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Moonscape

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MOONSCAPE

by

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Abstract

Moonscape

by

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Moonscape is a short novel exploring the interplay of incest and prostitution. The novel is set in Las Vegas in the late seventies, with flashbacks to the thirties when Hoover Dam was built. The thesis relies on first person narratives to incorporate three points of view: two feminine, one masculine. The inspiration for the novel comes from William Faulkner's Absalom! Absalom!, but the form and setting for the piece follows T. S. Eliot's poem, "The Wasteland". One character is patterned after Eliot's Sweeney, the heathen pragmatist who appears throughout his poetry until 1927, the year of Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism. The themes of sin and forgiveness form the focus of the novel.
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In Memory of Hal Stesc
The Accursed

Oh, I shall be, till Gabriel's trump,
Nostalgic for some distant dump;
And ever doomed to weep me dry
For some lost mediocre guy.

Dorothy Parker
from Not Much Fun
PART I: SWEENEY WAS HERE
What Margaret Said

It was hot. My back stuck to the vinyl car seat, and the perforated pattern of the upholstery was seared into my legs. Behind me, the dog’s breath felt like the desert breeze venting through the window. My husband, the tour guide, pointed to a jagged ashen peak on the western side of the valley. “They live in the shadow of Lone Mountain,” he said. ‘They’ were his grandparents that I’d never met. His mother, the only other relative, I’d also never met. My family was dead; his was unintroduced.

An orange sun rested on the crest of Lone Mountain, outshining the lights of two gravel pits below it. One pit seemed abandoned, the other a beehive of spinning cement mixers splashing the afternoon sunlight onto shadowed cliffs. Spotlights illuminated Caterpillar tractors mechanically digesting shale like ancient dinosaurs grazing on a barren plain. It was Friday, but cement trucks with shiny logos lined the road like a string of twirling beads, churning the contents for an endless week of construction. We passed new home tracks with foundations so small they looked like cemetery plots.

Zoe barked out the window, her spotted ears flapping, as a line of trucks pulled us into their wake. A tumbleweed grazed her nose, and she shook the dust over the interior of the car.

“Roll up the window, Carl. I don’t like breathing the
landscape." He closed the window and turned on the wipers. We were caught in a blowing brown fog.

"The wind kicks up a little at dusk," he tried to reassure me. I'd thrown up at the last rest stop from the heat, but Carl was worried it was something else. We had no air conditioning and we'd slept in the car the last two nights to save our last twenty. Bathing in rest stops from Virginia to Utah, covered with road dust and dog hair, I had changed from soiled to slightly soiled underwear and tried not to complain. I wanted a cold shower. Carl repeated, "We're making good time".

Styrofoam cups pelted the car and what appeared to be an arm rest cover from a sofa caught in the wiper blade before being reclaimed by the dust storm. The air smelled like a broken sewer line. Carl edged the car to the side of the road.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Out by the dump."

"How can you tell?" I wiped the glass. Through the yellow haze a fluorescent glow flushed the canyon to the south. The wind rushed over us rippling the roof of the car like an aluminum can.

"At sunset, the wind shifts from Sunrise Mountain to Lone Mountain," he said. "In the middle of town is the dump where trash mixes with dust, going nowhere. We're in the center of a dust devil."

"What's a dust devil?"
“Little tornado,” Carl answered. “Sucks the garbage high as a cloud, then drops it flat, like the high hopes of people in this town that get smashed.” He slapped my hand for emphasis. I was holding a pile of brochures collected at the last rest stop. “You won’t find any truth in those ads. Here’s the real story,” he said. Beside the road were piles of rusted cars and rotting refuse overlooking the city.

I pulled my hand away. “Wait, Carl. You told me this was a fun city with lots of opportunities. That’s why you wanted to move back.”

“Did I say that?”

“Yes.”

Carl ignored me and continued. “After my last pizza delivery, I parked the station wagon on that ridge.” He pointed to the littered hillside, and then patted the dashboard of his car. “Ten years for this red Rambler. Still running strong. Made a den out of discarded sofas, put my feet up and smoked a joint -- I was too young to buy beer. Listened to the desert dogs howl for their lost families. Watched the moon rise and the trash pile up.”

“How does trash pile up in the middle of the night?” I asked.

“Gamblers on the move, hauling rental trailers like ours. Looked like the Depression, as my grandpa described it, only the gamblers were moving because the silver ball rolled black and they bet red, or they crapped out.”

“Crapped out,” I repeated. He was offering a view of our
new home I didn’t want to hear. I couldn’t gamble with the twenty dollars in my purse. It was all we had. The deposit from my apartment paid the deposit on the trailer. I reminded Carl we didn’t have any money to lose. If we did, I’d rather spend it on a lounge show. I held up a pamphlet with pink feathered showgirls.

“Let’s celebrate our honeymoon with a night on the strip,” I said. “We don’t have to gamble.” My biggest gamble was taking off with Carl.

He pulled onto the highway and stared into the red ball of a sun through the dusty windshield. The sunset pushed through a crust of brown pollution that didn’t appear in the brochures.

Our road atlas showed a color picture of Los Angeles tinted with the same dark haze. On the map, it was two inches to the Pacific Ocean, sixteen inches back to Virginia, eight inches to home. I had taken Interstate 30 to Little Rock by bus, then Interstate 40 to Virginia, where I got married. By car, I took Interstate 70 from Arlington, left turn in Utah onto Interstate 15 and the trailer park we’d call home. “Plenty of room for all of us,” the grandfather said. I had floated across the map from my father’s apartment, to my husband’s station wagon, to the grandfather’s trailer in less than a year. I felt like a map without a compass.

“Dumped the remains of their rented dreams,” said Carl. “Dogs and cats thrown out with sofas and chairs. Exit fast when your debts are high.”

“Whose debts?” I asked.
"The debts of the gamblers making a quick exit!" He raised his voice as he said this.

"Oh." Carl crawled along with his story now that the drive was near an end. When we left Virginia, I mistook his ramblings as a conversation he was having with me. By Ohio, I knew he was talking to himself. Carl seemed to be putting together the pieces of a puzzle in his head. Was I a piece that didn’t fit?

The dog kept me company. She was a hasty wedding present from his mother. Carl showed up with the trailer to retrieve his stereo, and mentioned that we’d married. His mother, Genevieve, had no gift to give him. He played fetch with the hunting dog she was training as he loaded the trailer. Genevieve lifted the pup in the car when he left. He’d lost interest in both of us by the third day, near Hannibal. Carl had taken a wrong turn in Indianapolis. I showed him the mistake on the map just before the car overheated. He couldn’t push the engine over fifty miles an hour, and he’d been speeding to make up time. We pulled into a campground to cool the engine overnight. That’s when I dropped my glasses in the outhouse. He wouldn’t retrieve them.

"Why?" I asked. "Your arms are longer, and I can’t reach them. My dad bought me those glasses. I can’t read the map without them, and you won’t look at the map for fear of losing time!" I must have been shouting because the campers next to us stopped setting up their tent and stared. He pulled my boxes of books out of the wagon, throwing my
luggage on top to make space for his sleeping bag. The dog slept in the tent with me that night.

After that evening, Carl didn’t say much. When I asked him a question, he’d talk over me or not answer. I held the map close to my face and counted the miles. If he pulled by the side of the road to relieve himself, the dog would follow. I’d have to push her in the car to keep Carl from taking off without us. I never stayed in the restroom long when he stopped for gas, except when I threw up. That’s when I saw the brochures. I was cleaning my blouse in the sink. “If you’re so sick, how’d you have time to collect those?” Carl asked me. I had the dry heaves out the window, letting him think I was pregnant.

Zoe was more company than Carl. She’d look at you when you spoke to her, especially if you held up a treat. I hadn’t discovered how to get Carl’s attention. We hadn’t fed Zoe the previous night because we ran out of dog food. I searched through my purse for a biscuit. When I opened the cellophane, she devoured it in my bag. Catching her head in the shoulder strap, Zoe shook herself as I untangled her ears.

“Get that dog out of the front seat! I can’t see.” Carl swerved and the road swept over us like a dirty sheet. We looked through the windshield into the settling dust. An acre of mobile homes backed up to a small ranch with cattle and horses grazing in the front yard. “There’s Dicey’s ranchette and here’s the trailer park,” he said.

A sign with faded letters caught in a lariat’s loop marked the entrance to “Lone Mountain Mobile Ranch.” Its
hinges grated in the wind, mixing with the rustle of tall cottonwoods. A clear string of lights circled the weathered pool and reflected off the marble tiles of a mortuary next door. It seemed to be the most permanent structure in the neighborhood. Cyclone fencing surrounding the pool was bent by trespassers cutting across the graveyard to the corner convenience store.

The station wagon stalled at a speed bump. Carl downshifted and slowly ground into first. The yard nearby was decorated with plaster ducks and ducklings that swam on a blue gravel pond. A large porch with iron grating and pillars that resembled a southern mansion overlooked the pond, making the attached trailer look like a home.

"That's the caretaker, Mr. Monoghan's house," said Carl. "A singer and a waiter at a Gourmet restaurant. He sang with big bands and opened for Charley Pride when country got big." Carl knew most of the trailer park residents. He'd lived with his grandparents more than his mother.

"There's Caroline's double-wide." Leaning over me, he rolled down the window, and stared at large piles of dirt in her yard. Zoe stuck her head out the window and barked at two arthritic dogs on the porch.

"Guess her desert tortoises are under the trailer," he said.

"Turtles live in trailer parks, here?" I asked, trying to bring a smile to his face, which was close to mine.

Rubbing his buzz cut, which was growing rapidly since leaving the military, I looked into his boyish face. With a
week-old beard and wrinkled regulation khakis, Carl looked A.W.O.L. His tan, angular face was more suited to the blue dress uniform of the military school he'd left to live with his grandparents. He carried the picture of his school buddies and himself next to his draft card. The card arrived one month after he turned eighteen. In 1970, there were no school deferments. Carl’s lottery number was three. His step-dad got him an extended tour as a dental tech. Carl learned to rebuild cheekbones and eye sockets, attaching them to upper dentures for “guys who really served”, like his high school friend who was M.I.A. He considered his tour of duty in a Navy lab as the long arm of his step-dad, not Uncle Sam, reaching out to screw up his life.

Carl reached around me and pulled himself up by the steering wheel. The transmission casing scraped on a second speed bump as he downshifted. The trailer caught behind the first bump and the car died.

“Damn.” He turned over the engine and laid a stripe on the asphalt as he popped the clutch. Then he slammed on the brakes as we rounded a curve. A courtyard separated the trailers from a cinder block building. A gravel path wound through the park and was lined with painted rocks. Dwarf fruit trees, heavy with ripening peaches and apricots, had been taped like the legs of race horses to support the trunks. Faded metal ponies on springs stood next to the entrance of a laundry.

“There’s the space for the dental lab.” Carl pointed to the darkened end of the laundromat where iron bars fronted
the windows. "It was a market where I bought candy bars and gum. If I hadn't moved with my mother, my teeth would have rotted. Grandpa could never say no to me. The store was run by Mr. Monoghan's wife, who died after we moved. Big funeral, with a marching band like New Orleans, Grandpa said. Mr. Monoghan keeps the park up in her memory. When I came back in high school the store was closed, replaced by slots in the laundromat. "Better return on slots than candy," he said.

"That's where Caroline plays the machines most days. Monoghan cashes the social security checks she gets from her dead husbands, subtracts the rent, and gives her the rest. Arthritis in her knees keeps Caroline from getting to the bank, she says, though I've seen her get on all fours to take a broom to her turtles."

An Indian woman with a basket piled high with laundry stood sideways in the doorway. Her hair was thick and black, pulled low on her neck and coiled like a snake.

"What a beautiful way to tie your hair," I said. My dark hair was thin and combed off to the side to hide a bald spot. After a week of infrequent showers, it was tucked under a baseball cap.

"That's a chongo knot in her hair," said Carl. "Protects her from the enemyway."

"What enemy?"

"For the Navajo, white men's ways are the enemyway," he added. "Betsy's married to a white man. Needs all the protection she can get from him. His uncle is the retired
sheriff across the street. Keeps his nephew out of jail, but he can’t keep him sober. Gentry drives a cement truck when he’s able, which isn’t often. Betsy does laundry to keep the rent paid.”

Betsy wore a deep purple shirt with silver tips on the collar and a necklace that changed the porch light to liquid moonlight. She was tall and beautifully dark. Her load of laundry looked heavy. It caused her full skirt to ride up on her hip. Instead of moccasins, she wore tennis shoes. Betsy stood facing the darkness that was turning the trailer park to shadows, and switched her load to the other hip.

“We called her Betsy for ‘Begay’,” said Carl. “No one knew her real name because her husband only called her ‘Begay’, her maiden name, or ‘woman’. She didn’t seem to mind. Answered to any name. Nod her head and smile at you. On the reservation, Navajo women kept their names when they married because they owned all the land. So we settled on ‘Begay’ since she kept her trailer space like it was on the reservation; blue corn in the garden, big loom in the yard. When Gentry backhanded her off the porch, she let it all go.”

“Sounds like the Navajo way is better than the enemyway,” I said, and wondered if I’d keep my maiden name. Would I be married long enough to care? The Indian woman at the laundry was a foreigner who was the native. I had been raised in the company of men, felt comfortable with men, but my husband seemed more foreign to me than this Navajo.

After school, I sat on a barstool doing my homework surrounded by my father and his male friends. They cheered
teams I’d never heard of from cities I’d never seen except on
the bar television. The Cleveland Indians and the Cincinnati
Braves played in cities inhabited by large Indian tribes, I
thought. What good ball players these Indians were, but some
players were from dark skinned tribes. When I asked, my
father explained that not all dark skinned players were in
the major leagues and not all ball players were Indians.
There were also the Twins, the Dodgers, and the Giants. Betsy
was the first Indian I’d seen that wasn’t a ballplayer from
Cleveland. She waved at Carl and slipped into the shadows of
the low trees.

