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"Early Retirement" and other stories (Original writing)

Ardis Coffman

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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"Early Retirement" and other stories. [Original writing]

Coffman, Ardis, M.A.
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1993

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EARLY RETIREMENT AND OTHER STORIES

by

Ardis Coffman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Department of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
May 1993
The Thesis of Ardis Coffman for the degree of Master of Arts in English is approved.

Chairperson, Richard Wiley, M.F.A.

Examinig Committee Member, Douglas Unger, M.F.A.

Examinig Committee Member, Robert Dodge, Ph.D.

Graduate Faculty Representative, John Swetnam, Ph.D.

Graduate Dean, Ronald W. Smith, Ph.D.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
May 1993
The six short stories that make up *Early Retirement* are set in a town called Arcadia, somewhere in the Midwest. The characters are Baby Boomers, that group of Americans born in the post World War II years of 1943 to 1958. Themes are drawn from Greek Mythology.
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The glass surface of the greenhouse mirrored activity in the park. As Ellen Mason arranged a display of purple narcissus mums, she watched people meander among the tables of flowers behind her. She watched them point to the red, white and blue ribbons, sometimes nodding in approval, and sometimes snorting in derision. This watching while her back was turned delighted her -- spying with no risk of being caught. She watched her husband, Nate, carry a display table from the pile under a tree and struggle to unfold the legs. She watched his expression, the determined set of his jaw, noting that he seemed busy and content for a change.

Now who was this? Ellen monitored in the glass the graceful approach of a familiar young woman, a newcomer to Arcadia. She searched her memory for the name. Ellen always filed away a phrase to remember names. A pretty girl is like a Melody -- Melody Perkins, the wife of the pharmacy intern at Drew Drug. A pretty girl indeed! Long auburn hair, Mediterranean blue eyes, seductive young body combined with wholesome good looks.

She watched Nate set the table on its feet, and turn
toward Melody. She noted with amusement that he stood at full attention, chins and stomach tucked in, chest puffed out.

"Hello, Mrs. Mason," said Melody's voice at her back.
Ellen turned around, feigning surprise. "Why, Melody, how nice to see you."

"I didn't know there was a garden club in Arcadia. This show is wonderful."

"Thank you. This is our twentieth year, and the first one my husband has been available to help. Melody, I'd like you to meet my husband, Nate."

Nate nudged his wife against the table in his eagerness to take the girl's hand.

"Well, hello, Melody," he said in a voice half an octave below his usual tenor.

At that moment a man by the walkway signaled for Melody's attention. She ignored Nate's outstretched hand seeming not to see him at all.

"Excuse me," she said to Ellen in a pre-occupied tone. "Something I have to take care of." She walked swiftly away, her leather sandals whispering on the dying grass. Nate stood with his hand stretched out between the pots of mums. His face turned the color of the terra-cotta planters. In her mind a warning bell rang. Another storm approaching.

Life had been difficult since Nate retired as manager of the lawn furniture factory. The first week at home he announced he would build a boat in the backyard.
"Let's buy one," Ellen said. "We can afford it."

Nate was adamant. It must be built by his hand. He ordered 15 manuals on shipbuilding. Each day he met the mailman at the front walk inquiring after his books, but by the time they began to arrive, Nate's attention had turned elsewhere. He piled his expensive purchases on a shelf in the basement without a glance inside.

He was busy with his new interest -- housekeeping. For days he followed Ellen and the cleaning lady making notes as they worked. At the end of the week he handed Ellen a time and motion study outlining inefficient procedures.

"The problem is," he said, "women keep house exactly as their mothers did with no thought for modern methods or technology."

"When are you starting on the boat?" Ellen sighed.

But Nate would not be put off. At the library he checked out a book called Homecare for the 21st Century. He read it in an afternoon and the next morning, following the writer's advice, he rose at 5 a.m. and started vacuuming -- under the bed where Ellen lay sleeping. By ten he stripped and waxed the floors.

"Nate," Ellen complained, "that's no-wax tile."

He spent nearly $1000 on new electrical appliances to make cleaning more efficient. When Ellen complained about the expense, he fired the cleaning lady.
"We'll save enough to cover the cost," he said. "All you have to do is approach this in a businesslike way. A house should run as efficiently as a factory."

Within a few weeks Nate grew bored with his new career. Using the appliances gave him backaches, he said, and the detergents made his hands break out. Ellen rehired the cleaning lady at an extra five dollars a day.

When planning began for the annual flower show, Ellen offered Nate as a helper. Perhaps community service would capture his interest. He purchased white table clothes and satin ribbons, complaining all the while they could get a better deal if they bought wholesale. But he did seem to enjoy himself - -until Melody Perkins' snub.

The morning after the show Nate announced, "I'm going on a diet. I need to lose twenty pounds."

"Okay," Ellen agreed, "I could lose a pound or two myself. How about bacon, eggs and hashbrowns this morning before we set out on the road to health?"

Nate mulled the suggestion. "No," he said, "I'm beginning right now."

For the next six weeks Ellen prepared healthful, low fat meals. Nate began running in the park at dawn. Near Halloween he pointed out that his paunch was less pronounced as he sat at the table eating low fat cottage cheese on toast. By Thanksgiving he posed each morning before the antique framed mirror at the bottom of their bed.

"See that," he said as he sucked his stomach in under
his rib cage. "It’s ten pounds now." As the Christmas season approached he’d lost 15. Ellen cheated on her diet after the first week. She kept a package of chocolate chip cookies behind the cleaning products under the sink. Once Nate’s cleaning phase ended, it was the safest secret place in the house.

One morning as Nate stood naked before the bedroom mirror, he suddenly looked closely at his face.

"Hand me my glasses," he ordered his wife who was still lying under the comforter. "Oh, oh," he said, glaring into the mirror, "I’ve got crow’s feet."

"So? You’re 55 years old," Ellen said. "You’ve earned them."

"I never had crow’s feet before. It’s the weight loss. My face is thinner."

Ellen sighed. "Fat people don’t have wrinkles, Nate. You can’t have it both ways."

"Oh, yes I can," he said. When had she seen that look on his face? Ah, yes, 1972 when the chain stores undercut his prices with a cheap line of patio recliners. He had refused to be run out of business and eventually won his old customers back.

For a moment, she saw again the tenacious, optimistic boss she fell in love with 30 years ago. Ellen had been Nate’s secretary. From the first day he appeared at the factory as a manager trainee, she knew he was the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. Nate’s enthusi-
asm infected everyone he touched. He took a small factory in a nowhere town and turned it into the leading manufacturer of lawn furniture in the country. When the owners sold out last year, Nate was rewarded with stock and other benefits that assured them a comfortable and happy retirement.

Off and on over the next few days, Nate muttered to himself as he passed mirrors. Then one day at lunch, he made an announcement: "I've got an appointment with a plastic surgeon in the city.

"What for?"

"I'm getting my eyes fixed."

"You're kidding me."

"The hell I am. Listen, Ellen, you may be willing to let yourself go, but that doesn't mean I have to."

"I resent that," she said, dropping a Christmas gift she was wrapping.

"Okay, okay, I didn't mean it that way. But, look, doesn't it bother you that you're not the best looking woman in a room anymore? You were once, you know."

Ellen considered the question. "I guess I had a twinge or two the first time I realized men didn't look at me in quite the same way they used to, but I got over it."

"We have to get old, but we don't have to look old."

"What's wrong with enjoying who you are? I look at young women - like that pretty Melody we met at the flower show, and I think 'isn't she lovely?' But I sure don't want
His face fell. Mentioning Melody was a mistake.

The surgery was done a week later in the doctor's office under general anesthetic. Ellen accompanied Nate, sitting in the pastel waiting room staring at the silver and pink walls until the operation ended. Then she drove home, navigating the icy roads alone as he slept off the tranquilizer the doctor gave him.

For a few days the skin at the outer edge of his eyes looked starched, but that disappeared. They attended six different holiday parties, and not a single person noticed the difference in Nate's face. Still, he was happy. He studied himself constantly in the bedroom mirror.

"I think I'll get a hair transplant," he said brushing at the bare spots retreating on either side of his forehead.

"What about your boat? Isn't it time you started?"

"Just think how good I'll look standing at the wheel with the sea breeze blowing through my thick hair."

"Blowing though the holes in your thick head is more like it," she muttered.

"I heard that, Ellen. My hearing is great. I just want to look good. Is that so bad?"

In the dermatologist's office Ellen watched when Nate's first transplant was done. The nurse settled him into a reclining chair, then the doctor entered and set to work. Just like needlepoint, Ellen thought, as she watched the doctor remove hair at the base of the skull and punch it
into the front of Nate’s forehead with a needle-like tool. Blood ran across his eyebrows and into his ears. The doctor handed Ellen a clamp wedged with cotton.

"Wipe that up," he said.

The room grew fuzzy around the edges. "I think I’ll wait outside." Ellen took deep breaths to fight nausea.

Four more office visits were required to complete the transplant. On the following visits Ellen stayed in the outer waiting room.

Not all of the transplants thrived. Nate mourned every tuft of hair that landed in the sink. Still, most of the grafts stayed in place, and she had to admit the effect was pleasing. He did look younger. Ellen critically surveyed her own salt and pepper mane in the bathroom mirror, and wondered if it might be time to begin coloring it. What if people think you're Nate's mother, she asked the image in the glass. Well, what if they do, Ellen? You know who you are. What do you care what people think? She slammed her brush down on the counter, disgusted with herself.

A few weeks later, Nate told her about the liposuction.

"There's really nothing to it," Nate explained, "they inject a solvent into the thighs and vacuum out the fat."

"Will you listen to yourself? 'The thighs.' That's your inviolate body you're talking about. What's the matter with you?"

"There's nothing the matter with me. Anything that
makes you feel good about yourself...."

"Stop quoting Ann Landers."

"Dear Abby, and you don’t have to go with me. I’ll get someone else to drive."

"That’s a good idea. I’m not sure how much more of this I can stomach."

Nate developed an infection from the liposuction. His fever soared to 104. His right upper leg swelled to the size of a watermelon. The doctor told Ellen to put on alternating hot and cold packs and to pick up a prescription he would phone into the pharmacy at Drew Drug.

It was five minutes to closing time when Ellen hurried into the drug store. The pharmacist on duty was the owner, Conrad Drew, a man she had known since grade school.

"How’s Nate?" he asked, as he handed her the prescription. "This is a heavy duty antibiotic you got here."

Without meaning to, Ellen found herself pouring out the story of her husband’s medical adventures. Tears slid down the side of her face as she spoke. Conrad came out from behind the counter and put his arms around her. She cried into his white coat.

"I’m sorry," she said. "I guess I didn’t know how upset I was until I told someone."

Conrad seated her at a round table near the lunch counter and poured her a coke. He rang up a last customer, a lady buying a birthday card, locked the front door and turned the sign to "closed."
"What's gotten into Nate?" he asked as he sat down beside her.

"Melody Perkins."

"Melody, my trainee's wife?"

"Yes. The whole thing is so stupid. I introduced Melody to him one day and she didn't even see him. To her he's just an old man. Nate can't take that. He's decided to be young again."

They talked for half an hour shifting the conversation gradually to their school days when Conrad was called "cowpie," and to the death two years ago of his wife, Susan. Suddenly Ellen looked up at the clock and realized an hour had passed.

"I shouldn't have left him alone so long. He needs this medicine."

"Sleep will do him more good than anything."

She stood up. "Thanks, Conrad. It's really nice to have an old friend, or maybe I should say a long-time friend."

"Old's fine," Conrad said.

For two weeks Nate did nothing but watch game shows on cable. Ellen brought his meals to the living room and helped him into the bathroom.

"No more, Nate," she said, when he'd recovered enough to pay attention.

"You've got that 'I really mean it' tone in your voice."
"I really mean it."

"Okay, okay, just contact lenses. Then I quit."

He chose turquoise blue lenses, quite a change from the gray-green eyes he usually wore. When he returned from the optometrist, he walked into the kitchen blinking and beaming. Ellen bit her lip to hold back the laughter. Later in the day he spent $1600 on a turquoise and silver necklace to match his eyes. He began wearing his shirts open to show off the jewelry.

More and more Ellen found she needed items from Drew Drug: a pair of nylons, a case for her reading glasses, a box of envelopes. Conrad seemed delighted to see her. One day he asked her to lunch. She started to say no.

"I can take a few hours off," Conrad said. "I know a great restaurant in Milton. Unlikely we'd see anyone we know."

Well, why not, Ellen thought. Nate would never miss her. Several weeks ago he had joined Gym and Trim when he felt his chest didn't meet the standards set by his turquoise necklace. He would be there for two or three hours lifting weights and swimming in the pool.

She enjoyed the drive to Milton. A storm two days earlier whitened the winter fields and decorated the trees with sparkling ice. Conrad pulled off on a side road.

"Want to walk?" he asked. "There's an old pair of Susan's snowboots in the trunk."

They tramped through a wooded area under tall maple
trees, their boots squeaking against the snow. A squirrel darted across their path carrying a nut. He dropped it for a moment to scold them, then grabbed it again and scampered up the tree.

"That reminds me," Conrad said, "I'm hungry too."

"It's so pleasant here. I hate to leave."

They stood for a moment, looking up at the tree, watching the squirrel watch them, then Conrad put his arms around her and kissed her. His large bear-like body felt good against hers, warm and protecting.

"I'm going to a pharmacy convention in San Diego next month. I'd like you to go with me." he said.

Her first response was anger. What kind of woman did he think she was? One who sneaks around behind her husband's back? Well, she asked herself, what are you doing right now?

She smiled. "Do you know I had a tremendous crush on you in high school?"

"You did? You should have told me."

"Didn't you notice me hanging around you dad's drug store? I used all my baby sitting money buying cherry cokes, so I'd have an excuse to sit at the counter and watch you make malts."

"Come to San Diego with me and I'll make it up to you."

