consciousness for a rational description.

I am helpless to call another moment like it unto myself. It is a helplessness which does not frustrate me. I am relieved that I am not expected to make or grasp what I cannot fully describe. I am content with the memory of that moment's effect which continues to breed an appetite in me to find unexpected riches in my daily life. In this surprising effect called hope, I do all that I am capable of

doing to create what I think of as my solitary self. In the waiting, I experience joy and I know rest.

These gifts of joy and rest and hope are associated with words like grace, bliss, and music, but none of them coalesce into a narrative sufficient to tell the whole story. These words are little more than symbolic features of this event I call the creation of the solitary self. The features demand our attention, we want to perpetuate the joy, the grace, the rest, by telling not what happened but by testifying that it did happen. In this act of procreation, more clues emerges about our character and the nature of being human: We are social and solitary, together and alone. Silent and garrulous. Needy and independent.

In the telling of stories and in the blissful acceptance that we cannot tell them all, we preserve an aspect of our humanity that is both mortal and eternal.

BREAKFAST WITH THE GRAND MASTER

I couldn't look at him while he poured his coffee, so I looked down and studied his old gentleman's shoes instead, a real leather pair in a deep burgundy color that can't be bought anymore. The color of old blood. Shoes that were hand-rubbed to a cloth-whipped gloss.

The author of A Summons to Memphis entered the hotel's breakfast room with a cane, his body a tremble, the corner of his mouth permanently distorted by last year's stroke. He has the body of an old man, but the eyes of a young boy. His voice was a surprising old man's rasp when he asked the waitress for eggs. She was running for silverware and had trouble deciphering his post-stroke stutter blended with a Tennessee drawl. The rest of us studied our continental breakfasts, not knowing any better than she how to tell the aged writer that there were no eggs to be had--just fruit and bran and nuts and other forms of fiber.

A brisk young clerk was called from the front desk to determine the cause of discomfort in the elegant breakfast room. He did not know when he entered that at every table a

writer of some kind--at some stage of his or her career--was watching this painful scene as one of our own, the recent Pulitzer Prize winner, was revealed barebones without the mask of his fiction. Together, we saw the hand that had held the pen for so many years, and it was shaking.

"I need eggs within fifteen minutes. I'm diabetic," he apologized. "I just took my shot."

It was not a calm request. There was a rising panic in the statement, and a fearfulness, and aloneness. There were witnesses trained to see these details who maintained a careful cover chatter of normalcy and good humor: the black activist from California, a powerful book review editor of a prominent Southern newspaper, a senior editor of a New York publishing house, a writer of a recent biography on Truman Capote, and there was me.

I sat right behind Peter Taylor while the desk clerk assured him that eggs could be gotten from a drug store breakfast counter next door. 'Would you prefer toast or biscuits?' The clerk's tone was calm, designed to create the illusion that old age and diabetes don't exist in his breakfast room.

We know all about creating illusions, and in a collective, willing suspension of disbelief we pretended along with our hero that we really weren't on a fifteen-minute deadline.

The old writer steadied his hand against the table, and answered, playing his part, "Oh, toast, I think."

Thereafter, our hero pretended to read his newspaper and sip hot coffee. No one appeared to notice when he fretted with a piece of unwanted croissant.

During that fifteen-minute interval of group torture, a kind of frenzied networking went on--a smoke screen of activity to camouflage our watching him. Kvetching against Tom Woolf's last novel grew ripe. The black writer activist from California, grayed and crumpled in a corduroy cardigan, table-hopped by invitation. At a Southern writers' conference, white writers do back flips to prove how liberal we are to black writers from California.

I watched it all while paralyzed with the terrible burden of knowing that no one in the room had even bid good morning to the honoree of this conference, the author about to be named the Grand Master.

The brisk young man reappeared at last, and when he did, the slow motion of time on hold finally gave way. Real breakfasting commenced.

Silent and alone, the old man swallowed his scrambled eggs and finally ate the toast. I could taste every mouthful. The eggs were cold, the toast was dry. When he was finished, those of us who had not recognized the famous man before, moved eagerly to shake his hand and to offer felicitations for his most recent honor.