"Betsy’s daughter, Serena, was the barrel racer I told
you about," said Carl. I didn’t remember. "She won some local
rodeo—" "Enough!" I was holding my head. "You don’t speak
to me for two thousand miles, and now you recap your life in
the trailer park!" Carl stared at me like he had in the
campground, his boyish look turned dark. "I mean, I don’t
need to know everyone in one night." He looked past me to
where a floodlamp lit the back of a double-wide trailer.

"I’m home," he said, and pulled in between a neatly
trimmed hedge and a toolshed lined with trash cans marked,
"MacSwaine". Carl’s grandparents stepped through the sliding
glass doors and waved. The flickering light of the television
shone through their thin summer clothes. She was stout, he,
wiry, like an emaciated tree.

Hanging geraniums edged the porch awning, bouncing in
the wind. Carl bumped his head on a basket carrying in the
luggage. He was a foot taller than his grandfather.
“Jesus. Am I going to have to raise the porch, you tall drink of water?” Mr. MacSwaine kissed his grandson on the lips. Then he kissed me on the lips, a wet, whiskeyed smack. Then he kissed Mrs. MacSwaine, tilting her head back.

“Jesus, Mac. You’ll drop me on my ass!” In her low heels, Mrs. MacSwaine was the same height as her husband. Walking into the kitchen, which was two steps away from the living room, she removed two silvered trays covered with meats and pickles from the refrigerator.

Mac side-stepped the luggage with the deftness of a ballroom dancer. “Welcome. Welcome!” he said. Patting the recliner next to the television, he motioned to his grandson to sit down. He flipped the lever and squeezed Carl’s shoulder as the chair reclined. “Nothing’s too good for the Irish,” he said. From the dining room, Mr. MacSwaine brought a French Provincial chair covered with a beach towel. Ceremoniously removing the towel, he patted the brocade seat. “Have a seat, Princess. ‘Wheel of Fortune’ is almost over.” Mac took the matching lounger near Carl and pointed at the shapely blonde turning letters on the game show. “Your grandmother was a blonde,” he said.

“I’m still a blonde.” A gilt chandelier hung over the dining table casting a golden glow on Mrs. MacSwaine’s colorless wig. She was setting out the cold cuts for dinner. Mac shrugged as if he was agreeing with her. Turning his lounger toward the television he shouted, “Gert, bring us a beer”.

On the porch, Zoe patiently followed the movements of
Mrs. MacSwaine from the refrigerator to the table. When Gert brought the two men a beer, I grabbed slices of baloney from the meat tray and passed it through the slider. Mrs. MacSwaine noticed the space when she was arranging the cheese slices at the edges of the tray, but only smiled at the door where Zoe was licking her chops.

"Good manners, that dog, doesn't bark or beg. Genevieve's hound?"

"Yes."

"Fits her. A mongrel bitch with class. Outshined us with her decorated husband and embassy parties. Liked her first husband better. She was on to her second before Carl was three. Of course, it wasn't her fault."

"The divorce?"

"The death. War casualty. Korea. Her husband flew with Ted Williams, the baseball player. Mac has an autographed picture of the three of them before Buster was shot down. Genevieve came back to live with us, but not for long. Didn't like her father's drinking, though I hear it rubbed off on her.

"She met the captain getting Carl's teeth fixed. What a sweet tooth he had as a baby. Hard to believe it, looking at his beautiful smile. Could have got his head shot off in Vietnam, too, except for his step-dad. Guess we should give the captain a little credit. Hardly hear from Genevieve, unless she's sending Carl our way. She asked about the dog. Looks thin."

"Did she ask about me?"
“Well, yes. But I hadn’t met you, yet.” She hadn’t met the dog, either. Gert clapped her hands, calling the men to dinner. After we ate, she gave Mac a ten to buy dog food at the convenience store. Carl was busy unhitching the trailer and didn’t look up as we passed.

“Cicadas singing in the trees,” said Mac, “lovely moonlit night. Your husband should be walking you to the store, not some old man.” Mac looked up at me through myopic lenses that made his eyes disappear and smiled more handsomely than his grandson. His face wrinkled into a hundred laughing lines. “You’ll do,” I said, and we walked up the road.

Mac must have been “a looker”, as my dad called anyone who dressed and acted like they were in love with life. “A looker” came into the bar all dressed up for that special date “flush with love and liquor,” to be followed by “drunken and dishevelled,” ending with “Who is this bitch?” Or as my mother said, “Who is this bastard?” “The bastard who married you,” my father replied. That’s how he told the story, embellished with drink, just like the stories that Mac was telling.

“Every stone in the park lovingly hand painted by Monoghan in his dead wife’s favorite color, red ... The fruit trees, so carefully tended ... Little racehorses for the children, reminded her of home in Kentucky. Her father had been a groom for a large stable ... Monoghan’s house decorated like a Southern plantation ... the two chairs on the porch where he and his wife sat...”
When I reached the pool, I jumped in the deep end. The water was hot and the cottonwood droppings made a wreath in my wake. I could see the watery outline of the dog and man looking in at me. I blew small bubbles that floated up towards the circle of leaves. It was good to hear my breath in my throat and feel the motion of my hands pushing against the current pulling me to the surface. The lights of the pool glistened like headlights in fog, but the chlorine was starting to burn my eyes. Zoe jumped in and I could see her snout pushing down towards me and her slender legs beating in waves. I surfaced and found Mac’s face close to the edge.

"Your dog was worried about you, Princess." He pushed himself off the cement and fell back on a bar stool. I shoved the dog out of the pool. She clawed at the cement edge but couldn’t grab hold. The air felt cool against my wet shirt and I laid half in the water to keep warm. A weathered sign above the bar read, "Community Center". I read it to Mac.

"Good times, those. Our friend, Sweeney, owned the park, and served drinks, here, after work. We decided what projects to get done around the park as we had a few cocktails, and the girls put on their swimsuits. Gert was a sight, then, not chunky like she is now. Caroline watched Carl while Genevieve was working cocktails, and she’d walk him down to play in the shallow end. We never got anything done, and we drank up our rent checks that we’d paid Sweeney. He lost the park.

"Sweeney had gotten us to move in with a free cocktail hour, but he never watched the clock. You’d think a man who’d boxed for a living would know the value of an hour when his
life was measured in three minute rounds. But, he didn't. Fine talker, but no value for time or money. He always had some half-dead girl helping out, paid her well for washing bar glasses. Pretty soon, he was asking me for a loan since we were distantly related, he said. He didn't pay me back 'cause he said I drank it up in bocze. You can't argue with a drunk like Sweeney, even if he is your relative, so we quit coming down to the pool.

"When he lost the park, Monoghan took over. It's been a respectable place ever since 'cause his wife was Baptist. See the sign, 'No Drinking in Pool Area'? Painted in her hand. She first posted, "No Drinking on Premises", but she backed off after we explained it to her husband."

"Explained what?" I asked.

"Explained that we weren't Baptist. We were Irish, excluding Gert. Sweeney was still living here, training some no account boxer, like he used to do in Boston. We stood up for each other, when it was important. Sweeney always looked beat up so nobody messed with him. Monoghan said he understood, he was Black Irish. His great-grandmother was knocked up by an Irish tenant farmer. So the wife repainted the sign.

"Monoghan caught on after she died. Added the slots that made him a rich man. Only mistake he made was letting that drunken nephew of the sheriff move into Sweeney's trailer. Monoghan said nobody'd rent it, Sweeney wasn't a housekeeper, and the girls he kept were retired whores and only knew how to make a bed. The Indian wife got it cleaned up pretty good
until her husband laid into her. Then she skirted around the mess for fear of upsetting him. My question to you is how does a woman like Mrs. Monoghan, never drank or smoked, church-going, God-fearing woman, die of cancer? A cancer that ate her up?"

I had no answer to that.

"I say you're better off drinking and smoking. Bad times will eat at you worse than bad habits. I may have to grab some cigarettes at the store."

When I climbed out of the pool, the cement was hot so I rolled to dry myself as the dog licked my face. Mac crawled over the fence to go to the convenience store without us, saying we looked too sorry even for the 7-11 crowd. He stepped around the gravesites like they were open pits. A spry old man, he was smaller than my father, but more sure-footed. At least he'd hung onto his wife. That seemed to add life to men. Maybe that's how Mrs. Monoghan died. She'd had the life sucked out of her.

Mac's drinking was up since we'd moved in. We had settled in Gert's bedroom. She moved down the hall into one of the twin beds with Mac, leaving her clothes in our closet. Her wigs, on styrofoam heads, lined the room. Champagne, blonde, silver, rust (my favorite, added color to her bloodless complexion); faceless images of Gert haunted us at night. During the day, she walked in without knocking, forgetting we had taken her room.
We slept in Carl’s mother’s bed which sagged in the middle. We lay sweating on a rusted coil mattress shaped like a nest. The walls were so thin, our every move echoed down the hall. Gert complained of hangers screeching across the closet rod if we went to bed after her. Mac was noisy going down the hall for a nightcap and she’d curse him. If he took a sleeping pill, he’d snore loudly and she’d shove him on the floor. When the heat pressed close throughout the trailer, Mac opened the bedroom doors and turned down the swamp cooler which dripped on the indoor-outdoor carpeting. Gert would jump up to fiddle with the dial, shouting at Mac in high whispers. If Carl shut the door, Mac opened it. “Circulation for the cooler to draw, Carl. You’ll get too hot.”

We lay in a sweat-soaked pile of sheets watching the ceiling fan. When the moon was full, it caught the portrait of Genevieve over the headboard. She wore her graduation dress which circled her shoulders in white netting and shone silver in the pale light. Her starched brimmed hat was so low over her brow that her face was nearly hidden. In the mornings, she was reflected in the dresser mirror, her dark eyes doubling to infinity. She caught me with my nightgown on backwards, searching through the trash for a birth control pill that had rolled off the dresser.

I was careful, though Carl hardly touched me. He drank as much as his grandfather, and Mac could hold his liquor. When his hand followed the deep recesses of my thigh, the light would turn on in the hall. After the house quieted down, he was asleep.
Zoe rutted under the house to escape the heat. I felt her moving under the floorboards after Carl and his grandparents had drifted off to sleep. Putting my palm to the floor, I tried to feel her breath through the floorboards, and heard her sniffing for a familiar smell. She kept vigil with me, as I waited for my husband to turn towards me.

Carl was more attentive when he’d slept on my couch. I needed someone to share the rent. My job in the Navy dental lab paid little more than expenses, so I pasted an add on the bulletin board with tabs of my phone number. I hoped to get a call before the phone was turned off.

Carl was the step-son of my commanding officer. He worked in the lab that made plastic cheekbones and eye sockets attached to dentures. I saw him juggling eyeballs to a set of dentures once. I avoided Carl because his step-father was sponsoring me, and I had heard they didn’t get along.

When Carl stood in front of the ad board, I was desperate. He was holding a rolled up sleeping bag, so I pulled off a tab and handed it to him. “It’s only a couch in an efficiency” I said. He had noticed me, I was sure, because I was one of three women in the lab, but I surprised him. He stared at me, not answering, and I wanted to pull the number back from his fingers. I felt flush when he smiled at me, and looked away.

He said something but I couldn’t hear him. The room was filled with noise from the heating vent, the elevator clicking off the floors, a door that slammed shut. He left
and I couldn’t remember what he’d said. I spent half the money in my wallet at the corner grocery.

When Carl arrived, he’d eaten at the commissary. He said his step-dad had kicked him out for parking on the lawn when the base housing streets were being swept. He laid the citation on the kitchen table and never paid it. Said he couldn’t park in front of the garage. His mom or step-dad would be inconvenienced if they had to move his car. So he parked on the lawn.

Carl paid the other bills on the table; electric and phone. I’d buy groceries and he’d show up most nights to eat. The night he came home and the heat was turned off, he kept me warm on the couch. Said he’d thought it was electric heat, he’d mostly lived out west where everything was electric. The next day, Carl skipped work to pay the gas bill, and I called in sick to go to the free clinic.

When I arrived that afternoon, Carl’s space was empty. I lit the bunsen burner, checking the colorless flame with my palm. The denture case before me had to be completed for a retiring rear admiral, so I set the lower teeth quickly.

“Carl took a swing at the captain,” said my lab partner.

I put my wax spatula down and looked through the glass to where Carl’s desk was. “The captain’s his step-dad,” I said.

“This is different, Margaret. They were both in uniform.” My lab partner was looking through his drawer for an instrument, speaking low. “It was over you,” he said. “The captain told Carl he was a bad influence and the captain was
responsible for your welfare. He'd promised his classmate he'd help you. Carl walked off to the row of grinders, polishing a case. The captain followed. No one heard the rest, but when the captain raised his voice, Carl backhanded him into the plaster bins. The captain wasn't hurt, but he was dusted with plaster. He's so short one of the men had to help him off the counter, and the men laughed. The M.P.'s handcuffed Carl.

"The old dentist I worked for called the captain because I needed a good job after my dad died. A van met me at the bus station, not the captain. I was driven to an apartment house he'd chosen near the base. I paid my deposit. He introduced himself on my first day. That was it. I paid for everything with no help, except from Carl."

"Keep it down, Margaret," said my lab partner. "I don't want to be transferred just for knowing you. He may be court martialled."

"No, he won't." I said, but I wasn't sure. The denture I was waxing seemed to drift to the left. I popped out the front teeth and stared at a jack-o lantern face. I couldn't remember what the rear admiral looked like. The captain, the admiral, the older officers were stamped with the same face and crewcut. I knocked the rest of the teeth on the counter. Scattered, they seemed like a broken string of yellow pearls.

When I came home, Carl asked me to marry him, or so I thought. He actually asked me to accompany him to the west and the hitch was we had to get married to please his family.

"You were just carted off in handcuffs and now you want
to marry me. Are you sure?” I should have waited for an answer, because I didn’t figure it out until Missouri. I couldn’t afford the rent without him, and I’d spent most of the last year eating alone, visiting museums alone, making conversation with neighbors that didn’t have time to speak to me, some Southerner that spoke too slow. I was thinking slow because I didn’t want to be alone, again.