She looked out over the snow covered landscape. "I don't think so, Conrad, though I've got to admit it's a damned attractive offer."
The restaurant, as promised, served excellent food. The walk in the snow had increased their appetites and they ordered seconds on everything. Ellen thought she had never enjoyed a meal so much. It was wondrous the way Conrad stowed food away. Quite a contrast to Nate's recent mealtime behavior. He kept a scale by his plate and weighed his portions.

"These prawns are wonderful," she said. "I've forgotten what fat fried food tastes like."

"I eat out most of the time. Can't stand to be in the house alone."

"You really miss Susan, don't you?"

"Miss doesn't cover it. Sometimes I feel like the earth just opened up and swallowed her. One minute she's there, and the next gone."

"Someone told me it was a brain aneurysm."

He nodded. "She was probably born with a defect in the artery."

They found themselves discussing odd and sudden deaths of people they knew. A pall settled over the table, until the waitress carried in a huge plate of peach cobbler.

"Life's uncertain. Cut me a big piece," Ellen said. Conrad almost choked on his laughter.

By mid-afternoon they returned home to Arcadia. As she got out of Conrad's car he said,

"Remember. The offer's still open."
During the next month Nate went faithfully to the Gym and Trim each day and each morning he checked out the progress of his pectoral muscles in the mirror at the foot of the bed.

"Not good enough," he muttered. "Nothing happening."

Ellen shopped at the supermarket and stayed away from Drew Drug. Her behavior embarrassed her. What could she have been thinking going off to a mid-day assignation? Really it was not like her and she resolved to never do it again. Still, she looked at herself in the bedroom mirror from time to time and said, well, lady, you may be 53, overweight with stretchmarks and fallen arches, but somebody wants you. Clearly, Nate didn't. They had not made love in months.

She missed that -- maybe not the sex as much as Nate's silliness, his sense of adventure. Over the years they had exercised their conjugal rights in the most unlikely of places -- once even in the balcony of the First Baptist Church while the choir practiced in the loft at the other end of the sanctuary. She loved that boyish impulsiveness in Nate. It countered her serious, careful nature. They balanced each other; they were a set -- until recently. She wondered if Nate as he strove toward perfection was repelled by her ageing body -- or was he just tired from all the weight lifting?

One afternoon as she was changing the TV Guide in the
pouch next to Nate's chair she found brochures from a plas-
tic surgeon explaining a procedure called a chest implant.

"What's this, Nate?"

A red tinge of embarrassment crept up his neck. "Some-
thing I got from the doctor."

"It looks awful."

"It's a silicone implant. It goes in your chest to
make it larger. They sort of stretch the skin over it."

"Oh, no!"

"Now just a minute, Ellen. I haven't decided to have
it done. I just asked about it."

"Nate, you promised!"

It was only a matter of time until he informed her of
the date for the operation. Ellen was unsurprised.

"Get yourself cut up anyway you please, but I won't
stay here and watch it. I'm not sure where I'm going, but
I'm leaving."

Of course she did know exactly where she was going - to
San Diego with Conrad Drew. The week of the convention
coincided conveniently with Nate's surgery. Though she told
herself she had forgotten all about the San Diego trip, she
realized the dates were engraved in her memory. She called
Conrad at the pharmacy.

"It's Ellen. I know you're busy, so I'll keep this
short. I'd like to go to San Diego with you after all."

"I have customers here right now, but I'll be happy to
fill that prescription for you. Come in tonight and I'll
have it ready."

When she went to the pharmacy that evening, Conrad gave her a plane ticket. He booked her on a flight later than his, so they would not be seen leaving together. She told Nate she was attending a flower show in San Diego. She left him the number of the hotel where they would be staying, telling him not to call except for extreme emergency.

Nate payed little attention to her plans. He was too excited about his own. He talked to a tailor about altering his jackets to an athletic cut. He engaged a male nurse to stay for a week while he recovered. His good-bye to Ellen as she dropped him off at the hospital door was perfunctory.

"Have a good time, dear."

"I intend to," she said.

Spring had already arrived in San Diego. As Conrad and Ellen drove from the airport to the hotel in Conrad’s rental car they passed green grass, displays of petunias and crocus, and trees starting to leaf. A breeze from the ocean gave the air a fresh, salty smell.

"Ah, spring," Ellen said taking a deep breath. "It’s hard to believe Arcadia is still under a snow blanket."

"Wonderful isn’t it? What do you want to do first?"

Ellen thought for a moment. "Let’s have a hot fudge sundae," she said.

They stopped at a park for ice cream and coffee and then checked into the hotel. When Conrad signed them in as
Conrad and Ellen Drew, she felt the blood rise in her cheeks. She hadn't considered how he would handle the registration. Putting her down as his wife seemed sleazy and cheap. Was the desk clerk looking at her funny? Was that a smirk on the bellboy's face? I'm way out of my element here, she thought. What in the name of God was I thinking when I got myself into this?

The feeling stayed with her in the room as they unpacked suitcases and placed clothes in drawers. Ellen chattered nervously. She brought the wrong clothes, she said. The steward on the airplane threw her a bag of peanuts as if she were a monkey, she said. The view of the bay from the window is gorgeous, she said. Finally she stopped still and covered her face with her hands.

"What's the matter?" Conrad asked.

"I'm scared to death. I've never done anything like this before."

"Me too," Conrad said. "Susan is the only woman I've ever been with."

"I think a hug might help."

He put his arms around her and held her tight rocking her slightly back and forth until she relaxed. She listened to the steady thud of his heart. Slowly they began to undress each other. Conrad's body was thick and sturdy as an oak tree. The whiteness of his underwear indicated it had been newly purchased for the occasion. She found that touching. As she struggled to lift his T-shirt up over
his head, he pulled her down on the bed, and, to her surprise, pulled the sheet up over them.

"Why?" she asked.

"At our age, it's best to cover up," he said.

"And pretend we're 22 again?"

"Wouldn't it be lovely?"

No, Ellen thought, it wouldn't. Desire drained away as if a plug had been pulled. Let's just get this over with, she thought. It will be better the next time. We won't feel so awkward. We'll be more accepting.

Later, they lay side by side holding hands, watching the light of the setting sun move across the room and disappear into twilight. Ellen's last thought before she fell asleep was of Nate.

Ellen was awakened the next morning by a ringing phone. She woke dazed and disoriented unsure where she was. Conrad's pillow still held the indentation of his head, but he was gone. She picked up the phone.

"I have an emergency call," said the hotel operator, "for an Ellen Mason. You were the only Ellen I could find in the registry".

"I'm Ellen Mason," she said.

It was Nate's doctor on the line. Nate's heart stopped on the operating table, he said. "An allergic reaction to the anesthetic. Still in serious condition. Come as soon as you can."

"Will he be okay?" she asked.
"I'm not sure. I've done this operation hundreds of times. This never happened before."

Ellen called the airport and booked a flight, then had the hotel operator page Conrad. He arrived back in the room just as she finished packing. He had wakened hours ago and gone out for breakfast.

"I'll go back with you," he said, when she told him what happened, but she refused. Better that he stay and attend the sessions as he planned. She called a taxi and went to the airport alone. Please let Nate live, she prayed as the taxi sped through the spring morning. Let him live, and I'll never see Conrad Drew again. I love Nate. I have always loved Nate. Don't let him die.

Nate looked tiny and white as bleached bone lying in the hospital bed. So many tubes and wires ran from his body that a metal arm had been rolled to the bed, and the lines attached to it to keep them from tangling. At the head of the bed stood a large black box with a series of dials and flashing lights. Ellen recognized the blood pressure and pulse rate indicators. The others were a mystery. Other machines lined the right side of the bed, robot attendants with neon eyes and beeping voices.

Nate's arms were tied down. IVs were inserted at wrist and elbows. His chest was heavily bandaged. Wires ran down and disappeared inside the gauze. Bags of saline and blood
hung above his head.

Ellen made her way through the jungle of tubes and machinery and took his hand.

Nate opened his eyes -- the old gray-green eyes. He seemed to recognize her. He tried to speak, but the tubes in his mouth and nose made it difficult.

"I came about an hour ago. You were unconscious."

His lips moved in what seemed to be a question, but she could not hear. She put her ear close to his mouth.

"How does my chest look?" he whispered. Then he passed out.

Conrad called her at home that night. "Nate's in bad shape," she said, "I don't know if he'll make it."

For days Nate's vital signs rose and fell. His weakened condition invited infection. Antibiotics cleared up the redness and swelling in one place only to have it occur elsewhere. The changing of bandages was agonizing. Ellen held Nate's hand as the nurses ripped away the layers of gauze. He was too weak to cry out, so Ellen did it for him. His naked chest looked as if he had multiple stab wounds.

Then his body rejected the implant.

"We'll have to remove it", the doctor said, but Nate wouldn't hear of it.

"I went through all this," he said, "I want my pecs."

Conrad came to the house when he returned from San Diego. "Please don't come here again," she said. "My hus-
band is very sick and that’s the only thing I can think of now."

After six weeks in the hospital Nate came home. He was exhausted, but the infection was under control. Ellen poured her vitality into him. She read to him from the ship building manuals. She encouraged him to eat.

The coming of spring seemed to give him new hope. He walked out to the backyard one day to look at the budding flowers. Within a week he walked around the block. Frequently he admired his chest in the mirror when he thought she was not looking.

Conrad called one evening while they were watching television.

"I have to see you," he said. She went up to their bedroom, so she would not be overheard.

"It’s over, Conrad. Please don’t call again."

"Just like that? You can just cut me out of your life so easily?"

"Clean wounds heal best. Let’s just forget..."

"That man is a vain idiot. How can you stay with him?"

"History, I guess. I know he’s vain. I know he’s foolish, but he’s my vain fool. What can I say?"

"I’ll never forget you... never," Conrad said.

About a month later Ellen heard he planned to marry a widow he met at the Methodist Grief Recovery Group.

One summer evening as Nate sat at the card table in the living room paying bills, he reached out and caught Ellen’s
hand as she walked through the room.

"I'm sorry I put us through this. All these bills, all this suffering, for what?"

"Well, you are damned good looking. Of course, I always thought you were."

Nate chuckled.

"Growing pains," she said. "I guess you still get them at our age."

"Not you, Lady Cool. I think you were born mature and sensible."

"Oh, ho, Nate. There's a lot you don't know," she said. And damned if you are ever going to, she added silently.

In September Ellen agreed to help again with the flower show. Nate felt strong enough to also participate, although the doctor warned he must do no lifting. What appeared to be massive muscle was only silicon.

The last Sunday in September found them again arranging flowers outside the glass house in Arcadia Park. This year Melody Perkins joined Ellen on the committee. She spied the couple hard at work and hurried over.

"Ellen," Melody said stopping in front of their table, "I've so wanted to meet your husband."

Nate neither saw nor heard her; he was studying his reflection in the glass.
Hi Mom,

It's hard to believe I'm almost at the end of my senior year. Where has this semester gone? I guess a lot of it went to Hadyn. I've told you about him before, Mother. He's the Air Force Lieutenant I met at a New Year's party. He's liaison for some kind of missile research project at Berkley. I really like him.

That brings me to the point of this letter. Hadyn asked me to go to Louisiana over spring break to meet his parents. I'd love to see you too, of course, but I can't get to both Arcadia and Shreveport in a week. Would you forgive me if I don't come home?

I've been meaning to tell you that the local paper is now running Healing With Herbs. Of course I read it every day. My roommate asked why I had that stack of newspaper clippings on my desk. "This column is what keeps me in this expensive college," I told her. She knew you were a
journalist but I guess she thought you were out digging up scandalous doings by politicians instead of digging up compost heaps. The column's wonderful, of course, witty, wise and honest - like you. Got to go. My anthropology paper beckons.

Love,
Penny

25 Mt Olympus Way
Arcadia
March 24, 1993

Hi Honey,

Going to meet his family, huh? Does this mean you're moving in together? Or are you already co-habiting and you haven't gotten around to telling me about it? Well, whatever.....just don't let it interfere with your studies. Love comes and goes. A career supports you after you forget his name. I'll miss seeing you over vacation, but I'll use the time to organize some of the columns into book form. Bernie thinks he has a bite from Simon & Schuster.

Love,
Mother

Mills College
Oakland, CA
April 3, 1993

Dear Mom,

I had a great time in Shreveport. Met all of Hadyn's school friends. His family is very old south, very conser-
vative. Very polite. They live in a house that’s almost 200 years old. It’s full of antiques. I worried the whole time I’d break something.

I don’t know what they thought of me. I’ve got to tell you about one conversation. Let me set the scene:

We are seated in the family living room in front of the fireplace on two loveseats covered in some kind of black shiny fabric with vines on it. Hadyn and I are on one side of an antique coffee table. His parents are on the other. We are having coffee after dinner. Hadyn’s mother pours from a sterling silver service.

“I understand your mother writes a syndicated column,” says Hadyn’s mother. “How very interesting. Does she use a nom de plume?”

“No,” I say, “She uses her own name, Summer Afternoon.”

“Summer Afternoon? That’s her name?”

“It’s a name she took in the 60s. Henry James said those were the two most beautiful words in the English language, so that’s what she called herself. I think the name on her birth certificate is Dorothy. My mother believes family names are a paternalistic symbol of a society that denigrates women. She says a woman should select her own name when she’s old enough to know who she is.”

“I see.” Her eyebrows raised so high they met her hairline. “And have you selected a name?”

“I’m keeping Penelope. I was named for an aunt my mother was fond of. I’m happy with it. It suits me.”
“A dignified name,” says mother nodding.

Hadyn’s father speaks: “I don’t believe I’ve asked you what your father does for a living.”

“My mother is a single parent,” I say. “She never married.”

Uncomfortable silence. No one knows what to say.

“This coffee service belonged to my great aunt Hattie,” says Hadyn’s mother at last. “My grandmother insisted she once used it to serve General Lee, but you know how those family stories exaggerate.”

I didn’t explain about the artificial insemination. I guess it’s just as well.

Love,
Penny

25 Mt Olympus Way
Arcadia
April 7, 1993

Hi Love,

Hadyn’s parents sound dreadful. Don’t you dare make apologies for who you are. You are a bright, pretty, charming girl who has a great future. What’s more you were a planned and much desired child. How many people can say that?