"Is there anything I can do....?" Now the question was respectfully asked when his answer could be a gracious and dignified no.

An hour later, I saw the writer again, holding the microphone loosely, smiling with a kind of Peter O'Toole effortless charm, charming me--charming us all.

"When I discovered that one of my main characters had to die, I almost fainted," he confessed. The crowd of listening writers laughed in understanding.

Then, artfully, he invited us to tease him about his age, his slowness. He mentioned his stroke, a faulty memory. He painted his failings as eccentricities to be expected in the creator of Southern characters.

In a state of grace, we were drawn by an expert storyteller into a world of his creation, not his personal life, but to the personae he created for his audience: a mask of fiction invented for writing workshops like this one....and suddenly, he was all a-tangle in the cord of the microphone. But now his movements did not seem like the motions of an old ill man, they were the befuddled props of a famous storyteller.

His blue eyes grew intense. I saw the hero now as vulnerable, but not without his defenses. We were invited to join him, but we held at a distance, too. The old master's foot pointed out from his body, away from him, the only physical indication that the artist was holding

something of himself in reserve. That one foot successfully maintained the limit of any stranger's approach.

I looked down and admired once again his elegant pair of real leather shoes. They were the color of old blood. Not a color you can buy these days. They gleam a dull, rich gloss. I saw the tiny scratches from wear and was reminded of a horse's shiny coat, an easy chair, the leather of a Bible that is well-read.

During the question and answer period, someone called out to the grand master, "What do you say to the new deconstructionism in literary criticism?"

This question was a set-up. Someone always asks him that. His response was expected, will become part of his legend. We were not disappointed. He played the part well. After the right dramatic pause, he tilted his head and answered, "I say, Ha-Ha!" He was flirting with us. Like everyone else, I was willing to be seduced. I stared into his eyes and recognized the tender mercies abiding there. They were the eyes of a lover, someone in love with life still. They appeared to be the eyes of a young boy, but, they were not innocent. I recalled that the black activist from California has eyes like that.

WORDS OF LOVE

Too late, I realized that I had given the guest of honor at a book fair the impression that I, his appointed hostess for the day, suffered from multiple personality disorder. The misconception evolved because I talk too much without saying exactly what I mean.

First, I apologized for picking him up late, which sounded peculiar because I wasn't late. I considered myself tardy, because I was not as early as I meant to be. I mumbled the excuse that I had been daydreaming and lost track of the time. The truth was just as I was pulling out of the drive way (right on schedule!) I looked down, saw my bosoms pulsing out over the top of scooped neck blazer, and so I stopped the car and went back inside to change. I did not want my cleavage to prevent a frank discussion of a subject this man has made famous: handling sin.

After I got my bosoms tucked into something higher cut, I collected my guest and took him to breakfast (I could not swallow a grit), and instead of growing disenchanted with my hero, which is what is supposed to happen in real life, I

felt myself fall-dingley-heels-over-head more and more fascinated with him.

He was oblivious to my admiration, speaking lovingly of his wife. I always think this quality is so very attractive in a married man. That conversation, the timbre of his voice, the amusement glinting in his knowing blue eyes stirred me, and in order to hide my deepening emotions and a not unpleasant desire that made me regret the covering of my cleavage, I talked faster and faster about my three sisters. Because I was fairly hip-hopping in a high-pitched voice, he began to suspect that I was telling my autobiography rather than describing my three absent siblings. Suspicion that I was a disorderly multiple personality was born. I saw it happen, but I couldn't help it.

Later, after he read from his assorted works to the book fair audience, I dutifully persevered in keeping him well-fed, and over lunch, having run out of polite praise and innocuous conversation, tried to present myself as a kind of time's witness by nervously recounting a story about uncivil seasons featuring Martin Luther King, Jr.'s march from Selma, a subject I have written about extensively. Unfortunately, when I tried to tell my personal story about what happened to me when King came to town my memory went haywire, and I got the dates wrong. Anyone who can add or subtract would have to deduce that the action of the plot must have happened to some older woman, and even as he was

digesting the strange story, I could see that there were too many discrepancies in my rendition for it to be believable; but this did not happen because the story wasn't true--I simply kept losing my train of thought whenever he looked into my eyes.