We met at the base chapel the next day. His parents didn’t show because he hadn’t told them. I was wearing my best dress and Carl had on his dress uniform, but the pants were wrinkled like they’d been pulled from a pile of dirty clothes. There were no flowers, and I didn’t recognize the witnesses who were dressed in golf shirts and plaid shorts. Friends from Carl’s prep school, he said. Late tee time. I’d asked my lab partner to come, but he was afraid to choose sides and had a family to support. I tried not think of my dad who got married as suddenly and never recovered. Our marriage was the reason for Carl’s honorable discharge. I figured it out when he said, “In Nevada, it’s easier to get divorced than married. We might look into it if you don’t like it out west.” I’d never been out west and I’d never been married. I thought I’d give it a chance. His papers and final paycheck were on the table when we arrived at his grandparents. My paycheck was missing.

Sleepless nights dissolved into endless days of errands with Mac, who’d lost his drivers license to cataract surgery and his ability to sideswipe parked cars. Carl left in the
morning to hand out business flyers to prospective dentists. He had a few accounts, but not enough to rent office space in the laundry. He set up a torch, desk, and plaster bin in the toolshed. I hardly saw him until he came to bed.

“Margaret, don’t stop anywhere when you bring Mac home from the clinic,” said Gert, “and tell that doctor no more sleeping pills -- he’s addicted.” She shook her finger in my face.

“I’m not addicted!” he said. “You can’t stand my snoring. What’s a man to do?” Mac picked up his wallet and waited on the porch.

Gert softened and kissed me. “He’s always been addicted to something. It used to be me.” She wiped the lipstick off my cheek with her dish towel.

“I heard that, and I’m not addicted. I’m lonesome. A man cut off in his prime by his own wife, that’ll drive him to...”

“Go,” she said. “Here’s some pocket money.” She pushed me out the slider and waved to Mac who was getting in the car.

The morning heat was crisp and dry, as I waited with the windows rolled down. There weren’t two seats together at the Veteran’s clinic, so I stayed in the car listening to the radio. I didn’t like the waiting room which was filled with men in various stages of dying, supported by plastic body parts or iron walking supports.

The Vietnam vets were hard to look at since they were men my age. In the Navy clinic, I replaced missing teeth.
Carl made dentures for enlisted men who'd lost part of their faces. The parts that these men were missing were irreplaceable. Their eyes were blank or worried with unfinished thoughts that played out on their unshaven faces. The older vets visited with their buddies or the nurses. Like the Korean and World War vets, the Viet-vets had fought for their country. Though honorably discharged, they were not welcomed home.

I couldn't look at them for fear I'd recognize a face from high school with a stump of a leg, even though my high school was in another state. They were the vets that lived on the streets, soiled with urine and rotting food from the dumpsters they slept in. They smelled up the waiting room and paced while waiting their turn. The receptionist ignored them because they either argued with her or didn't answer when she called their name. She skipped over the troublemakers, hoping they'd leave, Grandpa said. Mac and his friends liked the receptionist because she called them first when they flirted with her.

The younger veterans weren't so charming. At our last visit, a vet with a white cane handed me a business card. It said, "If they ask you why we died, tell them that our fathers lied." He was promptly thrown out for littering. I kept the card but most were thrown on the floor. "Unpatriotic bunk," said Mac when I showed him the card. "Nobody gave me a break when I was through dodging bullets in Normandy. Even the Mob's disloyal when it comes to business. Some younger,
faster kid was running numbers in my place. I had to find a real job."

"But the man was blind."

"That’s his advantage. All these programs we’re paying for." There was no arguing with him, so I waited in the car.

Mac leaned in the window. "I’ve got a prescription to fill, Princess. Drive up the street."

"I should have waited for you inside. You can’t be trusted."

"Can’t a man have a private conversation with his doctor?" He hopped in the car and slammed the door. "I had to drop my drawers, prostate check," he confided.

"I’ve seen an old man’s backside. Grew up with an old man. Took him to the doctor."

"A liberated woman. Should I drop my shorts for you?" Mac undid the wide belt he wore cinched up to his breast pocket and pulled at his zipper.

"I don’t know any liberated women. Some just complain louder, like Gert. She warned me -- and you -- no sleeping pills." Mac held the prescription to my face. He pointed to the circled line, no refills. "A man’s got to have his sleep to keep up with his wife. I’ll ration them." Then he pointed to the pharmacy at the end of the parking lot. Rezipping his pants, he caught his shirt in his fly. When Mac jumped out of the car, it looked like a handkerchief was hanging out of his zipper. I coughed and pointed at his trousers. Readjusting
himself, he said, "Got to keep up my image for the counter
girls."

"Maybe they'd think you were waving to them."

He winked and joined his friends shuffling through the
automated doors of the pharmacy.

"Waves of heat radiated off the asphalt as I waited. The
radio station faded in and out in static as if it was
affected by the high temperatures. "Hottest summer since
1953," the broadcaster announced, "and it's the first day of
fall". There wasn't a leaf changing on the water-starved
trees in the parking lot. The announcer played, "Autumn in
New York".

At least there was a big band station. Mac and I agreed
on music. He liked country western because the words were
easy. You could sing along. But he loved big bands. A melody
to dance to, he said. He waltzed Gert across the trailer if
he'd had a few whiskeys to mix with his beer. "That's why I
married him," Gert said. "He didn't step on my feet like the
big lugs I knew."

"All you knew were krautheads," said Mac.

I grew up listening to Duke Ellington from the tenement
apartments that surrounded us. My father had a phonograph,
but mostly played Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman. Some of his
recordings were cracked by my mother who disliked his taste
in music. She was much younger than him. Other albums were
scratched by his feeble attempts to put a record on the
phonograph after he'd had too much to drink. He forgot which
ones were marred and was disappointed each time he played a favorite spoiled by a skip.

The radio had been my company when I was alone. After my father bought a television, I still preferred the dreamy sounds drifting from the radio to the white noise of the television, which was always blowing a tube. That would signal a trip to the convenience store where he tested the tube on a machine that looked like a robot with rows of black eye sockets. He’d have enough change for a treat, and I’d choose an ice pop even in winter because our freezer only had room for ice cube trays. He’d get discouraged trying to replace the bulb in the right socket and roll into bed early. I’d turn the lights off and the music on so I could stare at the dark sky freckled with stars from my window seat bed.

Listening to the car radio was the only quiet time I had unless Carl was home. His grandparents argued less when he was around. He spent his days cleaning the storage shed for the lab and waxing a few cases. There wasn’t enough work for both of us, he said. His nights were spent having a beer with Mac.

When he came to bed, the sounds of his grandparents’ marital distress that they’d kept bottled up during the day was uncorked. They’d variously whisper and shout. The whispering was more distressing because if we could hear them, they could hear us. Gert and Mac were louder if Mac found a hidden bottle to go with his beer. Gert had unfinished bottles stashed under wigs, behind bookshelves, in
her panty drawer, anywhere she thought Mac wouldn’t look. She liked having a highball, too.

My father drank but my mother wasn’t around long enough to care. He died before I was old enough to have an opinion on his personal habits. Carving out a bachelor’s life for us in an efficiency apartment above a dentist’s office, he walked to work. I walked to school. My mother left with the car when I was six. He never replaced the car or my mother.

I don’t remember much about her except that she smelled like cigarettes and strong perfume. I sat in dancehalls holding the table so they could sit down when she wanted a smoke. My father’s coat reserved a chair and I sat in the other one while they danced. The wooden chairs were hard and slippery. Dancers would bump me onto the floor as they shoved into the crowded aisles. I’d jump back on my seat as if playing musical chairs. I’d never played, but I had seen the adults scramble at the game on the dance floor. It looked like fun. Only adults had fun, I thought.

I’d finger the flowers on her hat while waiting. I thought her perfume came from the artificial flowers on the brim, but they smelled of dried paper and smoke. She had lots of hats because she was always coming and going. One day she was gone, and my dad never explained why.

I never wore a hat. My father tried to buy me an Easter dress with a matching hat the year she left. The hat was attached by a string to the price tag. He worked at the department store where we shopped. If I had a holiday from school, I waited in the employees’ lounge until he got off
work. He'd leave me with a coloring book and visit on breaks. We'd eat lunch in the coffee shop sharing a tuna sandwich and lots of saltine crackers, which were free.

At the end of the day, we'd walk through the store and buy salted nuts for his beer. That was before he drank cocktails at the local bar. He'd look at the children's sale rack, but I never tried on the outfits because the store was closing. If it didn't fit, I'd grow into it, he said. I learned to make quick decisions. He'd never let me change my mind.

But I wouldn't take the dress with the hat. It had purple flowers on the brim, her favorite color. It couldn't be priced separately, said the saleslady. He held it up to me and tried to squeeze the hat on my head. "For Easter," he said. "For church." I ripped the hat off my head tearing the string and the dress. The saleslady patiently picked it up. I ran under the clothes rack to hide my tears. I didn't miss her, but I knew my dad did. My father squeezed my hand and kissed it as he pulled me through the hanging clothes. He walked as if his feet hurt all the way home. I never gave him any trouble after that. For a hat, that Easter, I wore his handkerchief.

Mac came out of the drug store with a lilt in his step and a finger looped through a half gallon of amber liquor. "Now, a haircut, Princess." He patted his lush silver crew cut and smiled. "I'm on a roll." I didn't start the car. "What's wrong?" he asked.
"I'm scared of your wife."

"Me too." He shrugged. "But she's a krauthead. All bark, no bite, like a German Shepherd with no teeth."

"She pays me for running you around, Mac. If you don't behave, I'll lose my job."

"No Bingo Palace, then?"

"No Bingo Palace. The pills and bourbon should put us both in the toolshed."

"At least you'd get a look at your husband."

He'd noticed that I was on borrowed time, but I needed my paycheck to leave. I'd saved sixty dollars from Gert, but that wasn't enough, and I wasn't sure where to go.

"Haircut," he said. "It's Tuesday, and all the big boys will be waiting for me."

The big boys were not much taller than Mac and most were more wrinkled. They sat on a bench across from the two barbers, Marty and his assistant, and followed a pecking order to sit in the barber's chair. Peterson, the cleaner, was moved ahead because no one wanted to talk to him. He was tall and heavy set, and hunched over his paper to avoid the other men. Grandpa sat next to him on the bench, talking to the old judge, Rabinovitch, whose half-glasses drooped on his prominent nose. Grandpa told stories of our neighbor, Dicey Sloane.

I sat across from them reading men's magazines, like "True Detective". I still had no glasses so the magazine was next to my face. I didn't want to tell Gert I needed glasses to drive. Shuttling Mac around was better than waiting for my
husband to acknowledge me. I had spent one day following him from the toolshed to the house. That was enough. The dog followed him but I couldn’t. I kept each ten Gert gave me and waited.

When Peterson got up to take his place in the barber chair, Mac got up behind him. Rabinovitch slid off the end. They got a good laugh at the judge who fell off the bench, but Mac brought the boys back to a more serious subject.

“I’d bang the old chick,” said Marty, “if I could scrape up the money. Two hundred bucks is my whole social security check.” Marty combed Mac’s hair straight up like an elderly troll, and started clipping.

“Marty. You’re old enough to get your check and keep all you make. Save up, Man. Wouldn’t you like to know if she could get the old bugger to rise?” Mac turned towards me. “Excuse us, Margaret.”

“That’s okay, Grandpa. I’m not listening,” but I was. Paging through photos of scantily clad females with black gloved hands squeezing their throats had piqued my interest. Other photos showed bloody sheets with a woman’s body dangling off the bed with captions like, “Jersey Man Kills Call Girl”. How does a young call girl live to be an old call girl?

“But Mac,” Marty leaned in. “What if I couldn’t — I mean, when you’re six, you think your pecker’s for pissing. When you’re sixty, you know it is.” Mr. Rabinovitch dropped the financial pages he had pressed to his nose and laughed out loud. The other men joined him. Marty’s assistant had to
set the judge back on the center of the bench when it looked like he might take another tumble.

"She's got those magic fingers, Mart. Presses on this vein right here." All the men leaned towards him as Mac rubbed the hollow of his right pant leg. The judge fell forward into the coffee table and knocked over the bowl of plastic grapes. Marty's assistant righted the arrangement and the judge.

"Can't be done, MacSwaine." Peterson snapped the "National Enquirer" against his hand while the assistant trimmed his thinning white hair.

"Now Peterson," said Mac. "May I call you Pete?"

Peterson nodded. "Why do you think the old sheriff gets up for a ride with Dicey each morning? He's older than you, though he has more hair. Sign of a man's virility. Mac rubbed his thick, half shorn hair. Marty's assistant combed a sparse lock from one ear to the other on Peterson. "Pete, that sheriff's not watching the sun rise!" Mac slapped his knee and giggled. They all laughed except Peterson.

"Are you her pimp? Then you ought to know she's had her purse cut out!" Peterson stood up, the black barber cape clinging to him like a short halloween costume. The barber trimmed his sideburns as he stood.

"That's a lie, Pete. She still gets visitors." Mac sat up in his chair and Marty cranked it higher so the two men could have a look at each other. "Get off the heart meds and give her a shake. Get some first hand information, if your wife will give you spare change."
"I don't have to ask my wife for money! I've got a job. Not like you retirees!" Mac fell back as if he'd been wounded. Peterson ripped off his cape and threw it in the chair with a ten dollar bill. Peterson slammed the glass door so hard it rattled. Marty cranked the chair down to complete Mac's haircut.

"Don't listen to Pete," said Mac. "He's inhaled cleaning fluid so long his dick is pickled." They laughed together and stood to shake hands, exchanging dollars pulled from old folding wallets, the spending money their wives allowed them.

When we got in the car, Mac seemed pleased with himself. "Have fun?" I asked him as we drove the long stretch of dusty highway. He was hanging out the window like a bird dog on a scent. His crewcut rippled in the wind like a new shorn lawn.