Spring has come to Arcadia. All the lilacs are in bloom and I’ve had the doors and windows open all week. The only thing missing is you. By the way, I haven’t heard a word about a job. What are you planning to do after you
graduate in June?

This is a short letter. Simon & Schuster say they will look at the book. Unfortunately it does not yet exist so I’m slaving over a hot word processor. The weather is so nice it’s hard to make myself stay inside and work. I’d like to be out there hoeing and planting.

Love,
Mother

Mills College
Oakland, CA
April 13, 1993

Dear Mother,

Three times I’ve started to dial your number today and just couldn’t do it. I think maybe a letter is best for this kind of news. Hadyn asked me to marry him and I said yes. I wish I were good with words like you are so I could explain how I feel about him. Let me try this: The world before I met Hadyn was all pastels. It was pleasant, beautiful often. I didn’t long for what I didn’t know. Now suddenly everything is bright, deep colors. It’s amazing to me. I walk around looking at things saying “wow.” I’m so happy, mother. Please be happy with me.

We want to be married in the campus chapel the Saturday after I graduate. His next assignment is Greenland, a secret project. The base where we’ll be living is underground. That includes headquarters, family housing, medical
clinic, movie theatres, everything. It’s all connected by natural tunnels. Hadyn says if there is a nuclear attack we may be the last people alive on earth. Of course that’s not very likely now that the Ruskies are our new best friends.

There’s so much to think about. We’ll do a military wedding with the bride and groom leaving the chapel under crossed swords. I’ll need a dress, of course. And flowers. My roommate is going to be my maid of honor. Do you remember when I got a Barbie doll in a wedding dress as a birthday present and you took it away from me?

That’s all for now, mother. I know it is going to take some time to digest this news. Please know that I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my life.

Good-night and I love you.

Penny

Charon Cross Manor
Shreveport, LA
April 13, 1993

Dear Summer,

I hope you don’t mind me calling you by your first name though we’ve never met. My husband and I are so pleased that Penny and Hadyn decided to marry. She really is a lovely girl. We did so enjoy having her at our home.

Of course the wedding is going to call for a great deal of planning. I’m sure there are a million things we need to
talk about. We would really love to have you come and visit us the last weekend in April. I believe the children can be here at that time too, so that we can get the invitations underway.

Looking forward to meeting you, I am

Gloria Le Noir

25 Mt Olympus Way
Arcadia
April 16, 1993

Penny,

I tried to call as soon as I got your letter, but there was no answer. I assume you were with Hadyn. Of course I remember the Barbie bride and I remember well why I took it away from you. I wanted you to understand the reality behind the silk and lace. It’s a symbol of slavery as sure as a ball and chain on the ankle. I guess you missed the point. For God’s sake sleep with the man if you must, but don’t marry him. You are aware I assume that a wedding dress is designed to look like a shroud? In some cultures women get married in their shroud and then keep it for burial. Does this tell you something about your expectations if you go through with this idiocy?

Have you given any thought to what you’ll do with yourself all day in this cave in Greenland? What kind of life
is that - never seeing the sun? And what kind of man would
ask you to live it? I’m appalled.

We’ve got to talk. I’ll try to call you again tonight.

Your mother,
Summer Afternoon

25 Mt Olympus Way
Arcadia
April 20, 1993

Dear Mrs. Le Noir,

Thank you for your invitation to visit you, but I must
decline. We would both be wasting our time. Penny has too
much going for her to bury her light in some cave in Iceland
or wherever. I think you will find that my daughter will
soon come to her senses and the wedding will be off.

Summer Afternoon

Mills College
Oakland, CA
April 20,

Dear Mother,

I’m lying here awake after your phone call thinking of
all the things I wanted to say to you and didn’t. Somehow
we ended trying to outshout each other and then you hung up.
So here I am in my pajamas, notepad in hand, trying to find
a way to tell you what I want to say. This is it:

When I was growing up my friends always envied me.
I had that wonderful garden to play in and the nicest mother
in town. You never demanded that I be in at a certain time
or that I make certain grades. As a result I always came home earlier and studied harder than anybody else to make you proud of me. I love and admire you, Mother, but I want a different life from the one you have. I want to be Hadyn’s wife and the mother of his children.

You’re concerned about what I’ll do with myself in Greenland. I’m not. There’s a house to take care of and the Officers Wives Club to attend. We want to start a family right away. I’m excited about being a wife and mother. It’s all I ever wanted. Please try to understand and don’t be upset with me. I don’t want to gain a husband and lose my mother.

Love,
Penny

25 Mt Olympus Way
Arcadia
April 25, 1993

Penny,

Since when did you want to be a wife and mother? I’ve never heard you say such a thing. I think this young man puts ideas in your head. If you go ahead with this medieval rite, don’t expect me to attend.

Enough of that. On to more pleasant things: the book is off to S&S. I’ve been working like a troll to finish. At last I’ve found time to do the spring planting. Ardelle helped me with the plow for the last two day and now we’re
ready to plant. I’m going to put in five rows of sweet corn this year.

Love,
Mother

33 Mt Olympus Way
Arcadia
May 1, 1993

Dear Penny,

I helped your mother with the garden the last couple days and she talked to me bout your wedding. She’s terrible upset. We close friends since you moved to Arcadia 20 years ago and I never seen her in such a dither. You’re her life, girl. Yesterday we was sitting under the Elm tree talking. Summer says, “Do you remember when I fell off my bicycle and got that deep gash in my leg?” Then she starts looking on the back of her calf for the scar. But, of course, it ain’t there. “Summer,” I says, “that was Penny fell off the bike.”

She just can’t bear the the thought of you going away to live in some dark tunnel. Hon, could you reconsider? Maybe just put the wedding off for awhile? Give her a chance to get used to the idea. I know I’m being a Nosy Parker, but it’s awful to see your mother like this.

Your Aunt Ardelle
Dear Mrs. Le Noir,

Hadyn tells me you received a letter from my mother refusing your invitation to visit. I hope you will forgive her. She is not usually rude. She is just having a difficult time adjusting to the idea of losing her little girl. I expect in years to come you will be great friends.

Affectionately,

Penny

Dear Ardelle,

I just returned from taking my last final and found your note in the mailbox. There is no way I can postpone my wedding. The bridesmaids' dresses are ordered. Hadyn's parents have chartered a plane to bring family and friends to San Francisco. The caterer has been paid and the cake ordered. Really it is out of my hands.

Penny

Mom,

Please! Graduation is next Thursday. You don't have to stay for the wedding. Just come for commencement exercises
and go home. I know how important my graduation is to you. Please be here and be part of it.

Penny

Mills College
Oakland, CA
May 17, 1993

Dear Mrs. Afternoon,

I’ve not had the pleasure of meeting you, but I know your daughter well. I’ve been her academic advisor for the four years she’s been here at Mills and I was pleased to act in place of her father at her wedding yesterday. I’m sorry that none of her family was able to come. I wanted you to know that she was the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen, and at 62 I’ve seen a good number. She’s a lovely girl, intelligent and caring and I know you are proud of her. Just thought I’d let you know that everything went well. I believe the newlyweds will spend several days in Hawaii before they leave for Greenland. I got your address out of my files. Best Wishes,

Clayton Deering

David Bernstein Literary Agency
May 20

What’s going on, Summer? Just got a call from Julie Walker at S&S. She says they still don’t have the revisions they requested. And yesterday Copley News Service tells me
you're almost three weeks behind on the column. I tried to phone you, but your answering machine was off. Give me a call, will you?

Bernie

Greenland
PSC Box 32
APO, NY 09121-0032

June 7, 1993

Hi Mom,

Well we've arrived, but I can't tell you exactly where. My New York APO is on the envelope and that's all we're allowed to reveal. Hadyn is at work and I'm sitting here in an empty family housing unit wondering when the furniture will be delivered. This is pretty weird living underground like this. Electric lights on all day and night. It's warm though. We can go out in the tunnels without coats. Pretty strange when you think how cold it is up on the surface.

The first thing I did when we arrived was check to see if there was a letter from you. There wasn't. Let me know how you are, will you please? I've never gone this long without hearing from you. I miss you.

Penny
Summer,

Still no column and no revisions! Copley is threatening to cancel and S&S is holding the contract until they see the rewrite. This is not like you. You’ve always met deadline. If I don’t hear from you in the next week I’m flying out to Arcadia. I’m worried about you.

Bernie

From: City of Arcadia
To: Resident 25 Mt. Olympus Way Date: June 18
Pursuant to ACO-2557 (Arcadia City Ordinance) stating that all dwellers within the city limits shall adhere to acceptable standards of property maintenance, you are hereby informed that the land at 25 Mt. Olympus Way does not meet acceptable standards. If improvements are not effected by July 1, the property will be renovated by city contractor and the owner billed for services. The following items fail to meet city codes:

- grass unmowed .....................X
- tree limbs blocking roadsigns ....X
Bernie,

Don’t you dare come down here. I’ll get the column done and the revisions too. I don’t know what’s the matter. I can’t seem to get anything done. I feel like I’m swimming in mud. I’ve got a doctor appointment this week. Maybe I’m sick. I’m just so tired.

Summer

Office of Dr. Marie Ford
Arcadia

Dear Ms. Summer:

Attached are the results of the blood test performed in my office this week. There is nothing remarkable. You’re in excellent health. As we discussed in my office I think your problem is depression and I strongly suggest you see the therapist I recommended.

Regards,

Marie Ford M.D.

Greenland
PSC Box 32
APO, NY 09121-0032

July 26

Dear Mother,

I have the most wonderful news. I’m going to have a baby. Saw the base doctor today and he confirmed that I’m
eight weeks pregnant. I guess it happened on our honeymoon. Please, please write to me. I really need my mother now.

I’m feeling well. Had some morning sickness all last week, but it’s getting better. Got to go. I’m having lunch with two other women I met at Officer’s Wives Club. One of them will have her baby next month. New babies all over the place. I can’t wait.

Love,
Penny

FROM SUMMER’S JOURNAL, JULY 31, 1993

I wonder how my life got so out of control. Bernie is furious with me about the late columns. I just can’t seem to make the revision work on the book. And now Penny is pregnant. My little girl. I’m about to be a grandmother. I’m not sure how I feel about that. I wasn’t ready to pass the torch yet. I saw the therapist my doctor recommended yesterday. We talked about personal space. He wasn’t critical exactly, but I think he was implying that I’ve lost track of where my borders end and Penny’s begin.

I was looking for some old columns in the attic later that day and I found a poem I’d written when I was pregnant with her:
Mine more now than ever.
My flesh, my blood, my bone

Faceless, sexless, breathless life
We prepare for our farewell.

You stir - I did not choose this movement-
You alone possess your life.
Choiceless we approach the moment
I hold you close with open arms.

I’ve got a feeling I understood things better then, than
now. Revised chapter one of the book today and sent it off.
Maybe that will get S&S off Bernie’s back. He’s really been
very patient. P.S. I think I’ll send that poem to Penny.

Greenland
PSC Box 32
APO, NY 09121-0032

Aug. 4, 1993

Dear Summer,

Penny talks so much about you, I think I’ve known you
forever. It amazes me when I realize we’ve never met. I’m
writing this for my wife. She had a miscarriage yesterday
and is still in the base hospital. She’d like to come home
and see you if it’s okay with you. The doctor thinks some
fresh air, sunshine and her mother is the best thing for her
right now. She’s reluctant to make plane reservations with-
out your approval since you’ve answered none of her letters since our marriage.

Yours,

Hadyn

Telegram Aug. 6

SUMMER, <STOP>

PUBLISHER LOVES REVISION <STOP> JUST PERFECT <STOP>

WAY TO GO GIRL <STOP>

BERNIE

25 Mt Olympus Way
Arcadia
Aug. 8, 1993

Dear Penny and Hadyn,

I just opened your letter. I am so sorry - about the baby and about my behavior. We both lost our children and that is the hardest loss to accept. I wish I were with you because I feel very close to you right now. The difference in our losses is that yours was beyond your control. I almost lost my daughter through my own stubbornness and pride.

Of course you can come home, Penny. And you too, Hadyn, if it’s possible for you to get leave. Please, please come home. I welcome you both with open arms. They stay open too. No grasping. That means I let go when the time comes to leave.
Did you get the poem I sent you? Too bad I didn’t heed my own words. I didn’t want you to make the final separation. I wanted to choose your future for you. I was wrong and if I could take it all back I would.

Well, on to plans! First of all, I’ll have to get the garden in shape. I’ve let it go shamefully. I’ve even had a letter from the city demanding that the grass be cut. Then I’ll see if I can get the column a week or so ahead so that I’ll have more time to spend with you when you get here. Then there’s the rest of the revision for Simon & Schuster. Just come home. Everything else will work out.

Love,
Mother

Telegram, Aug. 8

BERNIE<STOP>

GLAD S&S LIKES BOOK<STOP>DON'T CALL ME GIRL<STOP>

SUMMER
The first time Agnes Penworthy heard the flute she listened with only one ear. The other was pressed to the telephone. Mrs. Bosnik was on the line saying:

"Our committee recommended against sex education and they’re starting it anyway. I’m just beside myself."

Before Agnes could reply, she heard the flute again. Louder this time, a fluid trill of notes from beyond the back yard, past the fence, out by the willow that arched over the creek. At first Agnes thought it was a mockingbird. Several families nested there each spring and the males sang with such range and endurance, it seemed they must fall exhausted from their perch. But this was no bird. There was something human in this tone, something that summoned from her a feeling she associated with her husband — and she seldom thought of him at all.

"They’re planning to actually pass out those -devices- to the students, Agnes. I can’t bring myself to say it. What are we going to do?"

"Do you hear music?" Agnes asked.

"All I can hear is the rush of blood in my ears. I
hate to think what my BP must be. Why did they ask us to serve on that committee if they ignore our recommendations? It's an outrage."