Rather than try to remember my real age or reconstruct the schedule of King's pilgrimage from Selma to Montgomery, I confessed that I sometimes tell a story that happened to my older sister as if it happened to me. Such are the mysterious and indivisible connections of sisterhood.

I believe it was this confession which cinched his growing suspicion that I was more than just the one woman sitting in front of him. I saw him rethink the details of our day together, and beginning with my admission that I had lost a chunk of time that morning (a classic symptom of multiple personality disorder), he began to suspect that there were a bunch of women inside of me; and sometimes they came out under different names, and I called these people my sisters.

So I said just as sincerely as I knew how, "I really do have a sister named Mary Ellen." Then, after he made a strange joke about whether she looked anything like Olivia d' Havilland, I attempted to conventionalize the conversation by offering him a plate of Italian ice cream. Of course, I could tell that I was offering him too much personal attention, but when a woman wants to shower a man

with words of love about painting roses red and climbing delectable mountains the pressure to profess great devotion is relieved by the simple preferments of ice cream and alcohol.

Fortified by a Bloody Mary and espresso, (and though I don't smoke, I craved a cigarette) we finally made it back to the car. While fastening his seat belt, he asked me to take him to the Zelda Fitzgerald museum, and, by the way, what did I think of Zelda? Naturally, since he was eyeing me strangely by this time, I thought this was a trick question.

In the tradition of many Southern women, Zelda was a little crazy, (I think being in the presence of her love, F. Scott may have caused the impression of it, maybe she wasn't); and, feeling that this writer beside me with his own Gatsbyish appeal was beginning to think I was a kindred sister of Zelda, I decided instantly to distance myself from any identification with a documented fruitcake as quickly as possible.

Preferring to be thought ignorant rather than nuts, I answered mildly, my right shoulder rising in an artful shrug, "I do not know much about her."

This conversation occurred while I zoomed across four lanes of interstate traffic to reach an exit that had sneaked up on me. That's when I caught a glimpse of myself in the rear view mirror and slammed on the brakes because I

have never been particularly comfortable in the afternoons with the face I draw on in the morning; and sometimes, when I catch a flashing glance of a face that doesn't look like who I think I am, I automatically try to stop the car and make that other girl get out.

We survived this uncomfortable moment, which I explained by saying I thought something was wrong with the seat belts. Taking this as some kind of cue, my guest then informed me that four of his siblings were psychiatrists. Naturally, this comment signaled to me that his question about Zelda was less innocent than the context he provided, which was a scholar's interest in F. Scott's better half. Which was too bad, because all I ever really wanted this man to see in me was that I am deeply sane and that, out of a great sanity, comes a sincere and well-conceived adoration of his work, and naturally, him, too.

The words were always there, bubbling passionately under the surface of this personae I dress up and send out into the world to behave as a mature, sophisticated reader of all kinds of books and knows better than to love from afar. I read, and I know this position can never be resolved dramatically. But, I was a completely bedazzled bookworm who loves this man's books, and I kept moaning silently to myself with unrequited fervor, "Ah, but for a sheaf of foolscap upon which to write my words of love!"

MY SISTER. MY DADDY.

As soon as my sister could remember who she was, she cut off her famous long fingernails that she loved and removed the red nail polish.

"When Dad told me how my hands curled up and spasmed while I was having the seizure, I knew my hands must have scared him. You know how he hates long fingernails." Mary Ellen drew her hands up under her chin to show me the potential effect. "I bet my hands looked like bird talons to Dad. I hate to think about it. I hate it happened when I was with him. It will take him so long to forget it."

Mary Ellen is right.

Dad has been having flashbacks of my sister suffering a startling grand mal seizure while they were taking their morning constitutional in the park.

I think about it happening again, and my chest tenses. I can barely breathe. My sister. My sister. My sister.