"Those boys don't know what they're missing. Living next to Dicey has been better than sleeping next to Gert for the past twenty-some years."

"I wouldn't tell Gert that while you're carting in your precious cargo."

"Let's leave the precious cargo stashed in the car till your granny's not looking."

"Don't involve me in your war games." He pulled his head in the window. His cheeks were flush from the hot air. Mac looked like a boy with silver hair.

"You're a new recruit, newlywed that you are." He saluted me.

"I'm a new recruit, yes, but not to the war with your
wife. I don’t know the rules. And my husband’s missing in action.”

“Don’t mind Carl, Princess. He’s finding his way. With us, Gert makes the rules. I break the rules. She gets mad. I’m repentant, or I’m not. Someone declares a truce. We live for another day, together. That’s the skinny, Sailor.” Mac saluted me till his arm was shaking. I saluted him back, not knowing what I was agreeing to.

“The tool shed, then. Neutral territory,” he said.

“Off limits for me,” I replied.

“Carl’s as much krauthead as Irish. Moody like his mother, but I’m working on him. Serve him Irish beer when I can afford it.” I didn’t know whether to thank him.

We pulled in the driveway and he ran to the shed carting the liquor and his prescription. Mac was slightly bowlegged from scurvy as a child, Gert said, but was fast enough to run numbers in Detroit. One of seven kids, he was the breadwinner at fourteen after his dad, a longshoreman, was killed. There was no union then, but Mr. MacSwaine’s friends offered Mac a job. He took it and never flinched at what he had to do to support his family.

His youngest brother, Irving, was a lawyer. He knew Judge Rabinovich from connected guys who were extradited from Las Vegas to Detroit. Irving and Mac remained friendly since they had friends on both sides of the law. Irving often called on Sundays, but only spoke to Mac. “The rest of us could go to hell,” said Gert. Mac was tight-lipped about his brother and often spoke to Rabinovitch about him. The other
siblings were dead or too civilized to speak to Mac. His brother, Emerson, had taught him to be a boilermaker after the first war. Their business, Sweeney’s Service, folded when Emerson was blown up repairing a boiler. “Never drink on the job,” Mac reminded his relatives at the funeral, where Gert said he was stone drunk.

Carl was sitting on the porch. His grandmother replaced the beer in his hand as I sat down next to him. “Carl’s opening his lab tomorrow,” said Gert. “Mr. Monohan’s fronting him the first month’s rent.” Gert pulled a beer can out of her apron. “I was saving this for Mac, but he seems to be organizing his tools.” She smiled and handed me the beer.

Carl seemed like he’d had more than two beers. He crossed his legs slowly and missed the side table when he tried to set his can down. He stared through the fence at Dicey’s mule, who was snorting and pawing at the dirt. Carl couldn’t hold his liquor, but he could hold his tongue.

“That Indian caretaker must be late with the feed bag,” said Grandpa. He was trimming a strategic hole in the hedge. Serena’s paint horse nudged at the barrels she circled, pulling at the grass underneath.

“Dicey’s Indian ain’t good for much,” Mac continued. “Hides in that hole in the ground most of the day. Halfbreed among Indians. Couldn’t take sides in that Indian war because he was related to both tribes. So he went to Vietnam. Got really screwed up. Liked living in a foxhole so much, he built himself one. Dicey befriended him because he could farm on the cheap. Lets the weeds grow up with the corn. Plants in

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the wash so he doesn’t have to irrigate. Blesses the seeds and sits on his ass. Crazy, too. Face paint and feathers. Smokes ragweed that he grows with the corn. I’ve smelled it when he burns the ditches.”

“Peyote, Grandpa. It’s part of his church,” said Carl.

“Well, wine is part of my church, but I prefer bourbon.” Mac pulled a small flask from his back pocket which he must have filled in the shed. He held it up to Carl and took a swig.

“I used to smoke with Hosteen,” Carl whispered. “He told me he’d never go back to the reservation as long as his relatives were feuding. Made a nice kiva for himself, here. His dad was Hopi, mother, Navajo -- Begay like Betsy. Has a relative on the Paiute reservation. Takes Serena out there to help her.” I asked why Serena needed help.

“She won’t go to school and she won’t listen to anybody,” said Carl. Hosteen thinks she’s wild because of Gentry. Gentry thinks she’s wild because she’s Indian. Hosteen drove Serena forty miles to school her on the Paiute reservation so she’d be part of the tribe. She and Betsy have no home, he said, because they are from Jeddito. She might as well be Paiute. Serena’s cord was buried near Jeddito and it’s Hopi land, now.”

“Her cord?” I asked. Carl slurred his words and wasn’t making sense.

“Her umbilical cord.” He spoke so loudly that even Mac turned his attention from Dicey’s house. “Navajos go back to where their cord is buried to enter the spirit world.”
"So?" Carl seemed like he wanted me to understand.

"She can't enter the spirit world because she can't go home!" he shouted. Mac and I stared at him.

"I didn't know she was so spiritual."

"Christ!" Carl fell back on the couch and turned to his grandfather.

"Christ," said Mac, and held his flask out to Carl who took a swallow.

All I'd seen Serena do was ride her horse and argue or flirt with Hosteen. She'd slam the screen door in his face, then bring him a soft drink while he was raking horse manure. Hot and cold she seemed, except with her mother. To Betsy, she nodded and deferred. They spoke in Navajo. I'd never heard Betsy speak English, but Gert said she understood it. She said hello and goodbye to Betsy in German, since Navajo sounded like German to Gert.

As the light dimmed, Hosteen pulled into the gravel road, locking the gate behind him. His pickup was a pale shade of yellow, like the fading light. The paint horse and mule fell behind the pickup in procession to the barn. Hosteen moved as slowly as he drove, cleaning the barn, painting the fence, but the ranch was in order. Hosteen was deliberate in all his actions, like he was working toward some grand design that only he saw. "He's on Indian time," Carl said.

The trailer park seemed transported from the barren landscape made harsh by the sun to the filtered light of a crescent moon. Shadows softened the box houses into homes.
where working people fixed dinner in stand-up kitchens. Dogs that had survived the afternoon heat crawled from under trailers and low hedges to scratch at kitchen doors for their supper. Zoe rubbed her back on the cool Bermuda grass. Taking notice of a white flash near the road, she sat up and barked.

"Here's the limo," shouted Mac. Carl had just found the crease in my jeans where his hand rested. He pulled away, but looked at me with eyes so dark in the shadows of the porch that I couldn't tell if he was staring at me or through me. I kissed him. He held my chin, my neck, and undid the top two buttons on my blouse as he returned my kiss. I felt my sleeve slip.

"Gert, the limo." Grandpa stood on the porch steps.

"Shut up, Mac." Gert was finishing the dishes with the television rolled into the kitchen so she wouldn't miss her program. Mac turned towards us. Carl kept kissing me and as I struggled to rebutton my blouse.

"Your grandmother can't stand the thought of a woman enjoying herself." Mac turned away and looked back at the hole in the hedge.

"It's Miss Sloane's business, you lunkhead. How do you know she's enjoying yourself?"

"Big ears on that woman. And a big ass." He wiggled his backside at the screen. Gert slid the door aside and popped him with her dishtowel. Mac held his fist up mockingly. She nudged him with her hip and he fell to the lower step. Stuffing the dish towel in her apron, Gert clapped her hands as if she'd won a round.
“Shh. Now, here’s the young fellow.” Mac motioned to us to follow him to the fence. Through the bushes, we saw a tall man in blue jeans on the porch. He tipped his straw cowboy hat and then removed it as the screen door opened. His face was tan except for a pale halo where his hat shielded his forehead. Dicey nodded cordially, her ample breasts supported by a sequined halter top. She seemed much shorter than the cowboy, but her hair was piled high on her head and made up some of the distance between them. The visitor stepped in and the door slammed shut. She turned on a blue porch light.

“That’s the signal. The limo driver will circle and park at the convenience store.” Mac eased up, clutching his back.

“You’re too old to watch!” Gert stood behind him, hands on his hips.

“Try me, Woman.” Mac fell back against her.

“Huh. You’re long gone.” She kissed the back of his head and pushed him toward the porch.

“How would you know? You haven’t looked since ’52.” She placed him in his over-stuffed lawn chair on the porch and walked into the house. “How would you know?” He shouted after her. “Oh, what the hell. Bourbon, water back, Woman.”

“Get it yourself, Irish.” She had her back turned to him.

“Story of my marriage. Get it yourself.” Mac lifted himself off the chair. As he tottered into the kitchen, he smiled at Carl. Gert put a bottle on the counter and slid him a glass with ice. Had she given up for one night? They had some tacit agreement that was beyond my understanding.
Their marriage was like an opera with discordant arias. Carl and I hadn’t written our first overture. He was seated on the loveseat, knodding his head. The low sad sounds of Patsy Cline drifted across the hedgerow. Mac joined us.

"I-I was walking a -after midnight.’ Wake up, Carl, you’re missing the party. I could play till I went to work the next morning, at your age. Never knew when there’d be another chance to have some fun during Prohibition.” He tugged at Carl’s trousers, then threw back his drink. Carl was nodding out of time. “Dicey sure has a collection,” he said to me. “Listen to that. Hank Williams, ‘Your Cheatin’ Heart’. Best song of ’52, the year Gert broke my heart.”

“Don’t start, Irish.” Gert leaned close to the screen, wiping a pan. She washed the pans last to use less water. Live through two world wars and you learn to use less, she told me. She added rubber bands from each paper to a ball in the drawer, which was next to the ball of assorted string. Aluminum foil was washed and reused. Plastic bags dried on drink bottles in the kitchen window.

Mac looked up through his glasses at Gert. Her silhouette filled the doorway. “I’m not starting anything, Gert. Just filling Margaret in on a little family history.”

“Tell the truth, then.”

“Always. Always.” He lifted his cocktail glass to her. She walked away.

“Now Carl, Son. Nudge him, Margaret. Are you listening?” I grabbed Carl’s shoulder and gently shook it. He awoke slowly, stretched, and put his arm around me.
"1952, Carl. The year you were born."

"Yes, Mac." Carl rarely called his grandfather by his first name. He sat up and drained the last of his beer.

"You don't remember, do you?"

"No."

"Well, I can't forget. That was the year my wife kicked me out of her bed." He nodded at Gert on the phone in the window. "Tells all her lady friends that will listen that I lifted her nightie, fondled her beautiful breasts...Well, she doesn't tell that part, but it's the last thing I remember... and pissed all over her. I woke up to her kicking me on the floor. Out, she said, and out it was. Until you and your mother moved in. By then, she'd sold the mattress and bought twin beds. Your mother got the bedstead and replaced the mattress. You slept with her until she found that you were a little pisser. You were kicked out, into a crib, and I was demoted to a single bed next to your grandmother."

"Where was your father?" I asked Carl.


Carl was awake. His face was turned away from us, towards Dicey's place. I stood and rearranged my blouse.
"Think I’ll join Grandma for some tube," I said. Mac blocked my way with his outstretched arm.

"Fill 'er up, Princess. No sex makes a man thirsty. Beer, Carl?" He didn't answer. "Beer," Mac said. "Wonder if she'll go for the big tip, tonight, Carl, with the underpants story. Dicey hasn't had a caller for days." I stood at the screen listening. "You've heard how her dad was a gambler. Wagered her blue panties when he couldn't ante up. Somebody must have cheated because he lost with four kings. Dicey's daddy was her first pimp. That's why her porchlight is blue." Mac pointed to the curl of his empty fingers. I refilled his glass and brought my sex starved husband a beer.

Gert was lounging on the sofa polishing her nails. "Sit down, Margaret." She patted the cushion next to her, but her artificial breast was laying there. I didn’t move. “Oh. This tub of lard. I wish I’d had them both cut off. I’d have lost twenty pounds without dieting.” Gert moved the jellied mound to the t.v. tray. I felt my small breasts shrinking from the air conditioner blowing at my back as I sank into the side chair. Beside me was a wall of family photographs including Gert's baby picture. Her tiny bonneted face seemed to stare down at the silicone breast jiggling on the tray.

"Don't listen to that shanty Irish on the porch," she said. I noticed all the shanty Irish relatives were pictured in the shadowed recesses of the hall. The krautheads overlooked us. Gert and her shorter, broader mother, Dora, stood on the steps of a church. They were dressed in plumed hats that sat square on their squat faces. Dora's coat was
trimmed with a fur collar, claws and tail attached, as if a small rodent had frozen caressing her. Dora's icy stare fell on an impish Genevieve waving from behind her mother's skirt at the cameraman. In the next picture, a veiled Genevieve knelt solemnly with hands folded to receive Holy Communion. Her relatives surrounded her at the communion rail as if witnessing the marriage of a child bride. In the wedding photo, Genevieve was dressed in a sleek, white suit framed by the darkly dressed Gertrude and Dora, like two gothic bookends. If one guessed the occasion from the looks on their faces, it would have been Genevieve's funeral, except she was standing. The groom stood in the dim background. The shiny medals on his uniform jacket sparkled in the flash of the camera, revealing his presence. Tall and awkward looking, he leaned into the photograph, as if an afterthought. He was younger than Carl when he crashed.

"Gert. Bring your sweet ass, here, and sit on my lap," Mac called through the window.

"How long will those men be out there feeding their fancies?" asked Gert. She stood over the barcalounger and yelled. "Mac! Come in before you fall off the porch. You watch him, Carl."

"Yes, Grandma." Carl laughed as he answered.

"Gert!"

"Yes, Mac. I'll sit on your lap as soon as I chuck my teeth and pull off my wig." Gert sat down. "He's drunk," she said.
Dicey’s Game

August is the cruellest month, breeding
Horse flies out of cow manure, mixing
Sweat and sweltering heat, stirring
Dry land with high wind.

“I walked my mule over to the sheriff’s house today. His wife watched me from the glass hall that led to the barn. Remember that house? There were the picture windows overlooking my ranchette, large rooms, ice cold like this kiva, from an air conditioner the size of a small house. She built five thousand square feet of lace curtains and flowered upholstery, four bedrooms for visiting sisters and their families branching off the living room like a cross.