Agnes struggled to keep her mind on the conversation. She said, "When are people going to learn that self-control is the answer? The good Lord meant us to keep our minds on heaven not to rut around in the dirt like animals."

"Control," she repeated for emphasis as she warmed to her subject. "Discipline, sacrifice, restraint. That's what the Arcadia Schools should be teaching the youngsters, not ways to circumvent morality with Latex."

Latex morality, she said to herself, pleased with her turn of phrase.

"That new superintendent better remember he's a public employee. It's the citizens of this community who sign his paycheck," Gail said.

The flute caressed a high note, sustaining it for an impossible stretch. Agnes, listening, held her breath. And then the melody descended, dropping in a heart-stopping slide to a rich, mellow vibrato.

"The school superintendent needs to grow up. He's living in the past, Gail. Free love. Remember free love? It was a lie. There is no free love. The price is high: unwanted pregnancies, Herpes, and now - AIDS. And that's what we need to tell those high school kids. There is no safe sex."

"Maybe we should call a meeting of the committee. Af-
"Good idea. I'll telephone them now," Agnes said and hung up. Her fingers massaged the stiffness at the back of her neck. She was relieved to end the conversation. Her mind seemed oddly muddled when the music halted. She felt she had lost something as if she held some important thought that slipped her mental grasp.

She rubbed a forefinger across the bridge of her nose. What is the matter with me? It's only music. No need to be so nervous.

She thumbed through the Rolodex on the desktop, looking under Sex Education Committee. The members were cross referenced by surname as well. Agnes took pride in running her personal business as efficiently as she ran Mr. Grey's law office.

The flute trilled again, calling to her. Agnes swayed with the music, breathing deeply. Her palm traced her slender waist, followed the curve of her rounded hips, slid her fingers over her thighs. She caught her image in the window above the desk and gasped.

"I'll put a stop to this," she said aloud.

She threw open the kitchen door, ran down the curving path to the back gate, past the raised ground where her flower garden used to be. Years ago she spent brilliant spring hours working her fingers in that moist, fertile soil. Such promise. Life renewal. That's how she used to think of it. She'd grown out of that, thank God. Flower
gardens were a waste of time and good land. If she grew anything now it would be vegetables. But she had no inclination toward gardening these days. All dirt, in the end, is dirty.

Lifting the familiar latch, she walked through the gate, closing it carefully behind her. Gates closed. Doors locked. A place for everything. Everything in its place. She used to tell her daughter, Susan, that - free, un fettered Susan. Dark hair, uncombed, flying. No, don’t think about Susan. Susan might as well be dead. Living in Chicago with a musician. Raising her illegitimate child in a squalid tenement.

When she reached the bank above the creek the flute music rose to a demanding, maddening pitch. She had a sudden image of herself throwing off her clothes, feeling the evening breeze on her skin, bathing in the magic sounds.

A memory invaded - a spring evening much like this early in her marriage. She and Mike walked down this path. They made love on this bank in the lavender dusk, shadows from the willow tree decorating their naked bodies. A delicious year - sleepy, love filled days and nights, one connecting to the other in a mindless daisy chain.

Then Susan was born and Agnes woke up. She was a mother. She had responsibilities, diapers, a budget to maintain.

“All you ever think about is sex,” she raged at Mike. “Grow up. There’s work to do.”
One day she looked up from her budget book and found her husband gone. What will be, will be, Agnes said. No self pity for her. But the next years were difficult. She had no work skills. She clerked in a convenience store and waited tables at the Arcadia Inn. Her income barely covered the sitter's fee. She appealed to her parents for help.

"We're putting your brother and sister through college," her mother said. "You made your bed. Buy your own bedding."

Agnes learned about worry. She worried about rent. She worried that her battered Volkswagen would collapse. She worried about money every day and every night of her life.

Evenings she came home exhausted, lugging her baby daughter into her small empty apartment. She looked at the haggard woman in the mirror and sobbed. Next morning she was up and standing in the employment line again. I'd like to have a nervous breakdown, she thought, but who would care for Susan? Breakdowns are for those who can afford them. Mothers trudge on and make the best of things.

At last she landed a job as secretary to old Mr. Grey, the town's attorney. She had no experience as a legal secretary, but she was willing to learn and willing to work for less than his previous employee. Agnes budgeted her time as precisely and carefully as her money. Two nights a week she studied shorthand and typing in a night class at the local high school. Saturday and Sunday night she still worked at
a neighborhood convenience store. Her one indulgent use of
time was the hour she spent in church each Sunday morning.
After several years of this exhausting routine, she was able
to set money aside to purchase a small house on the out-
skirts of Arcadia.

Somehow through the years she managed, but the manage-
ment exacted a price. The youthful, fun-loving Agnes wore
away like sandstone leaving only hard, joyless granite be-
neath. Life was work, sleep, church and duty. She remem-
bered that other Agnes only in her dreams.

It would have come as a shock to Agnes if it were said
aloud, but at forty she was still a beautiful woman.
Strands of gray highlighted the blond hair she restrained in
a tight bun at the back of her neck. Her features were
small, delicate. Her back was ramrod straight, her bust and
hips full. She weighed no more than she had at sixteen and
that was no accident. If the scales showed a pound gained,
she fasted until her weight fell.

"Eat to live," she told her plump daughter. "Don’t
live to eat." Restraint. Control. Life is not a party.

The young man looked up as Agnes made her way down the
river bank. He sprawled on the grass by the creek, his legs
in the water up to his knees. A Pan’s Flute was in his
hand. She’d seen the instrument on a television variety
show. It looked like the pipes of a church organ in mini-a-
ture.
He wore low cut, white shorts and a fur vest, open over his bare chest. Agnes puzzled for a moment at the unusual markings of the fur. Somewhere she'd seen that. In the window of Batson, where they had the pictures of endangered species. Lynx. The vest was a lynx pelt. His broad chest was muscular and bronzed by the sun. He had an amber beard, full and curly, and a thick head of auburn hair that cowlicked to points on either side of his head.

"Hi," he said in a soft, caressing voice that was almost feminine.

"Are you aware this is private property?"

"Yours, I guess?" He smiled at her with teeth as white as shirts on a Clorox commercial.

"I don't allow trespassing." She'd meant that to sound stern, but it sounded, to her annoyance, like an apology.

A battered Army surplus backpack leaned against the willow tree. Agnes hadn't seen one since 1968, the demonstration on the state university lawn, the night she met her husband to be.

"I'd like to stay the night," he said. "I'm just passing through."

"Oh, no. I really couldn't allow..."

"Just for tonight. I'm looking for work."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm a shepherd."

Agnes folded her arms over her chest. "You won't find
much here. Used to be a lot of sheep ranching, but most everybody works in the lawn furniture factory now. The money's better."

"I'm an outdoor type," he grinned. "Inside jobs make me crazy. I don't even care for motels. Will you let me stay here? I have a tent."

His gaze was so direct, his plea so sincere, she found herself relenting. Well, what harm could it do?

"All right. One night. But no more flute playing. It makes me nervous."

His grin made her wish she'd sent him packing. "A lot of ladies feel that way," he said.

Back at the house, Agnes completed her calls. The eight member committee would meet at noon tomorrow at Gail Bosnik's. They just might get that superintendent fired, Agnes thought with satisfaction.

She was amazed and gratified by how easily she swayed the committee members to her thinking. Perhaps she should take up politics.

I'm a mother figure, she said to herself. That's what does it. On the kitchen counter was a plate of plums picked from the backyard tree. She decided to dispose of them by making a plum cake to serve at the meeting tomorrow. Food gave dull meetings such a homey, intimate touch. And it puts mother in control.

As she worked in her Dotted Swiss kitchen, Agnes' thoughts turned to the times she and Susan spent here. As a
small child her daughter loved to help bake, but she sampled all the ingredients, spilled flour on the floor and created such a mess that Agnes declared the kitchen off limits. She shook her head. The girl never had a speck of self-control. She couldn’t even manage to run away properly. Several times in the past year she’d called her mother crying. Agnes hung up on her. When Susan sent pictures of her new baby, she took them straight to the garbage without a glance at the child. She had will power, even if her daughter hadn’t.

Agnes made one concession to efficiency, though. Before throwing out the envelope, she noted Susan’s return address and telephone number in her Rolodex.

That’s all it comes to, she thought, a name and number stored away. You work and worry and struggle to raise them - and they’re gone without even a good-bye, Mom, thanks, Mom.

When the baking was completed and the dishes done, Agnes found herself restless. Her thoughts strayed to the strange young man camped down by the stream. She thought of his chest, bronze and glistening, under the Lynx fur vest. She’d had the oddest impulse to reach out and stroke his skin. What in the world had gotten into her?

In her tidy, aqua-on-white living room she took her childhood Bible down from the shelf. The medal she won for memorizing verses still stuck to the cover where she glued it years ago. With closed eyes she allowed the book to drop
open in her lap. She fancied she obtained secret, special messages in this way. Agnes looked down at the Song of Solomon:

"My beloved spake, and said unto me, rise up, my love, my fair one and come away.

"For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.

"The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in the land.

"Arise my love, my fair one, and come away." She slammed the book shut with her knees and went to bed.

Sleep did not come easily. When at last she dozed she was awakened by the flute, calling, summoning her. She turned on one side, then the other. Should I go out there and speak to him? I told him to stop playing and he just gave me that look. So inconsiderate. And yet, so... attractive. Young enough to be my son. Still... when she pictured herself talking to him in the moonlight, she felt strangely excited.

She threw off the blankets and hurried barefoot down the stairs. Her heart beat to the rhythm of the flute and an unfamiliar heat pulsed through her veins. Pulled along by the music’s promise, she two-stepped out the door, through the yard into the spun silver moonbeams.

Her nightgown swept the dew damp grass. Joy danced in her heart and desire beat in rhythm with her blood. She
opened the gate wide and ran through, not bothering to close it behind her. She felt she could reach into the air and catch the flying notes of the flute. She raised her arms, spun round, dancing, her hair flying out behind her.

When her nightgown caused her to trip, she laughed and pulled it over her head, casting it aside.

A night change altered the familiar path to the creek. Moonlight painted the grass and bushes silver. The damp green odor of plants pushing up through spring soil stroked her senses. A breeze touched her flushed face.

Leaves whispered, "Come, Agnes. Come to him. Come, Agnes."

He waited for her in the blue moonlight beneath the willow tree where she knew he would be. She ran into his arms breathless. Wanting. His lips on hers hurt, bruising, but she did not protest. And when his mouth moved along the curve of her body she moaned softly as he pulled her down to the moist, sweet-smelling earth.

"Who are you?" she asked. Her voice seemed to come from far away.

"Who do you want me to be?"

"I think you are Pan and I'm an enchanted mortal."

"I'm that part of yourself you deny. I'm the beast from within - without," he said.

"Whatever you say," she shrugged and stopped his talking with her kiss.

The clock radio playing an old Beatles tune, "Lucy in
the Sky with Diamonds," woke her from a deep, troubled sleep. Her arm reached across the bed to hit the Off button. A curious dream. She remembered it with clarity – and not a little embarrassment.

She opened one eye and saw her bare arm in front of her face. Odd. She always wore high necked, long sleeved gowns even in the heat of summer. Awake now, she pulled back the blanket. Her slim body lay naked and vulnerable on the pure white sheets.

“What?...” she asked aloud, sitting up.

Eyes widening, she looked down at her thighs where two blades of grass and a willow leaf lay pressed.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and dropped her head into her hands. It was no dream. What had she done? What possessed her?

Pushing her body from the bed, she stumbled into the shower. She twisted the dial to fiery hot and stepped into the spray. The punishing stream turned her flesh to scarlet. She soaped her hair, scrubbing her scalp until it tingled.

Out of the shower she found to her surprise that she felt almost cheerful. What will be, will be. What’s done is done. The moving finger writes. Don’t cry over spilt milk. When confronted with emotions she didn’t understand, Agnes often retreated into platitudes. She rubbed her body with the rough towel. No harm done, she thought, looking down at herself. I’ll just forget the whole thing.
Then she began to wonder: Is he still there? That boy down by the creek? Can I face him in the light of morning? Of course I can! I have never been a coward!

Ten minutes later, dressed in white slacks and a gray striped blouse, her hair pulled into a braid behind her head, she walked toward the creek. In her path lay her flannel nightgown draped over a mulberry bush. She stood staring at the torn and dirty cloth. Then she dug a hole with her shoe, wrapped the gown into a ball, thrust it into the makeshift grave and covered it over.

The sun warmed her face. Mockingbirds sang in the oak trees above her. She half slid down the riverbank, aware of how passionately she hoped to find the young shepherd there.

He was gone.

She looked in all directions. No sign. She checked the grass for an impression left by his tent. The ground lay pristine, untouched. Perhaps he was a phantom, a night spirit summoned by her thoughts.

She stared up at the willow tree and found herself smiling. How long had it been since she’d smiled for no reason at all? Into her mind came a picture of them coupled here in the grass. The absurdness of the scene sent her into a fit of giggles and the sound of her own voice giggling like a teenager made her laugh uproariously.

"My God, I don’t know when I’ve felt so good," she said to no one in particular.

Back in her kitchen, the plum cake reminded her of the
meeting. That seemed so far away now, an appointment made in another world. She checked her watch. Gail Bosnik would be dressing for church at this time. She dialed the number.

"Yes," Gail whined.

"I'm not going to the meeting," Agnes said.

"Are you sick?"

"I don't think so. I think for the first time in twenty years I'm well. I'm not sure we should censor the superintendent. He may be doing the right..."

"I'm hanging up," Gail said. "I'll talk to you when you've come to your senses."

The telephone clicked in her ear.

Agnes looked out across her backyard just turning to spring. The Mockingbird trilled an aria. The Dogwood bloomed with pink fragile flowers. Thick-leaved morning glories on the fence turned blue and white faces toward her.

She found herself saying, "This is the day the Lord God hath made. Rejoice and be glad in it." She hadn't thought of that verse in years. Lately her Biblical quotations all seemed to deal with fire, brimstone and eternal damnation. Perhaps it was time to think of life, not death.