Forcing myself to exhale, I attempted to speak in neutral tones. "Dad hasn't mentioned your fingernails to me, Mary. He keeps saying how it happened so suddenly. You

hadn't walked twenty feet and, suddenly, you just nosedived into the grass. He thought you were going to die."

"I hate he got so scared, because I knew I wasn't going to die, but I couldn't make myself heard. I remember lying on the ground. I was aware of the other walkers stopping to watch, and I could sense that another seizure was coming, and I kept thinking why did Dad have to be the one to see it. I tried to warn him. I whispered as loud as I could, "Oh, Daddy. Oh, Daddy. Oh, Daddy."

"He says he never heard you." When I caught up with Dad in the emergency waiting room, he was pale, his skin was clammy, and he was self-conscious about being in a public place in his exercise outfit. He was chilled, and my arm around his shoulders could not stop his trembling.

Tears streamed while he repeated what had happened. "When she stopped breathing, I knew she was going to die. Her face was white. Her lips turned blue. My baby. My baby. My baby."

I told Mary, "When I got to the hospital I had to get him a shirt from my car to put on because he was ashamed to be seen in his tee-shirt."

"What were you doing with a man's shirt in your car?"

"You know me."

"You still keep a spare brassiere and pantyhose underneath the seat?"

I laughed. "I have at times been glad to have them on board."

"It's amazing, isn't it, how we think we are prepared for anything that can happen, and then something does happen, and nothing we've envisioned or planned to do is enough."

I suppose that element of surprise which gave birth to shock and fear and flashbacks explains why my sister and dad continue to talk about the seizure that happened to them both. To all of us now.

As they continue to remember, the story is refined. I find myself waiting for them to tell me the same story, for their respective versions to coalesce into a whole, but a month has passed and neither one can agree on exactly what transpired that morning. The seizure remains a tale of mystery that ironically unveils much deeper about the indivisible connections of family.

Mary insists that she tried to call to Dad to warn him and urge him not to worry. Each time she tells what happened, her voice shifts and she recreates her lament, "Oh, Daddy. Oh, Daddy. Oh, Daddy." Dad shakes his head, no, because he never heard her. He tells her that holding her in his arms, he cried, "My, baby. My baby. My baby."

She shakes her head and holds out a hand to comfort him now, and he doesn't see what she has tried to do for him by cutting off her famous fingernails.

My breath catches because I understand how much they mean to each other, and I feel afresh how much each one means to me. When I can exhale, I pray, "My sister. My Daddy," but they don't hear me.

LIVING WITH STRANGERS

My new kelly green coat lined in green silk was lying on the floor and I couldn't remember leaving it there. Lying next to it were my sister Mary Ellen's cherry red wool coat made just like mine, and Pattie Kate's blue one--PK always chose blue, blue everything. Those coats might have looked as if they were laid out for burial except for the arms--these were spread out to the side like little arms reaching for hugs. Only Mama wasn't doing any hugging that day. She was just sitting there in a living room chair we were not allowed to climb on, her face resting in her hand while she stared at our new coats lying on the floor.

"You need something, Mother?"

Silently she shook her head. And then Mary Ellen asked, "Is anything wrong?" Again, silence.

Pattie Kate leaned over, picked up her blue coat and started to hang it in the living room closet. Mother stopped her, "You put that coat right back on that floor."

Pattie Kate began to cry as she spread her coat out again on the floor. Our garments remained there like that

through dinner. Mother wouldn't let us hang them up, and she wouldn't explain. The strain was intense and unforgettable.

Naturally, I thought at first that my sisters had done something stupid, and I was being blamed for it along with them. I hated being punished when I hadn't done anything wrong, hated having my pretty green coat there on the floor falsely accusing me of a crime I hadn't committed. As soon as I could, I sneaked in there and hung up my coat. Mary Ellen followed me; and Pattie Kate, still teary-eyed, was finally able to slip by my mother and hide her coat away.