“The brick walls were formed from the red canyons of her home town. Took the bricklayers a year to finish. The sheriff said he should have hired non-union labor, but didn’t want to upset his union friends in construction. Fussing over the house kept his wife out of his hair. She had furniture on hold all over town. You should have seen the trucks lined up our dirt road the day she moved. The sheriff directed traffic. I waved to him as I was combed my mule in the front yard.

“You were invited over one Christmas, so small, you were strapped in a papoose board. Betsy had dressed you in a beaded leather skirt with a velvet shirt and moccasins to impress her sisters-in-law. But the wind came up strong, so
she wrapped you tight in a saddle blanket. No one saw the pretty outfit she'd sewn for you but me. She kept that dress in her top drawer along with the colorful afghans she made for your crib. Your mother was superstitious about pictures, but you could lay out those baby clothes and see how pretty you were. I kept them when they cleaned out the trailer. Don't remember being asked inside your aunt's house? You were small when they had a falling out.

"No, it wasn't over your father's drinking. Not his temper, nor his carousing. He was the baby of the family and was loved by all his sisters. If you must know, it was the color of your mother's skin. She believed her brother married beneath them. Light skin was highly favored in your aunt's heaven. You and your mother were dark. But you tanned so pretty in summer, like a chocolate ice cream cone. Thought it made you handsomer than the rest of the girls in the family who were pale as paste.

"I didn't like your aunt, either, but she really disliked me. Walked through her house with the sheriff right after it was built. She was helping one of her sisters have another baby. Blue tile kitchen, blue brocade couches, blue canopy bed. No, I didn't sleep in her bed! Wouldn't do that to any woman, even her. Asked the sheriff if he liked blue. He just coughed and said she was an expensive woman to keep. He'd like to divorce her, but 'Divorce was not good for a sheriff running for re-election... I'll retire soon.' He made a point of that by putting his arm around me. We both
knew her family got him elected. She kept the house, I kept him, and we both waited.

"You rode in their corral. Remember the hall that ran from the house to the barn? It was so long, the sheriff never wiped the manure from his boots. By the time he got to the kitchen, the carpet had cleaned them. She always had some service truck backed up to her kitchen door. Supervising the upkeep of the house was your aunt's biggest chore. I took care of her husband. All she had to do was watch the maid wash and iron. No, your mother didn't do wash for her. Your aunt was the only customer Betsy couldn't please.

"Besides cleaning boots, that hall was carpeted so the men could sneak out to the barn without being heard. The sheriff had a keg of beer in his refrigerator for the hired hands. Holidays, your uncles would bow out of the living room for the livelier crowd in the outhouses. I was never asked, but I recognized some of the girls. Young girls just starting out when I was retiring. Lucky girls, too. Caught that time when penicillin and the pill had improved our circumstances.

"My friends were retired -- either pregnant from some man they didn't quite remember but were too lonely to forget -- or because they looked bad and nobody called them. If they could stand, older girls served cocktails and hoped for a few tricks. You could be past your prime -- the lights were low -- at the level of the cards, but you had to have legs that looked good in mesh tights and heels. I was too short for cocktails. The sheriff thought he saved me from cheap tricks in dirty hotels."
"So, Mrs. Perry moved in across the street. I made a point of combing the mule or weeding the flower beds when she had company. Saw her standing near the front curtains more than once. Had the cactus and scrub brush bulldozed away from her house. Not to see me better, but because she was deathly afraid of rattlers. A field of bluegrass separated us. Mrs. Monoghan admired the manicured lawn -- she was from Kentucky -- but your aunt didn’t like her, either. She was dark skinned. My lawn was mowed by cattle and horses. The road ran between us.

"Watched the sheriff’s front wheels when he came home from work to see which way he’d turn. He parked the pick-up at her house to spite me. Then he checked with his foreman, looked at his cattle, the cattle in my front yard which he’d loaned me, and settled on my porch. The sheriff was neighborly to everyone.

"Started my place with the trailer set low to the ground to keep the pipes from freezing. Added the porch, front room, and extra shower as business picked up. Didn’t know how I’d do on my own, but I was tired of giving everyone a piece of me -- the bellman, the floorman, the trick. I wanted my own place, even if it was a trailer.

"Looks like a real house? It was real to me; more than a dirty hotel room and a Gideon bible to keep me company -- all I had before my dad died. Put up insulation and wood skirting around the trailer to beat out the wind and dirt because I hated to sweep.

That was my chore when dad couldn’t pay the rent. Swept
the roaming house, front and back steps, each day till he paid Mrs. Porter. Moved my share of dirt around. That’s why I planted the hedge row and rose bushes, to keep the dirt on the ground. The wind has its own mind, but I’m not ready to be covered with dust like you.

“Yes, that was a bad storm that blew in Margaret and Carl. Hot wind that night, then cold the next morning like the fever and chills of an early flu. It was the end of the summer. That colorless station wagon limped into the trailer park. Who taught Carl to drive, Hosteen? That explains it. Drove just like a reservation Indian — only guy on the road. That junkpile your father called a yard had better looking ceurs peurked there than Carl’s wagon.

“No, your aunt doesn’t want that trailer with all the garbage in it. Monoghan kept it for back rent. All your things are right here. Your mother must have the leather baby dress, but I have your dresser with crayon marks on the side and the silver hair brush that you both used. Made a ball of your shiny black hair and put it in an envelope in the drawer.

“I was saying that I left that mule at your aunt’s house. She was banging on the glass, following me down the hall to the barn. It was double pane glass and I hardly heard her till she got to the middle door and kicked it open. ‘Whore,’ she shouted, and the door slammed shut. Hadn’t heard that word in twenty years. The mule looked up at me like it didn’t understand. My face must have dropped with dismay, but he was soon distracted from me by the bluegrass. Mrs. Perry
pounded on the glass like an egg beater when she saw the mule ripping at her lawn. I watched the black maid coming for her. She looked like a football player in a starched apron. As the maid lifted your aunt, she turned and knocked the door open. Mrs. Perry shouted, 'murderer', and spit on the steps. She was carried back to the kitchen like a sack of potatoes. The help was paid by the sheriff since Mrs. Perry had suffered from nerves. They had little patience with her moods, and the sheriff made himself scarce since he no longer visits me.

"I watched the spit dry on the cement since that mule was stubborn about leaving the lawn. Gave him a kick in the flank, finally. You were right. I let him have his way too much. I kicked him high, thinking of the sheriff, and almost fell on my back in the flower beds. The mule turned and stared at me with those sleepy brown eyes. That look saved him from being sold for dog food more than once. I ended up turning tricks to buy hay for a lazy mule.

"I had bought him to plow behind, Nosy. No, I'd never tilled the soil. Didn't know about the hardpan caliche. I was the one being plowed under those first years. Any job looked easier to me. The sheriff said females give vigor to the offspring. That's why his kids were so puny, I guess. Said my mule had the a problem. It was a hinny, out of a female ass and a stallion; worthless. The horse trader was a cousin of the sheriff's, so I had trusted him. I reminded the sheriff of that. Just bought my spread and wanted to get along with the Perrys. Be a good neighbor. Showgirl to cowgirl, that was me. I didn't complain, just worked harder to support my only
breathing relation, the mule. I hired Hosnee and he planted fruit trees, built a chicken coop for the feathered varieties, and kept a few head of cattle. The sheriff had the hay barn built during one of his wife’s remodeling projects so she wouldn’t notice. Hosnee dropped a well for the livestock when he dug the kiva.

“That was near the first time I picked pieces of beer bottle out of your mother’s head. Got acquainted with your dad by smashing the back of his head with a shovel Hosnee had left in the yard. Gentry was lucky I’m a small person. Didn’t know he was a relative of the sheriff, who filed the report. Said if I’d hit him much harder, he’d have arrested me for manslaughter. I’d seen enough women slaughtered by men, so I didn’t care. I did return the sheriff’s favor for not arresting me.

Your dad learned to give me a wide berth, and Hosteen watched my back side. Fresh out of the service, he was cheaper to feed than the mule. Hosteen knew livestock and dry land farming, but neither of us could harness that mule. That lazy hinny was the first and last of my big dreams. I only had little dreams after that.

“When my dad died, our landlady, Mrs. Porter, said, ‘Just work for me. Save up. There’s money to be made with the boys coming home from the war. I bought this place working on my back. Save up.’ I knew she needed me. The servicemen were wearing out her two girls. One was Black. ‘Dark meat or white?’ Mrs. Porter asked. Dusty was more grey than black because she hardly got out.
"We sat on the stairs of the boardinghouse on Sunday mornings. Dusty was tired, but she'd get up to be with me. The front door was open when there were no customers, and the fresh air sucked the sour smell of whiskey, vomit, and aftershave out the stair window. The breeze played with the hems of our dresses like a playful suitor, said Dusty. 'Lawd Chil', if I could jus' stretch my legs once durin' duh week an' once't on Sunday, I'd be satisfy,' she said. 'I'm losin' my color.'

"We compared arms. I was brown like you from hanging out the wash, two sets of sheets everyday. The white girl was hard to roll out of bed, always drooling on herself from too much drink and I don't know what else. If she wet the bed, I had the mattress pad to wash, which was a chore with a ringer washer. I weeded the flowerbeds and pushed the hand mower. Kept busy outside while the other two paid the rent for Mrs. Porter -- not by cleaning, you understand.

Mrs. Porter filled her cookie jar all week. Went to the bank on Monday with the cash and her ledger, noting the services each customer paid extra for, the amounts in two columns for Dusty and Doris. Doris was called 'the white girl', except on the accounting ledger, that's where I saw her name. She ate breakfast at the side table while I changed the sheets. Mrs. Porter would throw her in the shower like a rag doll when she came for the breakfast dishes. Then we'd hear Doris crying while Mrs. Porter pulled her hair trying to comb it wet. That's the only time we heard Doris' voice,
when she was crying. She was silent as a lamb with customers.

“Dusty sang. She sang through tricks, unless her customer objected. Then she’d hum. On Sundays, she’d sing with the wedding chapel bells while we sat on the steps. Closest I ever came to church. Dusty’d hold my hands like she was praying with me. She’d hum like a bee with nowhere to light until she recognized a tune, then break out in a spiritual she’d learned in church before her family broke up. Her singing sounded earthy like Mr. Monoghan’s.

“You never heard your caretaker sing? You must have been off with Hosteen and your horse on Saturday mornings. Monoghan kept that little park like it was a cemetery plot. Hummed a spiritual, then a Frank Sinatra tune while he raked the paths of rainbow rock. Got on his knees to replace the painted rock borders, looked like he was praying, and always singing like Dusty.

“Wish I could have found Dusty after she ran off. Some Black showgirl told me her family was from Louisiana, but I didn’t know her last name. “Mrs. Porter insisted I give her a hand inside after Doris was carted off half dead to the hospital. She was the second person to expire in that house, said Dusty. The other was my father. She was spooked. Told Mrs. Porter I was too young to replace Doris; I was like her own chil’. Mrs. Porter said that didn’t surprise her. I had whore blood in me, just like Dusty. That was the first time I heard my name and whore mixed together, when Dusty told me what Mrs. Porter said. The last time was your aunt, today.

“Dusty left me her prayer book. Said she left the church
before she could read, but always liked the 'beauteous' pictures. It was my first bible that I could keep that wasn’t stamped ‘Placed by the Gideons’. After I finished the new testament, I wanted to tell Dusty there were lots of whores in the bible and most of them turned out alright. Dusty was the second mother I lost and the only one I ever knew.

“My first mother? She was younger than you when she met my dad. It was after they started the dam project. Paid good wages for the Depression. Men were away from their families and spent money freely. My dad had finished a card game which he’d won. Strolling through the casino, he’d tried his luck on a one-armed bandit and hit the jackpot. When he walked past the craps table, a clay-soaked worker with a beard handed him the dice. ‘Try your luck, Mister.’ My dad never saw what he rolled. The bearded man shouted, ‘Look what you’ve won!’ The crowd choking with laughter parted to reveal a young Mexican girl behind the gaming table. The croupier shoved her forward, her round belly exposed. As the gamblers moved to another table, they patted my father’s shoulder in congratulations. He searched through the crowd for the bearded man, but was left with the Mexican girl and the dealer who handed him the dice. ‘Good luck Buddy,’ he said. ‘She only speaks English with her body.’

“That’s how my parents met. Makes your parents look good. Either Hosteen or Gentry was your father. I’d say Hosteen because he took an interest in you. Who was my father? The man I called my father took this Mexican girl to his upstairs apartment. That was the place I told you where
my teeth were knocked out falling down the stairs. The white staircase was freshly painted the last time I rode out to the dam. That apartment was the nicest place I ever lived as a kid. Government housing for dam workers, it had a garden with its own gardener and a watchman, the man who opened the door and saved me from the gamblers.

"My dad never slept with my mother. He kept her around because she cooked and cleaned the apartment. Dad was a bachelor. Washed his handkerchief in the sink and pasted it to the mirror. Hung his underwear over the showerhead, socks on the side of the tub. She changed his habits. Scrubbed his shirts and starched them in the bathtub. Ironed with a cordless appliance she heated on the stove. Borrowed it from the Mexican neighbor that got an electric iron from the man she lived with. We used it as a doorstop, later. He was well kept for two months.

"My father was lucky during the time she was with him. Paid for her maternity at St. Rose and still had cash in his pocket. The doctor measured her stomach and told him I was 'a big strong boy.' Dad thought of setting my mother up in her own apartment if he kept winning. He needed space for card games, but wanted his lucky charm nearby.

The day I was born, he found my mother wrapped around the toilet in pain. Her eyes were black with fear. She was so young, it must have been her first child, he said. He carried her to the bed, and she clung to him with such force, he thought he was of a snake that chokes its prey. My father wrapped her in the sheets to comfort her, feeling the force
of her belly contracting. Then, she lay still like a statue of the virgin he had prayed to as a boy. Still, then writhing in pain, he felt my mother was possessed. When she screamed and clutched his throat, he called the taxi.