She flipped through her Rolodex until she found the number she wanted. She dialed, holding her breath in anticipation. A moment passed as the phone rang. It rang again.

"Hello."

"Hello, Susan, this is your mother."

From somewhere in the distance the piping of a flute floated on the gentle spring breeze.
When Mikus King was in first grade he offered to walk the neighbor's Chow each day before and after school. He liked the dog and looked forward to their time together, since he had no dog of his own. The grateful neighbor gave him a dollar a week. He would have given him more, but Mikus' father, Big Mike, deemed a dollar a week sufficient cash for a six year old.

Soon in addition to walking the dog, the boy mowed lawns and washed cars. When the ice cream truck rounded the corner, Mikus never ran inside to ask his mother for money as the other children did. He always had a coin or two in his pocket.

At first his parents bragged to family and friends about their young son's achievements, but as time went on they grew resentful and never mentioned it. It seemed wrong to them somehow that their little boy showed such unchildlike self-sufficiency. He received no allowance but always had money.

No charmingly misglued trinket boxes or misfitting handmade belts appeared under their Christmas tree. Mikus' gifts were practical and expensive, a new vacuum cleaner for
his mother, a set of metric wrenches for his father. They cooed over the handmade gifts friends received from their children and never mentioned to anyone the gifts Mikus gave them.

One day Mikus heard his mother talking to a neighbor about washing windows. He was ten at the time. Both women agreed they detested the job. Mikus considered what he overheard. He knew people paid to get out of work they hated. Later that day, when he accompanied his father downtown, he saw a shop owner cleaning windows with a long handled Squeegee.

"Mom does that different," he said to his father. "She uses a whole roll of paper towels when she washes windows and she rubs and rubs until she's really tired. Why doesn't she use a pole with a rubber end like that man?"

"Don't know, son," said the senior Mike. "Your mother is one of the mysteries of the universe."

Big Mike had brought his son downtown for a visit to the bookstore, but first they made a stop at the hardware store. While his father looked at the selection of hammers, Mikus priced a long handled Squeegee and realized he could buy it with the money his grandmother sent him for his tenth birthday.

"You're buying a Squeegee with your birthday money?" said Big Mike as his son pushed the device toward the clerk. "I thought you wanted a book."

"I got an idea," Mikus mumbled. "A way to make money."
Big Mike gave the hardware store clerk a shrug. "Kids," he said.

As soon as Mikus got home he offered to clean the neighbor’s windows, just to try out his new equipment. She insisted on giving him three dollars. In the next few days he called on every housewife on the street. Few turned him down. All were delighted with their sparkling windows. Within a week Mikus was able to buy the book he wanted, plus three others, and he still tucked 50 dollars away in his dresser drawer under his Cub Scout uniform.

I’d have more money, he thought, if I didn’t have to spend so much on window cleaner. He read the label on the product his mother used and wrote down the ingredients. At the drugstore he priced the chemicals and discovered he could make his own mixture for about a quarter of the price. That night he collected bottles and mixed liquids. When the noxious fumes burned his nose, he looked around the basement for something good smelling. On a shelf near his mother’s homemade jelly he found peppermint flavoring left over from Christmas candy. He poured it into the mixture just to see what would happen. He was, after all, still a little boy. The window cleaner fizzed and bubbled and gave off a candy odor. It smells pink, it should be pink, Mikus thought. He found red food coloring and poured it into his mix until he achieved the color he wanted. That will make the job more fun, he decided.

The ladies, whose windows he cleaned, asked what prod-
uct he used. He wafted the pink peppermint liquid under their noses. They loved it. Soon, in addition to the window service, he sold Peppermint Magic Glass Cleaner. He tripled the price it cost him for ingredients, and he still sold it for less than the cleaner at the A & P.

Residents of his suburb wondered about the boy they saw each day riding a red Schwinn with a bucket on one handle bar, a canvass bag filled with pink bottles on the other, and a telescoping Squeegee on the carrier at the back. Sometimes they stopped him and asked what he was doing. In that time children were not so afraid of strangers and adults did not fear they would be mistaken for a molester if they spoke to a child. Many of the people who asked “Whatcha doin’?” became customers.

Through that hot summer Mikus spent his days cleaning windows.

In the evenings he mixed Peppermint Magic in the basement. His mother answered the phone and the doorbell, so Mikus paid her a percentage of his profits to act as his saleswoman and scheduler. His mother thought it wrong to be paid by her ten year old. On the other hand, she liked having money she could spend any way she pleased. Big Mike complained:

“It’s just not normal, Sarah. The boy should be out playing.”

So his parents insisted he take two weeks off to go to Boy Scout camp. Big Mike said that by the time Mikus re-
turned it would be time for school to start, and the boy would forget the cleaning business. But the business would not forget the boy. During the two weeks Mikus was gone, Sarah answered calls all day long. Her son returned to a stack of messages. School began and Mikus continued washing windows late afternoons and on weekends. When he had more orders than he had time, he hired two friends to help. By his sixteenth birthday, he had a staff of twelve workers and had saved $20,000. He seldom picked up a Squeegie anymore. Managing his staff required all his time.

When he was about to graduate he told his parents he wanted to go to the state university in the fall. "What for?" his father asked. "People go to college so they can make a lot of money when they get out. You already make more than anybody I know."

Mikus said he wanted to study literature. He thought he would like to be a writer.

"You'll have to pay for it yourself." said his father.

Mikus had a plan. He explained it to Big Mike. College enrollment in 1968 had hit an all time high. Insufficient dormitory space plagued every school in the country. You could not pick up a paper or a news magazine without reading about overcrowded campuses. Mikus planned to use his $20,000 to buy a house and rent rooms to students. That way he had a room for himself and sufficient income to cover tuition and living expenses. As a property owner he would get numerous tax breaks including tax deductible trips home
for consulting purposes. And as the working manager of his business, he could deduct some of his educational expenses. When he graduated he would sell the house to someone else, and if he were lucky, make a profit.

Big Mike said it sounded crazy. He consulted an accountant without telling his son. The accountant called the plan brilliant. He offered to buy the house from Mikus in four years when his own daughter would be ready for college. Big Mike knew he should be proud of his son, but somehow the rental scheme irritated him. He had been unable to afford college himself, even with the GI bill. Once again Mikus got what he wanted without asking his parents for help. In his mind he heard the boy criticize him as a drudge and a no account.

In the small town where the state university is located, Mikus found a rundown Victorian mansion on a hill overlooking the river. The realty company after some haggling sold it to him for less than the asking price since he paid cash.

One of the students who called about a room was a tall and willowy coed named Nancy. She had little money, but she did have a skill Mikus could use. She was a journeyman carpenter planning to major in vocational education. Mikus offered her a room in exchange for 10 hours of work a week.

Over the next four years they replaced doors, painted, laid new floors, added five bathrooms, and turned the decrepit old family home into the showplace it had been 100
years earlier. Every semester Mikus raised the rent. Still he had a two year waiting list. Everybody on campus wanted to live in the Old Mansion.

Only one cloud marred Mikus' bright sky. His worst grades were in his major. Alas, young Mikus did not write well, a serious flaw in an English major. For the gods distribute birth gifts unevenly. Some people get perfect pitch, some the ability to throw a football, and some, like Mikus, are allowed to make money while they think of something else. It is also a given, that most feel their gifts are tin, while others received gold and silver.

Mikus wanted to write perfect prose. He wanted to make people laugh and cry. He wanted to pen that one crystal phrase in which mankind would see, once and forever, the explanation of the unexplainable. This was not to be. His instructors complained that his papers were convoluted and difficult to read. Somehow he used many words to say what other people said in a few. He told himself it was because he was more intelligent than his fellow students. He saw implications that required clarification. He saw possibilities that had to be eliminated. His professors did not comprehend the depth and density of his ideas, and that was their failing, not his. Someday it would come together and he would create art.

Mikus and Nancy fell in love. They were not sure when it happened - somewhere between fixing the clogged drain in the front bath and replacing the entryway floor, they
thought. They were married in the living room of their re-created house two days before graduation.

Though Mikus intended to sell the house to the accountant or another student, the best offer he received came from an exclusive restaurant chain that operated out of historic homes. He gladly accepted their bid of nearly four times what he paid for the purchase and restoration. He and Nancy honeymooned for a month in Hawaii.

Nancy had a job that fall as vocational education teacher in Arcadia. What will you do, Mikus, friends and relatives asked. "I'm going to stay at home and write," Mikus said.

They bought a big old house and began fixing it up. Mikus purchased a typewriter and sent out "how to" articles on home repair. He sold one or two, although the editors complained that his writing lacked clarity. When the articles appeared he could hardly recognize them as his own.

"Why do you want to be a writer?" Nancy asked him. "You're good at so many other things."

"I just do," Mikus said. "I'll keep doing it and doing it, and eventually I'll get good at it."

Every morning Nancy went off to her teaching job and Mikus sat down at his typewriter. Articles and stories departed with the mail only to return six weeks later with a printed rejection slip clipped to the cover page. Mikus learned to recognize, all the way from his workroom, the distinctive thump of a manuscript deposited in the mailbox.
He cringed each time he heard it.

Keeping the house orderly and good food on the table was Mikus' solace. He discovered he liked housework. When all the clutter was removed, the furniture dusted and the rugs vacuumed, he felt omnipotent, a creator of order from chaos. He was his own household god.

Sometimes when he had finished writing for the day, he walked over to the park just to be with other people for awhile. A group of mothers gathered there most afternoons to watch their children play on the swings. Before long he knew the names of the women and their children. They were fascinated by his career as a house husband. It was the mid-70s and most of the women were trying to break into the work force, either full or part-time. Housework was the major stumbling block, they complained. Their husbands refused to help. How could they find the time to find themselves?

"I kind of like housework," Mikus said.

"Oh please. Come and do mine," said three women at once.

"Okay," Mikus said, "I will." And before he knew what was happening he had three or four cleaning jobs.

He had an advantage few women possessed. No one had taught him to clean, so his mind was open. He contacted a successful Janitorial Service and asked if he could study their methods. He did some reading. He found shortcuts. The telephone rang constantly:
“Mikus, you are wonderful. Would you consider divorcing your wife and marrying me?”

“Do you have Monday free?”

“Could you come on Thursday?”

He doubled his prices and still the calls came in. One day Mikus looked at his calendar and realized he had done no writing for the last month. “This just won’t do,” he said, “I’ve got to get some help.” He called the local community college to see if their job placement office could provide students. “I’d rather have boys,” he said. “They have no preconceived ideas about cleaning.” Soon he had a staff to manage. The profits astounded him. He raised the wages of his best workers and offered them flexible hours that did not interfere with their studies. He named his business “The Golden Mop.”

Housewives attempted to seduce his young workers, who were often not reluctant. The temptation presented by a good looking young man in the house was overwhelming. He knew some of his employees collected tips for services other than cleaning, and he warned them against it. Still, that was their business. His business grew and grew. He seldom sat down at the typewriter anymore.

He read up on investments and began pouring extra money into carefully selected stocks. The first year he doubled his profits. The second year, he lost some money, but the third year made him a millionaire.

“If only I had made this money writing,” he said to
Nancy one night.

"You made it honestly. What's the difference?"

"I want to be a successful writer. That's the difference. Other things just keep getting in the way."

One day an investor called Mikus. He wanted to buy The Golden Mop name and methods and expand the service throughout the state.

Mikus did not really want to sell, so he set a price ridiculously high. Two days later an attorney in a limousine delivered a notarized offer for the exorbitant amount Mikus had named.

He had outsmarted himself. He had to sell.

"Now you can get back to writing," Nancy suggested to the crestfallen Mikus.

"Yes," Mikus agreed, a smile spreading across his face. "Neither one of us ever has to work again." They took a second honeymoon in Alaska. When they returned Mikus bought a computer and began writing a novel. It was wonderful the way the ideas came to him, almost as if they were planted in his brain by someone else. This must be talent, he thought. I always knew I had it. The hours slipped away as his fingers flew across the keyboard. He never re-wrote. Sometimes it was three in the afternoon before he broke for lunch. He read biographies of writers, all of whom complained bitterly of writers' block and the mindbending slavery of re-writing. Mikus found it odd. Writing came so easily to him. It flowed from his fingers.
After a semester at home, Nancy pled boredom and went back to teaching. Mikus invested her salary and doubled it in a short time. They hired a tax attorney and a financial advisor to handle their business affairs.

Once again Mikus was free to walk to Arcadia Park each afternoon, but few of the old group still came. Children were in school and most of the women now had jobs. Mikus missed them.

The one person he recognized from years past was another writer, a newspaper columnist, who called herself Summer Afternoon. Her little girl, Penny, had grown up and gone away to school, but Summer still came to the park afternoons out of habit. Summer wrote a syndicated column about gardening, which Mikus did not really consider writing. Still, she made a living with what she wrote, which was more than he could say. He asked her to look at his unfinished novel and tell him what she thought. He knew she would be impressed.

"Thanks for asking me, Mikus," she said, "but I'd really rather not. I learned a long time ago that commenting on friends' writing is a good way to lose friends."

A week later he asked her again to look at his manuscript and she changed the subject. The third time he asked, he begged. He found, to his surprise, that he really wanted her approval.

"All right, I'll read it, but I'll tell you the truth, Mikus. I'm not a diplomat - especially when it comes to the
written word."

"Good," he said. "I want to know what you really think."

The next week Mikus did no writing. He spent most of his time thinking about Summer reading his book. He pictured her smiling to herself and saying "this guy is really good." One morning she called him and said she had finished reading and would meet him in the park. He was excited as a kid on his birthday.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked, as she sat down next to him on a bench. Leaves from the tree above them drifted down, one of them settling on the package that contained his manuscript. She blew it away and handed him the pages.

"It needs work, Mikus, lots of work. The characters all seem the same. I can't keep them straight. What's more I don't really care what happens to them. There's no conflict - just nice people going around being nice. This does not a story make."

"They're not all alike. One of them is black." He was irate. He had not suspected her of being so dense.