Years later, I still marvel at that day and wonder if my mother was teaching us a lesson in being responsible or if it was something else. I wonder if my mother looked at our coats that day and wondered who her children were. Maybe she laid them out on the floor to marvel that the creatures who wore them did not bear the resemblance to her that she had expected. I didn't know the answer then; I don't know it now. That was the first time in my childhood when I realized that I would not always understand my mother--but it would be many years before I would know that I couldn't be my mother or even much of a mirror-image of her. I felt this separation vaguely that day, as if it were a crime that I had committed unintentionally but for which I was being punished anyway by having my coat held hostage.

That green coat of mine is always a verdant touchstone in my memory when I realize anew that there were reasons for my parents' behavior and values that I would never fully understand. I discovered that there were notions my parents espoused that were not universal truths after all, not amendments to the Ten Commandments, not maxims I needed to write down and live by forever. They were my parents' truths--the ones they had named and lived by in order to survive and get ahead and raise a family. They were guidelines that had worked for my folks and that I respected but which would have no personal relevance for me, ironically, because of the secure life they provided for us. Both my parents grew up poor, and it changed them deep down and forever.

Occasionally, my father, an orphan, alludes to the time when he was a boy and lived off of an avocado tree in Florida for several weeks. "That tree kept me from going hungry," is all he ever says about it.

Years later in between Sunday School and church service, he would give us girls two dimes to buy two small Cokes to drink before service. He wouldn't take a single sip of our precious Coca Colas, but he would watch us drink them. His refusal to partake was a discipline that never made sense to us. But even now that Cokes are so abundantly available, he still takes a juice glass of Coke Classic for refreshment and never more than one small glass at a time

even where there are a dozen liter bottles in the cabinet. But he doesn't begrudge our drinking them, opens them up with gusto as if they were bottles of expensive champagne, and just as he once did between church and Sunday school, he will sometimes just watch us drink. It's as if he admires our ability to drink extravagantly a whole Coke with so little conscience, without having to count the cost--I don't understand it and I can't talk him out of it, but like my mother who couldn't make us see the value of our coats when were children, I, as old today as my mother was then, fail at trying. It's the eternal impasse that a history of living together and loving each other cannot overcome.

The other day while chatting with a friend in parking lot of Wal-mart, I remembered this fundamental truth about the inevitability of recognizing our separateness between family members. Fern, the mother of three children, is a woman I admire, who is always devising charts and using gold stars to inspire good behavior in her rambunctious children. They are likable kids, spirited. Not being their mother, I can afford to enjoy their transgressions.

I've seen my friend battle with herself over making maternal decisions. I've seen her try to reason with her children, try to figure out where to draw the line on behavioral problems. She works outside the home, and the division of labor takes its toll on her efforts. Like any conscientious mother, she wants her children to look good,

to represent her efforts well in the world. She told me that her children sometimes surprise her, frustrate her, disappoint her--fail to hang up their clothes. Idly, I asked her what it was like these days to raise three kids.

"This was the best year of my life," she said. I marvelled that a grown-up could ever make a confession like that one out loud, because I have found that the years kind of run together now with no one year being so much better or worse than another. So, I asked her what she meant.

"I have learned that I must accept my children as they are. I've realized that although I gave birth to them, my children are not me. It boils down to the fact that they just aren't me." She said this marvelling, and I had a sudden flash of memory--of my mother sitting in our living room holding her chin in her hand staring at our beautiful, warm winter coats. I wondered at the time what my mother was thinking. The action of laying us out on the floor taught us a discipline but it was also the moment, I think, when my mother looked at us as strangers living in the same house and realized that as much as she loved us, we weren't her and we weren't going to be a whole lot like her--and that it was okay that we weren't. Maybe.

While those coats lay there empty of us on the floor that day, my mother faced that first real scary idea when family members begin to suspect that they are living with strangers. And the question lasted until long after we

girls had slipped off one by one to try and hide the troublesome notion away--to hide the proof of our separateness in a dark living room closet.

Maybe it took my mother a long time to get over being disappointed in us or confused or even mad at us for not being better children, more responsible, more like her and Dad--more grateful for the comfortable, secure life they had provided. Or, maybe--I like to hope--that day of seeing us as strangers was the beginning of one of the best years of her life.

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