"He carried her down the stairs that I tripped down. 'Carefully,' he said, to remind me he was once a sober man. In the street, he repeated her chant waiting for the cab. 'Duele, duele, duele,' it was the only word he learned in Spanish.

"'Wife's name?' asked the emergency room nurse. He didn't know. She served him meals from the groceries he bought at the store. She watched him while he ate, but they never spoke to each other. He should have asked the Spanish speaking neighbor. 'Was her name on the paper work from the doctor's office?' he asked the nurse. 'No,' she said, and waited.

"'Elizabeth,' he answered, his mother's name. They took my mother from him, calling her Elizabeth. She must have been confused. That was the last time my father saw her. They told him it would be a few hours. She was small and the baby big. He walked downtown and bought her flowers and a turquoise clip for the hair that was uncombed when he brought her to the hospital. He should have straightened her hair and changed her dress, but he'd hardly touched her. He bought a silk nightgown that he later wrapped in tissue with the for me. The flowers, my father pressed into wax paper, and kept one in his wallet for good luck. I used them as bookmarks for my Bible.
“My father never wore a watch. Said it was a temptation for a gambler to check the time. It must have been hours that he looked and shopped, stopping at the Rainbow Club to play a hand of poker. The cards were mixed; high pairs, but no face cards.

“He was confused and walked back to the hospital. The chaplain met him in the hall. He spoke some Spanish, he said, and had baptized the baby. ‘Elizabeth Consuela’ was the baptismal name chosen by the mother. I couldn’t get the order of the names, your wife was delirious, but the meaning’s clear, ‘faithful oath of God.’

‘And my wife?’ The chaplain stepped back from my father, glancing at the nursing station, which was empty. He put his arm around him and they stepped into the waiting room.

‘It is my understanding you did not know this woman?’ asked the priest. My father pushed past the priest, reading the nametags as he ran down the hall. The priest followed explaining, ‘We took the baby because the mother was so pale. I told her the nursery was just down the hall. I told her in Spanish, but she thought we were taking the baby to give it away. She made her confession to me, begged for forgiveness, asked for her baby back. I absolved her, but she was crying so hard, the nurse gave her a sedative.’

“By now, my father was to the end of the hall and found no nametag for my mother. He shook the priest, ‘What is it, Man? Tell me.’

‘She was looking for the baby,’ he said. ‘Touching each
child, disturbing the mothers. The nurses grabbed her next to the nursery, and helped her to bed. She fell to the floor, her gown soaked in blood. The nurses fell with her, covered in blood. They’ve gone to change.’ My father saw the stained mop and pail in the corner of the hall. ‘They paged me, but it was too late. The doctor came after me. May she rest in peace.’ The chaplain crossed himself.

‘Her room?’ My father pointed to the doorway next to the mop and pail. ‘The orderly is finishing. You may want to wait,’ the priest answered. The orderly stood with the sheets tucked under his arm, as my father entered. The bed was empty. There was a spot of blood on the mattress pad. My father kissed it, tasted the salt on his lips. It was warm where she had laid. He’d never kissed her, Consuela.

After a time, he came to the nursery to say goodbye. My nametag was easy to find, he said. I was the biggest baby dressed in pink. The others were lost in their blankets. The priest was behind him and motioned to the nurse. She brought me to the glass. ‘Lovely child,’ he said to my father. ‘Easy to adopt.’

‘Elizabeth Consuela Sloane,’ my father read. ‘Perhaps I can do better for her.’ ‘But the child is not yours,’ said the priest. ‘The nurse said you didn’t even know the mother’s name.’ ‘I know this name.’ He pointed at my bassinet. ‘It’s mine.’ My father looked at the room where the orderly was finishing. ‘There’s no one to dispute it.’ The priest nodded, and left. When the orderly finished mopping the hall, he
looked over my father's shoulder. 'Pretty baby. Looks like you.'

"When I opened my eyes, he knew my face. It had served him dinner. My mother hadn't been much trouble, he thought. Maybe I'd be easy, too. He needed his luck back. My father always had a lucky charm; the box of horseshoes, the iron she had used to press his shirts, me. Never worked a day at the dam after I came home from the hospital, and he won a potful of money on Friday nights when the men cashed their paychecks."
Margaret

One morning, the wind circled Dicey and the sheriff coming back from their ride. Mac was pulling trash through the cyclone fence with long pincers. He snapped at palm fronds that flew by him in the wind.

"Come in, Mac. Only a nosy fool collects trash in a windstorm." As Gert leaned out the slider, the screen flew off and bent over the porch railing.

"Better than a snow storm. Packed our house into a moving van during a Detroit blizzard, Margaret." Mac took the screen off the porch and straightened it against his chest.

"You packed in a snow storm because you insisted on moving the day after mother's funeral," said Gert. "My furniture still has the nicks."

I was on the porch, watching the clouds forming dark banks against the mountains to the east. Mac turned to me. "My wife has a memory like an elephant and the legs to match." Gert dismissed him with a wave of her hand and retreated to the kitchen. "I missed my daughter and thought we'd keep her company while her pilot was overseas," he shouted.

"She didn't miss you! Why do you think she moved?" Gert barked back.

"To keep from choking on the advice of Krautheads," he answered. "Her husband was transferred," he told me.
Gert slammed the cupboards. I suspected they'd always argued, but they loved an audience. Carl kept his distance, setting up the lab and soliciting accounts. I was left to referee. Genevieve must have tired of it, too. She left with the first G.I. that asked her. A hostess at the U.S.O., she spent her pay check from the candy factory on dance clothes, said Gert. When they packed Genevieve's trunks of frilly dresses, Gert and Dora had to sit on them to snap the lock. She had one small box of household items. Not a good sign, said Dora. My mother left with a carton of cigarettes, the clothes she had on, and the car. Carl kept the car keys in his pocket, and my separation check was lost in the mail.

Suddenly, white sheets of paper flew across the yard, collecting against the screen Mac was holding, littering the lawn. Gert gathered the papers in the fence and hedges. Mac peeled the papers off the screen on his chest and scurried around the yard to retrieve the rest. They looked like two old kids on an Easter egg hunt.

At Dicey's ranch, the sheriff struggled with the saddlebag caught on the horn of his saddle. Papers flew each time his Appaloosa reared and pawed at the air. As the sheriff pulled the saddle from the horse, he fell into the wood pile next to the kiva.

Drops of rain drummed on the aluminum roof and dappled the concrete walkway where Gert and Mac organized the piles of papers. They ran under the porch, and we watched Dicey try to pull the saddle off the sheriff. Hosnee climbed up the ladder of the kiva, his face and arms caked with dried mud.
The rain exposed dark splotches of Hosnee’s skin, like leopard’s spots. His headfeathers bent and straightened with the wind. Lifting the saddle, Hosnee pulled the sheriff up with his free hand. Dicey cradled the old man’s head against her shoulder, and they walked the sheriff home.

“Mrs. Perry’ll have something to say about that!” Gert sat down on the porch with her stack of papers. “Listen to this, Mac.” Gert read the top page:

How is it that I love you so --
Your paling lips and Autumn glow?
Love returned in knowing eyes --
See my sword, unsheathed, won’t rise?
Too late. I leave my love, unanswered.
Love’s ambition lost to cancer.

“It’s written in a man’s strong hand. He writes her poetry.” Gert hugged the pile of papers like a girl caressing a valentine.

“He can’t have written that! Goes off with Dicey every morning and -- ” Mac thought for a moment. He leaned the screen against the trailer. Rain beat in waves against the roof, but the wind had died down. “I’m taking a nap,” said Mac, and walked in the house.

Gert got out her ball of string and wrapped the papers in a bundle. “You take this to Miss Sloane after the storm blows over. She’ll be missing it. I’ll check on Mac. He must be upset to lie down in the middle of the day.”

The rain settled into a slower pattern, but the clouds were dark over the Perry’s ranch. The Appaloosa was tied to
the front fence at Dicey’s. The mule and Serena’s horse gave him a wide berth as the Appie stepped and kicked at the air. I leafed through the pages on my lap and found this couplet on a torn sheet:

I am naught but spit discarded
On a seem’ly worthless carcass.

Had she heard me? To keep from ringing the bell twice, I picked at a square of wire mesh that had been rewoven into Dicey’s screen door. The horse flies were thick after the rain and swarmed at the screen, seeking a small entrance to the house. I swept the flies from my face and knocked.

“Patience, Dear.” Dicey pushed the door towards me. I handed her the bundle. “I thought these would all be lost,” she said. “Not that it matters, now. Come in. Are you MacSwaine’s granddaughter?”

I didn’t hear her, at first. All I could think of was how perfectly Dicey’s denture supported her lip as she spoke. In the dim living room, her smile was luminescent and curved seductively toward the edges of her mouth.

“You’re the first person that’s come in the front door and stared at my teeth,” she said.

“I’m sorry. That’s how I make my living, when I’m employed. I’m, Margaret, MacSwaine’s granddaughter, through marriage.”

Dicey shook my hand, a strong handshake for a tiny woman. She stepped back and placed the papers on a side table that seemed to be part of an old bar.

“Let’s sit down.” I followed her around a glass table
supported by antlers and sat on a red leather sofa with cream colored horse heads stitched to the back. Next to the couch was a floorlamp with a black fringed shade, the base made of horseshoes soldered together. I ran the fringe over my hand.

"That lamp is funny," Dicey said. "My dad collected horseshoes. He wasn't a religious man, but he did believe in a higher authority -- luck. When he moved here, you could find horseshoes on the backstreets around town. If he discovered one in an alley, he knew he was in for a lucky streak. 'Your believing makes it so,' I told him. 'Long as it works,' he said. I inherited a crate full of horseshoes when he died. Hosnee put the lamp together so gentlemen could remove their boots by catching them in the forks. You know Hosnee?"

"I've seen him."

"If you saw him this morning, you know he gave Mrs. Perry a scare when we walked the sheriff home." Dicey laughed and held her throat. Her slender, arthritic fingers revealed her age. "Hosnee said he brought on the rain with his ritual dancing. Mrs. Perry'd be just as scared of a priest as an Indian in headdress -- anyone not like her that came to the door. Coffee?" Dicey held out a porcelain cup and saucer.

"Please."

"Never know when I'm going to have company." She unscrewed the top of a silver thermos and poured the coffee into two cups trimmed in gold, matching the creamer and sugar bowl.

"Wish I had nice china like yours," I said, reminding
myself not to stare at her shirt which was stretched to maximum capacity. The largest belt buckle I’d seen on a woman accentuated her tiny waist.

“So, you’re Carl’s wife. Did you two just marry?”

“We married,” I answered. “But we didn’t have much of a wedding. No reception. No presents -- except Carl’s dog.”

“Sometimes it’s better not to marry them, Dear. They appreciate what you do for them more. You get more presents. My china’s from the sheriff. Would you like these cups we’re drinking from?”

“No, thankyou. It’s a matched set.”

“I have a dozen, and only use two at a time,” she said. “Please take a couple. Every bride needs a gift for putting up with a husband. Besides, I’m mad at the sheriff. Waited too long for that man. He retired and his wife got sick. Always an excuse. Can’t look at these cups without thinking I wanted to serve that man breakfast in my bed! I’ll wash and wrap these for you. Two less memories to haunt me.” She held out her cup to me with her little finger crooked like we were at an English tea party. “Let me be the first to toast your marriage in your new china.” We touched rims and the cups resonated like chimes through the dark, empty house.

“Thanks, Miss Sloane.”

“Call me Dicey. Let’s wrap two clean cups. I use these all the time and they’re chipped.” We sat sipping coffee, listening to the last drops of rain on the tin roof. Wood paneling made the room look like it was part of a real house, though the roof had the same tinny sound as the double wide.
Dicey stood and walked quickly into the kitchen, like she had a timetable to keep. Shorter than the floorlamp she passed, Dicey looked tall and slender from the back from her high-heeled boots and narrow hips.

The kitchen table had a low, green lampshade over it. Dicey motioned for me to follow. She wrapped each cup and saucer in paper toweling. Searching for a box, Dicey came across a crystal pitcher trimmed in gold and wrapped it, too. "You'll have to find your own sugar." Dicey smiled at me as I helped her tie a ribbon around the box. She looked younger in the tinted light.

"Don't you worry, sometimes, Miss Sloane?" I asked her.
"About what, Dear?".
"These strangers that come to your house."
"They're guests of the hotel, Dear. They come to play cards."
"I see."
"What did you think?" Dicey touched my hand.
"Well, Grandpa said -- "
"That old rooster who's lost his roost? His voice carries farther than the fence. I have to turn up the phonograph when I have company. Every word travels from his porch to mine. Saw your grandfather on the roof, too. Suppose the view's better of my bedroom window."
"Mac's been having trouble with the swamp cooler. He was supposed to call a repairman."
"Spry old man. Too bad he can't get his wife to notice."
"He tried to crawl in with me one night when Carl was in
the bathroom. You’d think he’d lose interest, at his age.”

“They have to be six feet under to lose interest,” said Dicey. “Most of these old boys just want a story to tell their poker partners back home. I let them win, at first. Strip poker. I had one old man down to his dentures.”

“Never lose?”

“Can’t lose. I’m too old to wrestle with some drunken cowboy, and I’ve had my purse cut out. Keep Hosnee around to quiet the rowdy players by standing behind them in facepaint and headfeathers. You’d be surprised how many cowboys are afraid of Indians. And Hosnee watches out for Serena.” Dicey pushed back from the table, stood, and handed me the present. “Come riding with us, sometime,” she said.

“I can’t ride.”

“You’ll learn. I did — on a stubborn mule.” As Dicey held the door for me, I heard the phone ring.

The trailer seemed to swell in the Autumn heat, parting seams in the walls for flies, radiating sounds through the thin flooring — footsteps to the liquor cabinet, a glass dropping, the toilet flushing. Our sleep was unsettled. We lay staring at the shadow of our revolving ceiling fan. I slid frictionless, seared in sweat, pushing Carl off my arm to reach my underwear on the floor. I was caught in the glare of the bathroom bulb with my gown on backwards.