"Then get inside him. What makes the black experience different from the experience of the other characters? How does it affect his personality, his speech, his feelings about himself? Make him a product of the things that have happened to him. You tell me he's black, but I don't feel it from what you write."
Mikus picked up the manuscript and stood up. "Thank you for your comments," he said. "I'll give them all the consideration they deserve."

As he walked away, Summer said to his back, "I told you I'm not a diplomat."

It was two weeks before Mikus was able to get back to work again. During that period he wrote several letters to Summer telling her how misguided her criticism was. Then he threw them out. Finally he decided the best revenge was success and he returned to work with an iron will. She is probably just jealous, he thought. After all, she doesn't do creative work. She just writes a newspaper column.

A month later the book was done. Mikus bought a manuscript box and sent it off to a publisher with a six page cover letter explaining how he had always wanted to be a writer. He began preparing amusing remarks for his interview on the Today show. In a month the book returned with a letter:

"Dear Contributor,

Our staff has carefully evaluated your submission. We are sorry to inform you that it does not suit our needs at the present time. Thank you for thinking of Inbrook Press."

He bought more boxes and sent out three more copies. All came back with three or four line rejection letters. One didn't even have a letter. On the front page an editor had stuck a tiny yellow note that said, "No thanks."

Mikus decided he needed an agent, so he wrote to fif-
teen of them. Three agreed to look at his book. Unlike the editors, who told him nothing, the agents were brutal:

"This has no merit whatsoever."

"The characters are dull and the plot is implausible."

"Put in a few years learning your craft, then try us again."

Mikus was crushed. Life lost its purpose and meaning. He quit dressing and spent the day in his bathrobe. He stared out the windows for hours at a time. He grew pale and thin.

"Mikus," Nancy asked, "are you sure you want to write or do you just want to be a writer?"

"What's the difference?"

"It seems to me the desire to write is a thing quite apart from the desire to publish. People who want to write do it because they need to. What other people think of their work is quite beside the point.

"Really! And people who want to be writers?" She could be so irritating at times.

"People who want to be writers want the adoration and acclaim that comes with being a writer. The writing is just the necessary road they have to trod to get there."

"I think you should stick to teaching teenagers carpentry, which is what you know about."

The atmosphere in the house was decidedly frosty for the next day or two.

I just need someone to say something kind about my
book, Mikus decided. If just one person liked it, I could find the enthusiasm to keep working. Then he got to thinking. Are there other writers out there who need a kind word or two? Would they be willing to pay for it? If so, how much?

He bought a writers’ magazine and looked up their advertising rates. Then he composed an ad and sent it off to the two major magazines. The ad said:

“English major and unpublished writer will tell you what is good about your manuscript. I have no publishing credentials, but I love to read. I will tell you what I like about your novel or short story. Guaranteed: no negative comments. $3 per page.”

After he sent the ad off, he felt foolish. No one in their right mind would pay him to read their story, not when they could hire a professional. But the cost of the advertising was minimal and Mikus had more money than he needed anyway. Besides, it beat staring out the window.

Over the next few weeks he forgot about the ad. A new idea for a story came to him and getting it on paper absorbed all his time.

Then one morning he got a call from the Arcadia post master:

“Mr. King, would you please come in here and check your post office box. You have 15 parcels. This is a small office. We don’t have room to store packages.”

Mikus picked them up immediately. What a curious col-
lection. One was written by hand on yellow legal sheets. Another was in hanging folders thrown into a big Depends carton.

The stories were truly awful, worse than he could have imagined, but reading them lifted his spirits. I may be bad, he thought, but I'm not this bad. He found something good to say about each one:

"Allow me to compliment you on your spelling and punctuation. There is not a single error in this story."

"I enjoyed reading your descriptions, especially the five page one in Chapter Twelve where you talk about the sun dropping into the ocean. Also the details of the characters' clothing were really interesting. I never knew what a fescue was before."

"I think your point, that people should be kind to each other, is well taken. I enjoyed your story about the white dog and the black cat getting along so well together with no thought of the difference in color. Sometimes we need to be reminded of simple things."

He put the checks in a pile on his desk. When he finished reading the last of the manuscripts he counted the take, "$1,009.00. It had taken him a week to read the offerings and write a short complimentary letter. I hope I am not being condescending, he thought. Maybe all these people will write and demand their money back.

Several did reply, but only to thank him for his kind remarks. "Your service is worth twice what you charge," one
woman wrote. "I did so need a kind word from someone." Every day more manuscripts came. Once again his business grew beyond his ability to cope. He called the English teacher at Arcadia High and asked if she would like to earn extra money reading manuscripts. She was delighted. The following month he hired two more readers. The only thing they had to do, he explained, was find something complimentary to say about the manuscripts.

"Mikus, you need a tax shelter. Your income is going through the roof," his accountant complained.

"I'll find something," Mikus said. He spent an afternoon at the library reading about new enterprises needing funding. He chose as most likely to lose money a scheme by a sailboat pilot named Ted Turner to start a 24 hour news channel on cable television. No one wants to watch news all day and night, he reasoned. And he was right. Cable news was an excellent write off for a few years.

"Well, Mikus, you've done it again," Nancy said one afternoon. She stood in the doorway of his workroom looking at the stacks of cartons and manuscript boxes. "What happens now to your own stories?"

Mikus looked up from between two stacks of paper that reached higher than his head. "I'll get back to it, Nancy. In a few months, I'll get back to it."
I asked Mayna out a second time because I didn’t believe anyone could drink the way she did and stay sober as a Presbyterian choir soloist. At least I used to like to tell the story that way. I thought it made me sound sophisticated, “with it” - not like a preacher’s son from a small Iowa town. In 1967 when I was 21, I cared more for style than accuracy.

Not that I lied about her alcohol capacity. I didn’t, but, of course, that wasn’t the only thing that attracted me. She looked good - wild tawny hair, large brown eyes, long graceful legs. She had a supple, liquid way of moving, like the Slinkys we carried everywhere that fall. I liked being with a woman everyone noticed. What’s more she had a reputation on campus as an actress who just might be good enough for Broadway. She starred in “Tea House of the August Moon” and “Splendor in the Grass.” Drama professors hinted she possessed that special stage presence the great ones have. She reflected well on me.

At parties my fraternity brothers watched with wide
eyes as she emptied glass after glass of beer, never slurring a word or losing her willowy grace. On several inebriated occasions she drove a group of us back to the fraternity house, then returned to her dorm room for a few hours sleep. The next morning she rose for an early class we both attended and took notes for me while I lay in bed too hungover to drag my body across campus. What a woman, my brothers said. What a woman!

At a fraternity picnic one night the subject of marriage came up. She surprised me with her quick “yes.” That confused me; I wasn’t quite sure what I asked.

“I thought you wanted to try your luck in New York,” I said.

“Too much competition. I’d rather have a starring role in your life.”

My good luck, I guess. Somehow Mayna never believed she was talented - or pretty - or smart. She reacted with utter amazement when someone suggested she possessed these obvious virtues.

We married two months after we graduated.

I got a job in the Chicago City Planning Office and we started a family immediately. Our second child, a son, was born when our daughter was two. A tendency toward asthma in stressful situations kept me from serving in Viet Nam and gave me those extra years to make my mark. By the time the war ended, I had already received two promotions and climbed several rungs on the success ladder. Mayna and I thought of
ourselves as happy, if we thought of such things at all.

Somewhere around Mayna’s 30th birthday she gained a few pounds. One day she brought home a book about a carbohydrate diet, *The Drinking Man’s Diet*. The author of the book suggested that, since there are no carbohydrates in alcohol, dieters should drink when hungry instead of snacking. What an idea! I mentioned her new regime to a friend at work.

"Yeah, great," he said. "My uncle went on that diet and lost four pounds. They had to take out his liver."

"My wife can handle it. She used to be the best drinker on campus, had a real talent for it," I bragged.

"That’s an early symptom of alcoholism," he said, suddenly serious.

"Mayna alcoholic! Don’t be silly. She’s the most well adjusted person I known." My sharp retort surprised us both, and embarrassed me. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then decided against it, giving me instead a cryptic half smile.

At that period in our lives, although we drank at parties, we seldom kept liquor in the house. That changed quickly. We had drinks before meals, wine with meals, several drinks through the evening. I couldn’t keep up with her and work the next day, so I didn’t try. The alcohol seemed not to affect her. She was never drunk and never hung-over. She also never lost the seven or eight pounds the carbohydrate diet promised to eliminate.

"Maybe you ought to take it easy on the sauce," I said
one night looking into a cupboard at an empty wine jug. It had been full the night before.

"Is my drinking affecting you?" she asked.
"Not really."
"Is it affecting the children?"
"No."
"Then what's it to you?"
"I don't think the amount of alcohol you consume is good for your health, for one thing."

I didn't tell her that I'd recently asked my boss to come to dinner and his wife had refused. She had been our guest on two earlier occasions and she said spending an evening getting smashed was not her idea of a good time. They're uptight people anyway. I didn't tell Mayna why they turned down our invitation.

She found a drinking buddy in Cub Scouts. A neighbor two blocks away acted as den mother for our son's troop. Mayna answered her plea for an assistant. One afternoon after the boys had been particularly rowdy the den mother offered Mayna a gin and tonic after they cleared the nine year olds from the living room. From then on she always stayed and drank after meetings. I usually ordered a pizza on Cub Scout night knowing Mayna would be home late and not interested in cooking.

"Why don't you get a job?" I asked her. "It would fill your free time."

"Doing what? What does a drama major do?
"You could be a secretary."

"No, thank you. Secretaries do the routine, boring jobs that free men to do creative work. I'd rather scrub floors. At least it's my floor."

I had to agree she managed the house well. Also, the children sparkled in both personal hygiene and manners. I had no complaints about her maternal abilities. As for her drinking habits, well whose spouse doesn't have an annoying quirk or two? The fact that she watched her weight, prevented the drinking from getting too bad. When it became clear that the low carbohydrate diet wasn't working, Mayna conscientiously counted calories. Wine, because of its lower calorie count, became the drink of choice, but it was hard to squeeze many glasses of wine into 1000 to 1200 calories a day.

She was drinking heavily, I think, about every three days. I'm not sure because by then she had begun to hide it from me. This pattern of dieting for several days then dousing her body with alcohol continued for several years.

At this point her habit affected our lives hardly at all. She belonged to a number of political organizations, PTA and she volunteered with children's theatre, directing two of the four yearly plays. At least twice a year she dragged me to an awards ceremony where she was given a plaque or framed certificate. She piled them on a high shelf in the garage where they gathered dust. My job - by that time I was assistant city manager - required that we
attend many civic events. Mayna made a great impression, always beautifully dressed and coiffed. She never had more than one or two drinks at these affairs. When we returned I went to bed; Mayna went to the liquor cabinet and got down to the serious consumption. She would stumble into bed at 2 or 3 a.m. smelling so strongly of wine my stomach turned. That’s when she wanted to make love. Fortunately she always passed out as soon as her head touched the pillow.

The next day she would be recalcitrant. I knew I would come home to a sparkling clean house, my favorite dinner, and an agreeable, malleable spouse. It was her way of apologizing. We never discussed her late night behavior. I suspect often she didn’t remember.

On those “days after” she agreed to anything I wanted - new car, electrical tools, subscriptions to nudist magazines. Handling the budget was her job, and I knew my frivolous expenditures meant she would have to forgo buying things she wanted. Well, it served her right.

I got an offer from Arcadia to be their city manager. Although it is a town of only 20,000 paying less money than I deserve, the position appealed to me for several reasons. The children were away at college. We no longer concerned ourselves over tearing them away from their schools and friends, so it seemed a good time to move. I would be in charge of the office; I liked that; and it was a chance to get Mayna out of Chicago into a rural environment.

Somehow I thought her love affair with the wine jug
might cool there. I was wrong.

"I’m not going to drink at home anymore," I told her. "New place; new rules." I didn’t say she had to follow my lead, but for a time she seemed to. There was no liquor in the house that I knew of. Yet, often in the evenings when I came home her eyes seemed red and puffy. And she grew distant, content to watch an endless stream of television movies while I worked at the computer. She always carried a glass bottle of diet Pepsi gripped firmly in her hand.

One night I washed some garage rags in the basement and accidently caused the washer to flood. I pulled the appliance out from the wall to wipe up the spilled water, and as I did, I heard glass fall. I reached behind the machine and pulled out an empty vodka bottle and two full ones.

So that was it. She had switched from wine to vodka. No wonder I didn’t smell it on her breath. When she was in the bathroom later that night I unscrewed the top on her Pepsi bottle and caught the unmistakable medicinal odor of alcohol.

"There’s a clerical job opening in the mayor’s office," I said the next day.

"Why are you telling me about it?"

"You could apply. It would give you something to do."

She returned to her TV mystery, ignoring me, nursing her Pepsi.

One day I came home from work to find her in a high state of excitement.
"Why didn’t you tell me there’s live theatre here?"
I shrugged. "It never came up."
"It’s wonderful, plays under the stars, out at the edge of town."
"I know. Didn’t I show you that tourist brochure my office prepared?"
"I discovered it today. I drove by and there it was, carved out of a red rock hillside."
The table was still piled with the day’s mail. Usually when I came home it was set for the meal. I could guess what would be served by the settings.
"What’s for dinner?"
"I read for a part."
"Good. Are we ordering out or what?"
"I think I got it, the mother in ‘The Subject Was Roses.’"
"What?"
"‘The Subject Was Roses.’ It’s a play. The director took my telephone number. He said he’d call me tomorrow."
She did get the part. For the next six weeks I hardly saw her. She rehearsed every night. The whole town showed up for the opening. Agnes Penworthy, my new secretary, found me after the curtain. "She’s wonderful," Agnes gushed. "Not like amateur theatre at all. You must be so proud." I fought my way through the crowd to the dressing room where I found Mayna surrounded by a group of loud women.
“Did you like it?” she asked as she wiped off make-up with a tissue.

“You looked dumpy up there under the lights,” I said.

“She’s supposed to look dumpy.” A dark woman’s glare cut right through me.

“I don’t know much about the stage,” I said, “but I’m glad this is over. Maybe we’ll have meals on time now.”

No such luck. Her first performance led to a second and a third. She was always in rehearsal, out there in the woods at the edge of town.

People stopped in my office to tell me how well Mayna performed in this show or that. The mayor said we made a great contribution to the cultural life of Arcadia. He meant Mayna.

“It would be nice if you made some money at this,” I said one night when she came in late. “I looked at a new BMW today. It seems unfair that working as hard as I do I can’t afford a new car.”

“In a few years the children will be through college...”

“And I’ll still be supporting you and your theatre habit. All my life it’s been what you want and what the children want. When does my time come?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to forget this theatre nonsense and get a job.”

She stood staring at me for a moment, then turned on
her heel and left the room. I heard her down in the basement a few minutes later in search of her vodka bottle. I think she knew I was aware of her secret liquor supply, but we never discussed it. Anyway she drank less in the evenings now, since she couldn’t start until rehearsals ended.

Sometime that night she fell on the stairs and hit her head on the railing. The crash woke me up, but when I got to her, she was unconscious and I couldn’t pick her up, so I went back to bed. She crawled under the covers about dawn. The black eye and swollen nose lasted for three weeks.

We lay in bed one night talking after making love.

“I’m scared,” she said.

“Of what?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Of getting old?”

“No, not that.”

We lay there for a long time without speaking and at last we went to sleep.

I looked through the incoming mail after work one day and came across an application for a job at a convenience store.

“What’s this?”

“I got it from the 7-11. There’s a sign in the window they need clerks.”

“You’re not planning to apply at a 7-11 for God’s sake?”

“You said you wanted a BMW. I should be able to make
enough to meet the payment and I can arrange my work schedule around rehearsals."

"Are you out of your mind? I’m city manager in this town and my wife works at a convenience store? How is that going to look?"

Mayna didn’t apply at the 7-11 and she didn’t try out for any more plays either. She watched a great deal of television and drank gallons of diet Pepsi laced with vodka. Yet, somehow the house was always clean and meals were on the table when I came home from work. Mostly we ignored each other. As soon as I finished eating I retired to my den and worked on the computer. She watched television until the early hours of the morning. On Friday nights we celebrated the end of a week with dinner at a Mexican Restaurant. I drank two Margaritas. Mayna usually drank four. One night she ordered a diet coke.

"No Margarita?"

"I want to stay sober. We have to talk about something. I went to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting today."

"You what?"

"Two of my friends from the theatre group took me. I asked them to."

"Why?"

"Because I think I have a problem with alcohol and I don’t know what else to do."

"You are not an alcoholic."

"I don’t know. Maybe I am. I don’t know what an alco-
At this moment the waiter interrupted with our order and we made small talk until he quit fussing and moved on.

"You've got a habit," I said. "It's just a habit. You quit smoking. You can quit drinking."

"I can't. I've promised myself a hundred times I won't drink anymore and I always do."

"Then quit, but no AA. How's that going to look? By tomorrow it will be all over town that my wife attended an AA meeting."

"It's anonymous. Who you see there, what you hear there stays there. That's what they said."

"No way. Not in this town." I couldn't believe she had so little regard for my position. Also, from what I had heard Alcoholics Anonymous is a spiritual program. Mayna and I are agnostics, if not outright atheists. "Have you thought about how you're going to handle all that religious mumbo jumbo?" I asked.

"My friends said I didn't have to. They said I could just take what works for me and leave the rest."

This passive recitation of her friends' cliches made me furious. She had more brains than that. "Show a little strength of character for God's sake. Just quit drinking. You don't have to make a three act drama out of it."

She sighed. "Okay. Starting tomorrow. Order me a Margarita."

On Monday I bought the BMW. There's something about a
new car that lifts your spirits like nothing else in the
door. I felt reborn behind that wheel. What the hell,
life is short. I'll pay for it somehow, I told myself.
Mayna handles the bills. Let her figure out how to squeeze
the money out of our budget. Maybe she'll see she needs a
job.

I traded in both our cars to buy the Beemer. That left
her isolated at home all day without transportation, but it
was a small town. She could walk where she needed to go.
Frankly, I didn't want her driving anymore.

She hit the bottle all weekend after our outing that
Friday night, and this time she made no attempt to hide it
from me. I didn't want her driving in that shape.

The following Friday she showed up at my office, eyes
wild, hair uncombed, obviously drunk. And at three o'clock
in the afternoon! Agnes ushered her immediately into my
office to get her out of the waiting room. She fell into
the upholstered chair in front of my desk.

"I want to use the car," she mumbled.
"Did you walk downtown?"
"I want to go out to the theatre. I want to watch
rehearsals."
"You're not going anywhere in the shape you're in."
"I could get the spare set of keys you keep under the
engine block."

Her belligerence surprised me.
"You just go sit in the conference room. Agnes will
show you where it is. As soon as I can get loose I’ll drive you home."

About 15 minutes later I heard the crash of metal from the street three stories below my office. A moment passed and again the screech of metal ripped through the summer afternoon. This time the whole building shook. The chandelier above my desk swung like a bell. I pulled up the mini-blinds and looked down just as my BMW backed into the street, and then ran at full speed into the concrete side of city hall. The front end of my beautiful red Beemer twisted and looped into a metal maze. The car backed over the curb again and into the street pointed for another run at the building.

I didn’t wait for the elevator. I took the steps three at a time down to the street. A crowd gathered, serious faced, pointing and shouting at my wife in the driver’s seat. A man in jeans and a T-shirt grabbed the door and tried to pull it open, but she sped away from him, up over the curb, through a bed of nasturtiums and into the building again. A cloud of steam rose out of the crumpled hood as the radiator burst. This time the BMW would not back up. She ground repeatedly at the starter, but the car sat dead against the wall, its fenders and drooping bumper decorated with red and orange flowers. I commanded my legs to move, but they would not.

The crowd stared. I stared. Above City Hall a pigeon complained in the sudden quiet. This could not be happening
to me. Mayna unfastened her seat belt and tried to get out, but the driver’s door bent and jammed. She slid across the seats and kicked open the passenger door. The crowd backed away as she moved in their direction.

She looked a madwoman, hair wild, make-up smeared. She threw her head back and laughed.

"Don’t make these God damned cars like they used to. Not like they used to," she shouted in a loud stage voice.

A police car with sirens screaming sped around the corner and pulled to a stop next to my car. Two policemen jumped out. I knew them both, although in my shocked state I could not think of their names.

“What’s going on here?” the larger officer asked me.

“My wife. She’s having a breakdown or something.”

“Just stay there and let us handle it,” the smaller officer ordered.

The police took Mayna to the hospital where she was checked into the psycho ward. I spent an hour with the psychiatrist.

“How much does your wife drink?” he asked.

“Not much,” I said. “A little wine with dinner. I don’t know what got into her today.” I sure did not plan to betray Mayna to this prying stranger. They kept her at the hospital for three days.

“Menopause,” the doctor said pursing his mouth and nodding reassuringly on the day she was released. We stood in the hall of the hospital as a nurse pushed her out in a
wheelchair. "It will pass," he said. I'll begin seeing her when I have an opening. It should be about six weeks. Meanwhile the tranquilizers will help." He nodded toward a plastic bag full of happy pills in her lap.

The family's nasty little secret had burst into the sunlight. Every time I saw two Arcadians talking I assumed they discussed Mayna's escapade. It was the worst week of my life. I wanted to crawl in somewhere dark and not see anyone, but that was not possible.

What to do about her? Leave her? I sure didn't want to do that now when my career was going so well. Maybe it would get better. She sure caused no trouble at the moment. The tranquilizers turned her into a virtual zombie. She sat all day in front of the TV. When I entered the room she started, seeming to forget who I was. Well, at least she wasn't drinking - or I didn't think so.

One morning about 3 a.m. I woke with the feeling something was wrong. Mayna was not in the bed beside me. I went downstairs to the kitchen, checked the basement and looked at last in the garage. My rental car was gone. Where would she go this time of night? Suddenly I remembered a conversation we had earlier in the evening. She told me she wanted to try out for the part of Clytemnestra in "Agamemnon".

"Not just 'no'," I said, "but hell no."

She hadn't argued with me, but then she never did. Mayna's way of fighting back was to run into the arms of her
demon lover. When she finished drinking herself into a stupor, she probably drove out to the theatre. I called a taxi. It took him about 20 minutes to arrive and he showed more than a little curiosity about my 3 a.m. drive to the woods. "I have to go get my wife," I told him.

The full moon turned the woods outside Arcadia green and silver, and as we approached the Theatre Under the Stars, it seemed a spotlight prepared by nature just for me. The seats carved from red limestone rose up the side of the canyon, glowing pink in the moonlight, purple in the shadows. I told the driver to turn down the side road to the parking lot. When we arrived at the chained entrance, I instructed him to wait for me by the side of the road.

I climbed over the chain and hurried up the tree lined drive. I had no trouble making my way across the parking lot and into the theatre entrance. The moon shone brightly on the blacktop. I walked through the arch into the seating area. The theatre is built in such a way that the stage is invisible from the road, but from this vantage point I looked directly down on it.

A figure in a white dress stood center stage raising a sword above her head. It was Mayna in her nightgown. She shouted:

"Evil for evil to an enemy
Disguised as friend,
Weave the mesh straitly round him."

"Mayna, what are you doing?" I yelled at her. I ran
down the limestone steps two at a time toward the stage. Suddenly the asthma flared up, stealing my breath. I sat for a moment my head between my knees. Then I continued down the stone steps struggling to breathe.

She turned and watched me come, an expression of puzzlement on her wild face.

"Agamemnon, I slew thee," she shouted up at me.

I reached the base of the grandstand and gasped for breath as I climbed the steep steps to the stage. By the time I got to center stage I was half bent over and panting. "Mayna, put down the sword. We're going home." Her eyes were unfocused, her features slack. I reached for her arm, but she shook me off and raised the weapon higher, holding it with both hands. She backed a few steps away from me.

"Even as the trammel hems the scaly shoal,
I trapped him with inextricable toils,"

Before I could stop her she brought the sword down with all her might, hitting me on the shoulder.

"Then smote him, once, again - and at each wound,
He cried aloud."

I screamed in pain as the sword dropped again. I fell to my knees, tried to rise, tried to pull at her gown. The stage grew dim and darkness closed around me.

She raised the sword again:

"Once more I smote him,
With the last third blow,
Sacred to Hades, saviour of the dead."
And thus he fell.*

It was the last thing I heard before I blacked out.

I learned later that the taxi driver saved my life. Though I had asked him to wait in the road, he elected to follow me up to the theatre.

Thank God for the curiosity of small town people. He wrested the sword from Mayna’s hand before she could deliver the killing blow. When she broke away from him and stumbled off into the woods, he ran back to his taxi and called an ambulance from his car phone.

The police found Mayna at sunup at the base of a steep cliff. Apparently in her dark run through the woods she failed to see the drop-off. They took me in a wheelchair to identify her bruised and broken body. As long as I live I will never forget the sight of her bare feet, bloodied and cut to the bone in places. The coroner said she was so full of booze and tranquilizers she probably didn’t feel a thing.

I’m fortunate that the sword was a stage prop and not very sharp. All the same I took a long time recovering from the wounds. The physical ones healed more easily than the emotional.

I look back sometimes and wonder if I could have done things differently. I hated Mayna’s drinking. I felt it reflected on me and I don’t like looking bad. But perhaps I made some wrong decisions. Too late to worry about that now, of course.
THAT OLD TIME RELIGION

Dora McLaren sits at her dining room table pasting wings on angels made from detergent bottles. She does this every year at this time in preparation for the church Christmas pageant, but tonight her craftwork goes badly. Glue sticks to her fingers. The sequined wings hang askew. Dora is preoccupied.

Something is going on in her town and she cannot fathom what it might be. Change is in the air. A wind is shifting. Dora does not demand to be part of all town activities, — after all 20,000 people live in Arcadia — but she does take pride in knowing major trends. When friends burst to share news, she loves to say "I know it." For weeks she has had the feeling that she doesn't know, and it is annoying as an itch she can't reach.

Last Tuesday she called her branch of the prayer tree to ask blessings for a parishioner who had a gall bladder operation. Tia Garcia was not at home and her husband refused to give an explanation of her whereabouts. Ann Davenport was also out. Out where? Where does one go on a Tues-
day night in Arcadia? To a movie or to the Hy-Vee. In that case, Mr. Garcia would have said so.

Dora gives both women an opportunity to explain at church the following Sunday. "I tried to call you Tuesday," she says, "but you weren't home."

"Right," says Tia.

"I prayed for Mrs. Harris," says Ann, changing the subject.

They are hiding something. Dora is sure of it.

It is December 21st, the longest night of the year. In the living room Christmas tree lights blink on and off, on and off, in an erratic pattern. One string of bulbs near the top is dead.

The Rev. Bob McLaren, Dora's husband, stops in the doorway and looks at her over the top of his bi-focals. He carries a book of sermons and a pink felt tip pen.

Bob has wild white hair and a paunch that hangs over his belt. He wears bedroom slippers and a gray robe tied with a cord. Dora glances at his book of sermons. In a few moments he will crawl into bed and spend the next two hours plagiarizing other ministers. Next Sunday his material will sparkle, but Bob will not.

When they first were married, she tried to help him with his sermon delivery. It was hopeless. Bob was accurate, meticulous and boring.

I should have been the minister. The thought comes bubbling to the surface and Dora, out of habit, stuffs it
down. Those days at Moody Bible Institute when they were just kids are best forgotten. So what if Dora had been the stand out in her class and Bob an also ran? So what if she gave fiery, revivalist speeches that brought her audience to tears and to Christ? Her betters at Moody told her what she must do. She must squeeze herself into her proper role though it was not an easy fit. A talented woman picks a God fearing man and acts as his helpmate. God did not mean women to be preachers. After all, none of the apostles were women.