“Not disturbing you, Princess?”

“Just thirsty,” I answered, holding the used condom behind me. I had run out of pills.
We settled into a routine that allowed us small freedoms. Carl set up the lab and had work for both of us. We talked over the spin of the dryers and the churn of the slot machines. Our machines were louder; the stone vibrator, the model trimmer, the gold casting machine. We could guarantee our privacy by turning on a machine. Laundry patrons were frightened by the rows of plaster teeth along the window sill. We left the iron grating locked but the door open for ventilation. Few people spoke to us. They stared at the odd shaped tools on the bench and the half completed denture cases that looked like skulls with missing teeth, then moved away.

We had learned our trade in different ways, so the shelves were stacked with rows of teeth and metal articulators that looked like vices, mine different from Carl’s. I had a set of gold denture teeth that was no longer made. Carl teased me about it. There were cut-out stars and moons, front teeth with diamond chips. The dentist I worked for had Black patients. He’d show them the set to promote the deluxe denture, which was costly.

“Dr. Bivac, I be back,” said Carl laughing, but I enjoyed setting the characterized teeth. It broke the monotony of imagining the perfect face with the perfect smile. No one’s face was symmetrical. Dr. Bivac introduced me to each patient to see how their lip lifted to the side, or their gums showed above the teeth when they laughed -- all imperfections that had to be diminished by the denture.
The Black women often tipped me when they left the office, slipping a moist bill in my lab coat pocket they'd pulled from the crease of their bra. They were dressed in servant uniforms, and their dentures were paid for by their employers. "Bless you, Honey, for makin' me a nice set of teeth." The Black men rarely came in, except for extractions. They were rarely employed as steadily as their wives. I gave one horn player back 'his lip', which he tested on a trumpet before he paid for the dentures. He tipped me a twenty and a Duke Ellington album.

I wished more patients had given me gifts instead of money -- I played the Ellington album each night. It was hard to hold onto cash when you'd never had it before. Dr. Bivac ushered at church with my father. I helped count the change after mass. He noticed I was done before the men and never pocketed the pennies that fell on the floor. "Would you like a job?" He asked me. I was fourteen, but he promised to train me after school. Backing up the receptionist led to helping in the back, where his denture man was falling steadily behind Dr. Bivac's furious pace. When the lab man had a stroke, I took over -- setting teeth till two in the morning, at first. We lived in the apartment above the dental office, so I could work after Dr. Bivac went home.

He raised my salary when I learned to keep up with his orders. I was making more than my dad when he died, but it was hard budgeting funeral expenses, unpaid bar tabs, utilities. "Go to lab school. You'll make more money," Dr. Bivac told me. "I have a friend," who was the captain.
Dr. Bivac hadn’t the money to bring his wife from eastern Europe when he was in school, so he roomed with Carl’s step-dad. He was grateful for an American friend to improve his English. When he drove me to the bus station, Bivac gave me the set of teeth. “Many Black people in Virginia,” he said. “You’ll do well.” I hadn’t finished my lab rotation when we moved west. Carl was a certified tech -- I had to work under his supervision. I had gone from a small salary to no salary.

At dawn, when the segregated colors of the sun matched the fading tints of neon, we ran the canyon. Carl sprinted ahead to work up a sweat. Zoe circled between us, tracing the scent of jackrabbit on sagebrush, scaring up tarantulas, picking through rusted cars for the scent of game birds. At a tall stand of cottonwoods fed by an aquifer, we turned back. I was checking the answering machine for early morning denture repairs when the laundry door seemed to burst with pounding.

“Let us in! Let us in!” Carl recognized Serena’s voice. He unlocked the door and pulled back the grated screen. Serena and her mother fell into the room. Betsy’s brown upper lip was pierced by her two front teeth. Blood dripped from her chin onto the velvet collar of her shirt.

“Lock the door. Hurry! He’s coming.” Serena was jumping in place like a nervous child. Carl grabbed her shoulder to steady her, reaching to shut the door. Serena ripped her arm
from Carl's, and climbed on the counter to look out the transom. The blinds in the front window were drawn. Sunlight seeped through the blades, segmenting Betsy's face into bruised brow, bloody nose, raw lip. Seating her in a low chair, her back was against the wall, I asked, "May I push these back in?" She nodded. I blotted her lip with a towel to get a look at her loose teeth. If I could shove them to place, the bleeding would stop. I'd seen Dr. Bivak do it. Clots of blood clung to her tongue and edges of her lips. She winced as I pressed against her front teeth.

"I hate him! He'll follow us. He wasn't that drunk."

Serena was hanging on the transom bars. Betsy spoke to her daughter in low, guttural sounds. Her lip was swollen and her tongue moved the front teeth when she spoke. I wiped the dried blood stains from her neck, feeling her pulse which was fast.

"He's coming! The bastard. I told you." Carl pulled Serena down and whispered to her. She pushed him away, but looked at her mother. Betsy trusted Carl and nodded at her daughter. Serena left by the side door. Closing the iron grating behind him, Carl locked us in. Through the high window, I saw a stocky man in a greasy, unbuttoned work shirt, his fleshy belly shining with sweat. With the point of his boot, he kicked gravel at Zoe as she stood growling in the doorway.

"Out of my way, Bitch." He reached over and picked up a red rock from the path.

"Hello, Gentry." Carl stepped out from the shadow of the
doorway. Gentry flipped the rock from hand to hand.

"Hello, Carl. Doing laundry?"

"Not this morning. Get in a bar fight, Gentry? Your hands are bloody."

Gentry squeezed the rock in his right hand, examining his knuckles. "Nothing I can't handle," he said, and pushed up the brim of his cap to look at Carl who stepped towards him. Zoe growled and lunged.

Carl read the logo on Gentry's cap. "Zion Gravel and Cement. Still working for your family? Haven't fired you, yet?"

Gentry tossed the rock at the dog, grazing her hind leg. It bounced off the washers, startling Betsy. Carl pulled Zoe up by the collar.

"I take care of my family. Pay my bills." He looked beyond Carl, saw me watching from the window. "That your little wife? Grown boy like you can't afford your own place?"

Gentry tried to step past Carl, but he held him back.

"The door's locked. Never known you to pay your own bills, Gentry. That how you thank your wife for keeping a roof over your head?"

"I can kick your butt too, Boy." Gentry was on the same step as Carl, but had to look up at him. Zoe tore at his jeans as he slapped at her.

"Only person I've seen you beat is your wife," said Carl. Gentry looked past him, determined to finish what he had started. If Betsy heard her husband, she didn't let on.
She sat with her eyes closed, hands folded in her lap, though a fly lit at the edge of her lip where the blood caked.

"She can't walk away from me!" he shouted, waiting for some reply. Betsy reached for the hem of her skirt and passed it through her fingers like rosary beads. "Don't stand in my way, Carl." Gentry had his hand on Carl's chest. "You'll never get started, here, if I say a word against you. I'm related to every--"

"City councilman, and cop -- hasn't helped you, Gentry. You're still living in this trailer park. The sheriff's retired. Let's see if some young officer knows your name. Betsy had the shit beat out of her. Serena's called the police."

Gentry stepped back. "I'm warning you, Carl." He pointed as he walked, then turned down the path, kicking the stones that lined the walk. In one pocket of his jeans was a hair brush, in the other, the butt of a revolver.

Dicey stood at the side door holding a jar of horse salve. "Serena was to call the police?" she asked. "What good would that do?"

Carl slumped in the doorway. "I just wanted him to think things have changed."

"Ha!" she said. I unlocked the door, and she started wiping Betsy's face with liniment. Carl lifted Betsy off the chair. Dicey steadied her. Her head fell against Carl, then Dicey, as they dragged her weary frame across the lawn. I closed shop and followed. Spreading a quilt over a white chenille bedspread, Dicey laid Betsy in the front bedroom.
She plumped the pillows and put an ice pack on her face. "To keep the swelling down," she said, but Betsy's face was purple and bloated. Sunlight streamed through the dotted swiss curtains, marking the dark-skinned women with small circles. They blended into the warm earth tones of the patterned quilt. Behind us, Serena and Hosnee argued in Navajo. The steady click of their tongues sounded like an ancient Chinese language. Betsy was too far gone to notice. She slept with running shoes on her feet, as if she could slip away in her sleep.

Dicey closed the door, and we followed her into the kitchen. Hosnee spoke severely to Serena, but lowered his voice as we entered. He shook hands with Carl and nodded to me, as we sat down at the kitchen table. Hosnee jumped to catch the tea kettle as it whistled. He stirred the hot water through a mix of herbs wrapped in cheesecloth. Pouring the tea into earthenware cups, he set them in the middle of the table.

"We'll have to watch that son-of-a-bitch." Dicey stirred sugar into her tea. One teaspoon, two -- she added more sugar than her tiny waist revealed. The tea tasted naturally sweet and pungent, like sage cured in honey. Serena took her cup and stood at the back window. The ladder leading up from the kiva rattled in the wind. Loose straw from the haystacks swirled around the low adobe walls.

Hosnee cut a loaf of bread making quick, even slices. He offered Serena a buttered slice, but she shrugged her shoulders. He dropped the bread plate on the table. Dicey
looked up at Hosnee, but his back was turned. "Hosnee bakes fine bread. Trained as a cook in the Marines."

"Serena, will you get me some prickly pear jelly from the pantry?" Dicey asked. Serena looked at Hosnee. He pointed to the back room. "Just look, Dear. You'll find it." Dicey turned toward us. "I'd like to get Gentry out of their lives." She leaned in. "He's been a wild stallion since he was a young boy. Should have been gelded." Hosnee wrapped his large hands around the steaming mug and lowered his head. His fingernails were clean, half-moons on stubby fingers. The back of his left hand was scarred with an ink tattoo. 'Semper Fi' was drawn in crude letters. Dicey laid her hand over his.

"Hosnee doesn't like me to tell this story," Dicey said as she squeezed his hand. "His family were potters. Sold their wares at the trading post owned by Gentry's uncle. Gentry was a young boy when he got in trouble with a girl in his hometown. He was sent to live with his uncle on the reservation. He flirted with the young Navajo and Hopi girls that brought their rugs and pots to the trading post. Betsy's mother disliked him. He was disrespectful to the older women who didn't speak English. She was a weaver from Jeddito, made horse blankets, so she sent Betsy to the store often because her rugs were small and quickly made. Her family lived on the few sheep she raised and the sale of blankets. If she butchered too many sheep, she'd be short on wool for the blankets.

"Betsy turned up pregnant that fall. Her mother blamed Gentry's family. Uncles disciplined nephews in her tribe, she
said. She wanted her saddle blankets back for compensation.
'Take them to Ganado for fair trade,' she told the uncle, who
spoke Navajo. Am I telling it right, Hosnee? You had left for
the service by then?"

Hosnee shoved his chair back and stood up, turning his
back on Dicey. He was shorter than Carl but muscular and
square-shouldered. His blue workshirt was tucked into a
turquoise belt. His hips were slim and his jeans hung low. He
cleared the tea pot and sieve from the counter, ignoring
Dicey's story.

"The uncle got his rugs back and Gentry got Betsy. He
complained that he hadn't knocked her up, but he'd already
been in trouble once. The uncle thought a Navajo wife would
settle Gentry down. He was married to a Navajo and it had
been good for business. She was a hard worker. Gentry and his
new wife could run the post in Showlow. Quiet town to raise a
family in -- good opportunity. But Gentry appealed to his
older sister who got him a job, here, and a trailer."

Hosnee, who was putting the bread away, slammed the
refrigerator door. Serena came with the jelly and slid the
jar down the counter. "Have you decided how to slice up my
father, yet?" she asked. Hosnee was wiping the bread knife
and didn't answer. He opened the jar and set it on the table
with a pile of spoons. Opening the cupboard, he took out an
assortment of small plates, and slammed it. Dicey smiled up
at him, when he dropped the plates in front of her.

"I'll talk to the sheriff. See what he can do," she said.
“We’re staying with you, Auntie? With police escort?”
Serena was making a jelly sandwich. Her spirits seemed restored.

“I can’t promise how cooperative the sheriff will be. His wife’s mad at him, and he’s got his tail tucked.”
Serena spoke with her mouth full. “When isn’t she?”

“This is different, Serena. Hosnee and I walked the sheriff home when he fell off his horse. She pulled him into the house and said, ‘Leave my husband to me.’ Slammed the door in our faces. ‘I’ve been more of a wife to him than her sickly self.”

“Woman’s not right in the head, Auntie.” Serena shoved the other half of her sandwich in her mouth. Carl had been so quiet, I put jelly on bread and sat it in front of him. Serena took a bite of it to tease him, but he didn’t notice. I took the last piece of bread and spread it with green jelly. It was sweet and tart. Carl left his uneaten, and Serena finished it as Hosnee removed the plates. Why would Serena and Betsy concern Carl so?

“I thought the sheriff was close to leaving her, but what does an old woman blinded by love know?” Betsy laughed and Serena joined her, as if they were both too smart for love. “You get so long on a dream,” said Dicey, “you can’t get off it.”

“I don’t know about the sheriff, but I know my dad,” said Serena. He’ll burn down your haystack when no one’s looking, and if the house goes with it, he won’t care. I say
we pop his gas line, first. I don't need anything in that trailer."

"Serena, he's your father."

"He's never claimed me."

"That doesn't mean -- ," said Dicey, "My father wasn't perfect. What man is?" She looked at Carl and Hosnee.

"Present company excluded." Carl shook his head as if he had a personal grudge to settle.

Serena wiped her mouth on her sleeve. "Gentry's mean, Dicey. He's never cared about me or my mother. Doesn't claim us as family -- only good enough to cook his dinner and pay his bills. That doesn't give him the right to put his fist in mother's face when she's trying to protect me. People think that's an Indian nose." Serena pointed to the front room.

"That nose was shaped by the back of her husband's hand!"