Dora picked Bob because he was kind and introspective and he brought calm and order to her life. Calm was the watchword of their marriage, a great overriding calm, like a lake on a still summer day. Now Dora organizes prayer trees for gall bladder patients and pastes nylon net on plastic Ivory Snow containers... and wonders if there might be something else out there - maybe lightening or thunder, over the nighttime waters of the calm lake. At her age she doubts she will ever find out.

As her middle years draw to a close she sees herself as unfinished, though she is not sure what she needs to complete. The last of their four children married last year. She has time for her own interests, but what are her interests? Lately she seems to chew on this question like a piece of old gristle she can’t get out of her teeth. The world is changing so fast, she feels she has wandered into a science fiction movie.
Yesterday in Drew Drug she found a whole shelf of herbal remedies where the ointment and salves used to be.

"What is this stuff?" she asks Conrad Drew, the pharmacist.

Conrad, busy plugging data into a portable computer cradled in his left arm, points to a sign over the herbal display: "Drew Drug does not recommend alternative medicines. The safest course for any medical problem is to consult a physician."

"But you give that junk shelf room," Dora says.

"People buy it. This is a business."

"Who buys it?"

"Any number of people."

"Conrad, that is not an answer to my question."

"Dora, dear," Conrad smiles and pats her arm, "I don't think your question deserves an answer." She turns away from Drew in disgust and looks directly into the face of the new druggist, Les Perkins, busy behind the high pharmacy counter. She reminds him that she has not seen him in church recently.

"I work Sundays," Perkins said.

"I'll give your wife a call when I get home. I've been meaning to talk to her about Women's Missionary Alliance."

About an hour later she reaches Melody Perkins on the phone: "May I be honest with you, Mrs. McLaren?" Melody's lovely voice has an annoyed edge. Dora assures her that honesty is always best. "I'm beginning to have my doubts..."
about traditional religion. Is there really a place for
women in our church? Are women really wanted there?"
"We are all God's children, Melody. We belong in his
house."
"Well, I've been doing some reading and some thinking
and I'm changing my mind about some things."
"What things?"
"Well, Christianity, I guess."
"I'm sure Jesus would support you in your desire for
knowledge, but it is also good to remember that on judgment
day God is going to ask us what we have done, not what we
have read."
"I'll bear that in mind," Melody said, then she hung
up. Dora mulls the conversation in her mind. Melody Perkins
doing some reading and some thinking? She summons the men-
tal image of the beautiful Mrs. Perkins, creamy skin, long
auburn hair, model's figure.
"She thinks too?" she asks aloud. She never suspected
Melody of having an introspective nature.
"Something is going on in this town. I just know it," she
says as she empties more sequins out of the plastic bag.
She is almost finished with the angels. Two of them are
lopsided, but they will have to do. She has used all the
Ivory Liquid bottles. She places the winged women in a
circle on the red and green tablecloth. Suddenly she remem-
ers a scene in Arcadia park - women in a circle - like the
soap bottle angels.
Dora decided to walk one afternoon two weeks ago in a remote part of the park down by the river. From the ravine ahead of her came a peculiar humming sound. It rose in pitch until it became a scream. As she reached the top of the hill, she half expects to see a space ship taking off. What she sees is twelve women, several of them members of her church, standing in a circle. Were they making that odd noise? Surely not.

Dora knows this group often meets in the park in the afternoon. They have been getting together here for almost twenty years. It started when their children were preschoolers and they brought them to play each afternoon. Later when the children went to school the mothers continued to meet and talk. They were Arcadia's first encounter group. Dora has always hoped she might be invited to join them, but the group has a long history and she is not part of it. Anyway ministers wives put such a damper on social functions. Almost as bad as ministers.

She glances out the dining room window at Ardelle's house across the street. Lights blaze in every window. Is her chubby black neighbor giving a Christmas party? She has not seen her for about a month, not since the day they talked by the curb. Such an odd conversation. Part of the puzzle.

Last month she was sacking leaves and carrying the bags out to the pavement when she became aware that her neighbor
engaged in the same activity. Dora dropped her bag and crossed the street to say hello.

"Are you ready for Thanksgiving?" Dora asks in a manner she likes to think of as bright. "Seems it's just over and it's Christmas again.

"Don celebrate that, just winter solstice and Kwanza."

"How interesting. That's the African holiday isn't it?"

Ardelle ignores her. "The tree sleeps now" she says, looking up at the bare branches of her oak. "She gets undressed."

"Well, I wish she'd learn to pick up her clothes," Dora says, pointing at the bag full of leaves. "I get sick of tidying up after her."

"The work of the goddess."

"Goddess?"

"Caring for the earth. That's the work of the goddess."

Dora allows the corner of her mouth to raise in a semi-smile. Ardelle can be so peculiar. She is the only black woman in Arcadia, the widow of a Navy officer. After her husband's death ten years ago, she began to dress and speak ethnically, though Dora suspects she frequently gets it wrong. Ardelle comes from a wealthy family in Illinois. Her father is a judge.

"Those people lookin' to save the earth ought to be lookin' to the goddess," Ardelle says. "You worship the one
male God, just look where he take us - oceans no fish kin live in, air nobody kin breath, land so fulla' pesticides it kint be farmed."

"I'd hardly blame that on God."

"See the goddess, she never let those things happen. But she lose her power. Men take it away. People don worship her no more."

"Excuse me, Ardelle, but that sounds more than a bit blasphemous. 'Thou shall have no other gods before me,'" Dora quotes.

"Now ain't that just a man - always worrying who's on top."

Dora backs away, talking about completing her work. "It gets dark so early now." She scurries to the safety of her own side of the street. Ardelle is becoming just too peculiar. She will avoid her in the future.

A sound outside Dora's window attracts her attention. Two cars pull up in front of Ardelle's house. Seven women unfold from the vehicles, stop to greet each other on the sidewalk, and enter the house. They are wearing long dresses under their coats.

A party? Dora knows nothing of a Christmas party, but then why would she? She had been staying away from Ardelle. Still it is rather bad manners not to invite the neighbors.

Headlights round the corner followed by a large van that parks behind the other two vehicles. Dora moves closer
to her window so she can see who gets out. It is Ellen Mason and Melody Perkins, the same Melody who told her just the other day that she was questioning old beliefs. She wears a long dark cape. A figure passes on the walk in front of Dora’s window. It also wears a long cape. As the figure pauses, preparing to cross the street, the hood is thrown back and Dora sees that it is Summer, the newspaper columnist, who lives several doors down.

Summer crosses the street in long, confident strides, approaches Ardelle’s front door and rings the bell. As the door opens light emerges along with a strange sound, the same humming Dora heard in the ravine in the park. At least she thinks it is the same. It is hard to tell through her thick storm windows. Dora switches off the dining room ceiling light in order to see better.

The moon casts a pale glow in the cloudy sky. A few flakes of snow flicker in the street lamps. Through the chain link fence across the street, Dora sees a dark form in Ardelle’s back yard. Someone is building a bonfire in violation of city codes. Shadows from the flames leap and dance on the side of the garage. Sparks swirl upward in the night air. More dark figures join the fire builder. Most wear long capes, although one or two seem to be wearing ski jackets over long dresses. They huddle around the fire.

What in the world is going on over there? She has to know. Dora moves through her darkened house to the hallway
and takes her winter coat from the closet. She pauses for a moment listening for Bob. The light from their bedroom spills into the hall at the top of the stairs, but she cannot hear him turning pages. He is probably asleep. She opens the front door and quietly pulls it shut behind her. She stands for a moment in the gloom of the front porch watching the flames on the other side of the street. Then she descends the porch stairs and makes her way down her front walk, keeping to the side of Ardelle’s house away from the bonfire. Her slippers leave prints in the light covering of snow as she crosses the blacktopped street.

Several large trees decorate Ardelle’s front yard. Dora hides in their shadows moving from one to the other until she slips into the darkness along the side of the house. She presses her body close to the building, sliding slowly along in the shadows.

The voices are clear now. She is sure the group is all women. An odd Christmas party, she thinks.

"Let’s get started; I’m freezing," someone says.

"Get closer to the fire.

"No thanks, I know what happens to our kind." Laughter.

They speak in unison:

"Our Mother who lives in the Earth
All womankind seeks thy name.
Thy queendom lost
Shall be restored
As it was in the beginning.
Thanks we give for your bountiful gifts
Forgive us our misuse of them
As we forgive those who misuse us.
Lead us not into exploitation,
But deliver us from ego,
For thine are the mountains and the forests and the plains
Forever and ever. Blessed be."

The cadence is the Lord’s Prayer, but the words are strange. Is this some religious cult? Somehow Dora cannot imagine Summer or Ardelle involved in cult activities - and certainly not Ann Davenport. She’s a Republican for goodness sake. She moves closer to the edge of the house where the fence begins. The revelers are just around the corner, but she feels safely hidden. The women’s attention is centered on some activity that requires burning pieces of paper. She watches their shadows on the garage wall as one by one they step forward to throw a scrap into the bonfire.

Dora slides around two garbage cans and moves a step closer. A high pitched screech tears through the night and a dark form shoots out of the shadow and up the chain link fence onto the roof. It is Ardelle’s cat, Houdini. Dora stepped on him. She is startled and jumps backward hitting the metal garbage can, which bangs into the wall. As her leg touches it, she turns to grab the can to rebalance it, but she loses her footing on a patch of ice and falls,
bringing the can down on top of her. The crash reverberates through the snowy night.

The gate in the fence opens and Ardelle is above her, robes flowing. More women appear staring down at her.

"Dora, what in the world?" says Ardelle, extending a hand. The other women grab her shoulders and lift her to her feet. "Are you hurt?" It is Melody Perkins.

"I think I'm okay." She brushes wilted lettuce from her coat and shakes string beans from her sleeve, giving herself a moment to think. An explanation of some kind is in order.

"I saw the lights over here. I thought there might be a fire and nobody home, so I..." Her voice runs down. She doesn't expect them to believe that. Not with all the cars parked in front of the house.

Ardelle smooths it over, "That was damn neighborly. Come on in and get warm. We got some hot herb tea."

"Oh no, really I can't. You're having a party."

"Shoot, honey, that's no party. It's my goddess group. You know most of the women. Come on in."

Dora tries to stand, to refuse their hospitality and return to the safety of her home, but when she puts weight on her foot, a sharp pain radiates up her calf. She has sprained her ankle. She is at their mercy. Three women half carry her through the gate and into the kitchen of the house. They settle her on one chair and put her leg up on
another.

Everyone crowds around. They study her ankle which is turning red and purple as they debate the appropriate treatment. Some favor ice, others heat.

Tia Gonzales looks at her with narrowed eyes. "What were you doing out there anyway?"

Before Dora can answer, Ardelle hands her a cup of tea. "She saw the flames and thought we had a fire," she says.

"Really" Tia says, "I would have thought...." Ardelle glares at her and she shuts up.

"Wolfsbane," says Summer. "That's the best." The women defer to Summer's superior knowledge. She does, after all, write a column on herbal healing. "You have some drying in the attic?" she asks Ardelle.

Ardelle nods.

"Get some leaves," Summer says, "We'll put them on her ankle and then alternate hot and cold compresses over the top. It'll draw the swelling out."

"This is awfully nice of you," Dora says. "Impolite of me to interrupt your... meeting like this."

"Think nothing of it," Summer says. "We'll do a healing ritual for you. Haven't done one since Ann's hysterectomy." Dora stiffens. "What do you mean a ritual?" she asks frowning. Tia laughs. "Don't worry. We're not going to crucify a toad. We only do white witchcraft."

"Witchcraft." There the word is, out in the open, hanging in the air like a black balloon.
Summer laughs. "Well, it's out now. We practice the old religion. We've been doing it for about a year."

"Why?" Dora asks. "Why would you do such a thing?"

"I guess we got bored with our Encounter in the Park group. It seemed a logical next step. How long can you complain that the world treats you unfairly before you decide to do something about it?"

"But you don't believe in magic and spells?"

"Well, I don't know," Summer says. "It's a fine line. A ritual keeps you focused. When there's something you want, you're more likely to get it, if you keep reminding yourself what your goal is." Summer pauses and studies Dora seeing that she does not understand. "Let's say you're hoping for a promotion. Every morning you burn a candle while you think about what you want and what you'll do that day to get it."

"That's not magic."

"Isn't it?"

Ardelle returns with the wolfsbane and Summer arranges it around Dora's ankle. Then she covers the leaves with an ice pack.

"That should help," she says, and indeed Dora feels an immediate relief from pain. "Where do you get your rituals - from old books?"

"Nah," says Ardelle, "mostly from Waldenbooks. They got goddess shit all over the place. And sometimes we make up our own."
“Who’s your leader?”

“No leader. It’s men got to have a boss. If someone feels like taking charge, we let ‘em.”

Dora’s mind flashes to the way it used to feel to preach, to hold an audience in her hand, to make them laugh and cry. No, she says to herself. I will not listen to this. There is one God, and He is male, and anything else is heresy and a crime to even consider.

“I’d better be going now,” she says.

“You’re welcome to join us. One member of the coven moved away. We plan to add another person,” says Summer.

Dora is suddenly irate. How dare these women think she’d even consider such a thing? “I’m afraid not,” she says. “You’re all risking eternal damnation. I don’t want any part of it.” Then she remembers her manners. “But thanks for the herb wrap. It really did help.

“We’re not ashamed of what we do here,” Summer says, “but we’d appreciate it if you kept it to yourself. People misunderstand.” There is a veiled threat in her tone and Dora resents it.

“You’re the ones committing a sin. I don’t think you have a right to put conditions on me.”

Ardelle leans against the sink and regards her solemnly. “We might have to mention that we found the Baptist minister’s wife hiding in the garbage cans, spying on the neighbors. Who would believe the word of someone who does that?”
"I'll go now," says Dora rising from her chair and putting on her coat. She hobbles to the kitchen door and opens it. Snow swirls around her. A cold wind stings her face as she walks out into the night. Behind her she hears Ardelle say:

"She be back."