Serena stood. She looked at Dicey and the rest of us. Carl left the table.

"Give me some time, Serena. I can fix it," said Dicey.

Serena walked out the back door. Hosnee followed her. We watched them saddle her horse and set up the barrels. Dicey smiled weakly. "I hope I can fix it before Serena does."

Serena and Betsy moved in with Dicey, and there didn't seem to be a problem. Grandpa learned through Mr. Monoghan that Gentry was seeing other women. Looked like Sweeney's old place, he said, except the class of whores was lower. Betsy picked up more laundry from the bachelors in the trailer.
park. She was also the new cook at Dicey’s. We were invited over for fry bread, beans, and salad any night, said Dicey, because that’s all Betsy cooked, except mutton stew. None of us liked mutton, except Mac who grew up eating Irish stew. Gert wouldn’t let him visit. Mutton was bad for his digestion, she said, and looking at Dicey was bad for his blood pressure.

Hosnee took on more cattle and painted the fences that had flaked in the summer heat. When he was done with the fences, he painted the house which had been a faint red shade, like the mountains just after sunset. I never wanted a white house, said Dicey, but Hosnee had bought large pails of Navajo white. He even white-washed the low adobe walls of his kiva and coated the exposed logs with creosote. When he decided to spray the barn with creosote, Dicey closed up the house for a day. Hosnee took Serena and Betsy to the Paiute reservation, before he sprayed, to stay with his aunt. They came back late the next night, walking arm in arm with Serena. Dicey had no visitors in respect for Serena, and Grandpa was disturbed by it.

“What can she live on?” Mac was sorting through the mail. “One for you, Carl, from the city.” Carl looked at the envelope. Most of his business mail came to the box outside the laundry, except his mother’s letters which he never opened.

“What do you care?” asked Gert. “She probably sleeps on a mattress stuffed with hundred dollar bills.” She set out cold cuts and a tin of fish for Mac’s lunch on the table.
"We had our business license pulled thanks to you, Margaret." Carl threw the letter on the table and sat down to lunch. His grandmother picked it up before I could reach it.

"How can you say that, Carl. Who could have complained? Everyone likes your work -- and Margaret's. She did a nice job on Betsy's teeth, although I don't like the star and moon." She smiled at me, confidingly.

"She wanted that, Grandma." I said.

"She wanted it, Margaret, but you had no prescription from a dentist to do the work. And you pulled her teeth!" He stood and threw his napkin down.

"They fell out in my hand! What was I supposed to do? She wouldn't have seen a dentist for fear they'd report Gentry, and he'd come after her."

"That's the trouble with women like that. They have to be such God damn victims. They screw up your life if you try to help them. Like my mother, she never --" Gert and Mac looked up. Carl grabbed the letter back from his grandmother. "You know she'll go back to him!" He was pointing at me.

"How do I know?"

"Because she will. Because they always do."

"He'd kill her, Carl, if he could get away with it. Why would Betsy go back?" We stood arguing over the dining table. Mac pulled on Carl's sleeve.

"Sit down, Son." he said.

"Why'd this come to the house, Margaret? Gentry's needling us. Proving his point." He crumpled the letter.

"I know some people, Carl. Sit down." Mac took his arm.
“Who? Old gamblers and drunks at the barbershop?”

“They have their influence. I don’t tell you everything.”

“Sit down!” Gert stared at Carl and we both sat down. He glared across the table at me. I bit into a mackerel sandwich that was meant for Mac. It was dry and stuck to my throat. Tears ran down my cheeks as I tried not to cough. I hadn’t cried since my father’s funeral, and I didn’t want Carl to think he’d won. He was upset about Betsy, but I knew I did the right thing in helping her.

“If your grandfather says he can help you, Carl, he can,” said Gert. “Now, what is this about your mother?”

“Old news, Gran. Ignore it.” Carl went to his room. I wiped my face and followed him. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, changing into his running shoes. He was wrong, I told myself as I fell back on the pillows. I counted the blades on the ceiling fan as it revolved, waiting for an apology. He jingled the keys in his pocket. I heard him call the dog. The car door slammed. He bottomed out on the speed bump, but the sound of his tires on the pavement grew distant. When Gert yelled they were walking to the store, the shadows of the fan had fallen across the mirror, cutting the reflection of Genevieve. My large brown valise was next to the bureau.

Dicey was watching an old Audrey Hepburn movie. She let me in at the back door. “How kind of you to let me come,” I said. Laughing, she held out a bottle of champagne to me.
I read the label. "Dom Perrignon. Pricey."

"Was that Carl tearing down the road? She grabbed another glass from the cupboard.

"He left."

"Looks like you did, too." She held a glass out to me. "I'm cleaning out the refrigerator." She clinched her stem against mine. "To our little cat house, with no customers."

The champagne burst like tiny balloons in my throat. Dicey tried to take the suitcase from me, but I held on to the handle, my connection.

"No, thanks."

"Well, at least sit down." She pushed my chair in, like a waiter at a fancy restaurant, and refilled my glass. The bubbles were tinted green from the overhead lamp. I wondered what color the bubbles were that floated behind Lawrence Welk's band when he danced with the champagne lady? Pink. Not gray like the t.v. set, but pink. My dad slouched in a sofa chair, lit by grey light of the television, his hand clutching a cocktail glass. If he was awake during the champagne dance, he held out his hand to me. I danced on his stocking feet, until I was tall enough to stand as his partner, remembering the steps he'd shown me.

When they rolled the credits, he changed the channel to the fights. Sitting on the broad arm of his chair, I was instructed in the art of the upper cut. "You're left handed like me, Margie. Surprise a man with a quick left, if a guy grabs you." He demonstrated the jab from his seat. I got a hug from his pals at the bar, but they seemed nice, like my
dad. A jab for a hug? I found out later, what he meant. He pulled my thumb out of my fist, if I forgot, when I boxed the palms of his hands.

"Knobby Brooks."

"Knobby Brooks," I repeated so he’d know I was listening. He pulled the high school picture off the bookshelf where he kept his awards. Knobby was one of the kids he’d beaten. “Thick German hands. Hit you like a door knob in the face.” The photo showed a nun with a whistle and a crucifix around her neck holding up the gloved hand of my father. The other boy had fallen into the arms of an old Black trainer. The nuns taught pugilism to boys at the orphanage to prevent fights outside the ring. The janitor doubled as the trainer. He thought my dad had promise because of his long reach. But dad didn’t like to get hit. He mastered the upper cut to end the fight quickly. If he couldn’t knock the guy out, he danced around the ring for three rounds. “That’s how I learned to dance. Impressed your mother.” Not for long, I thought.

He picked up another dark photo. He had two medals around his neck, but a black eye. His eyes were deep-set, so he pretended he’d never been hit. Big ears framed his narrow cheeks. He had a startled look like he wanted to run out of the ring, but rows of boys were climbing over the ropes to congratulate him. He’d won his weight class, 125 pounds, and best amateur fighter of 1933. “That was my last fight,” he said. “I was eighteen and graduated. When I enlisted for the war, they told me I’d lost the hearing in my right ear. Had a
hard time protecting my right side. Wouldn’t have met your mother if there had been many other guys to dance with.” He put the picture back on the shelf.

Dicey was wiping my face with the handkerchief that she kept tucked between her breasts. It smelled of perfume and perspiration. “Don’t cry, Honey. We’ll get that Carl back for you. He’ll be knocking at the back door before you know it.”

“I’m not crying over him.” I took the hankie from her and blew my nose. She looked into the champagne bottle, tapping the false bottom with her long nails.

“Let’s have another,” she said. “Now, if some cowboy I was trying to impress was sitting here, I’d get up like this.” She leaned toward me as she stood up, her breasts straining against the halter top, the brown edge of her nipples just visible. Reaching into the refrigerator, she ran her hand over the curve of her hips. “No panty line. G-string,” she said and lowered herself to the bottom shelf. Pulling the bottle toward her, she stood with the champagne between her legs. “Tight thighs from riding my mule,” she said and laughed. Grasping the bottle, she peeled back the foil, untwisted the wire, and popped the cork. The champagne burst forth in a light stream, staining her jeans. She lifted the bottle to her lips and drank slowly, overflow trickling down her neck. She filled my glass.

“Impressed?”

“I’m surprised they don’t come in their jeans.”

“They do. Sometimes, I let them lick the champagne off my neck, and a little lower. Then, I win the next few hands.
They usually go home before they’re down to their underwear. If not, Hosnee comes in and grabs a beer from the fridge when I flick the light twice. An Indian drinking behind their back sends them home quickly.

Dicey was good at getting what she wanted. She’d done well with her modest looks. Her dyed black hair was tied back in a roll that was as thick as a loaf of bread. When she let her hair down, it fell softly around her breasts and hid her leathered neck. She looked almost as young as Serena from behind. “Riding tones your butt,” Dicey told me when she wanted me to ride with her. When she laughed, her breasts jigged precariously in her blouse. Her face shone with gold powder that she brushed on her cheeks and throat. Dicey knew every trick to look and act younger. I wanted to ask her —

“How old am I? You are asking the one question I won’t answer. I’m old enough to be your mother and young enough to be your friend. If some cowpoke fell in love with me, I’d still marry. Maybe they could put my purse back in. I look good in white.” She held a paper towel across her chest.

“You do. I’d like a wedding, too.”

“You’re married.”

“I don’t feel like it.”

“What should it feel like?” She wrapped the paper towels around her like a veil.

“Not so cold and lonely. A warm spot in the bed next to you. A warm arm over your heart. Someone to squeeze your hand and not let go.” I held the cold glass against my lips.

“I felt that, once,” said Dicey. “It gets you hooked.”
She poured more champagne. The last of the bottle tasted foamy, like beer. Bubbles popped in my ears. The television, which had been turned down since I walked in, was flashing the late news on our faces.

"Dicey, I'm grateful to you, but I'm so tired. Can I sleep on that cot on the porch?"

"That's where we roll the drunken cowboys. I don't know how clean the mattress is, and the porch is drafty."

"I like sleeping at the edge of the house, where you feel outside but you're not." I thought of my window seat bed.

"You won't get lonesome and run off?" She took my hands and kissed them, then held them to her throat which was damp from the spilled champagne. I hiccupped and we both laughed.

Dragging my suitcase to the porch, I shoved it under the bunk. When I laid down, it kept the mattress from bottoming out. My father's case felt solid against the small of my back. A year this fall. I couldn't part the curtains and see his chest rising, hear his snoring. The broken ceiling tiles above me were punched with tiny symmetrical dots. As I rolled over, the dots spun into the stars of distant constellations. The night sky seemed fixed in the same pattern I'd seen as a child, an ancient black sheet resting on my cheek. There was a crimson outline to the kiva. Did Hosnee ever sleep? Did he have a magic potion for sleepless nights, for lonely hearts, in his pouch of herbs? The red kiva spun to black. A web of night colors sealed my eyes, hushed my breath, swallowed me in a cocoon of death and life in twilight.
"Margaret, are you awake?" The banging on the screen door riveted into my head.

"I am now, Mac." I covered my head with the pillow.

"Come to church with me."

"No." I didn't feel like church. Why did expensive champagne feel like rotten wine the next morning?

"I have a plan." I sat up as the sun rose above the mountain. Wrapping my head in the pillow, I reached over to unlatch the screen. Grandpa kissed me on the cheek. His dry lips felt like a bee sting.

"Judas." I said, and fell back on the bed which felt like a pin cushion. Mac sat next to me. The roll of the mattress caused a wave of nausea and dry heaves.

"Princess, you don't look so --"

"Don't call me Princess. I'm wise to you. Go," I felt the contents of my stomach rising.

"Sit up. I can help." Mac tugged at my arm. His hand felt as dry and leathery as his lips. I opened one eye. Mac was on fire with the sunrise. It hurt to look at him. I covered my face, but he pulled me towards him and put his arm around me.

"Carl loves you. He's just a young man."

I dropped the pillow. "He's almost thirty. Got another excuse?" Mac shrugged. I had the overwhelming desire to strangle his scrawny neck for defending Carl, but the sun was full in my face. I needed both hands to squeeze my temples.

"Do you love him?"
“I hate him. He’s a cold son-of-a-bitch.”
“Watch it. My daughter is no bitch.”
“Sorry.” I pressed my palms into my forehead.
“Your grandmother’s called me worse. We’re still married.”
“How can you tell?”
Mac didn’t answer, but rubbed my back. He squeezed my neck just below the hairline. The pain stopped. When I lifted my head, he winked. “Love and hate. Made a marriage out of it. Don’t know which kept us together. Strong stuff.” He let go and the pain rushed back.
“Can you do that again?”
“If you’ll get up.” Mac lifted me off the bed. The sun sat squarely on his shoulder as he squeezed the base of my skull like a firm melon. As long as he pressed, I could stare into the harsh morning light without flinching. Suddenly, he kissed me and let go. I was free of the headache.
“Mac, your breath is worse than mine.” I pushed him away and walked into the kitchen.
“Hair of the dog,” he said following me, and opened the refrigerator. The row of champagne bottles was missing from the bottom shelf. Dicey had washed them, turning them upside down in the drainer. She and Gert saved everything. Mac seemed to be collecting half the kitchen on the counter; Tabasco, tomato sauce, two eggs, pepper, glass, ice, spoon. I held my ears when he slammed the cupboards. I held my mouth when he set the glass in front of me. The eggs glistened over the ice cubes. A splash of hot sauce stained one egg yolk.
"Bottoms up." Mac stared at me over his bifocals.

"Can you stir it?" I asked.

"And bruise the eggs?" He sounded insulted.

"Oh, all right." The yolks burst on the way down. Both of them. But I didn’t throw up. If anyone knew about hangovers, it was Mac. I’d never seen him sick from drinking, just a little stiff in the legs the next morning.

"That’ll sweat it out of you." He patted my shoulder.

"Take a shower. We can still make eight o’clock mass."

I was too weak to argue. Mac sat at the kitchen table with his legs crossed on the adjacent chair, obviously pleased with himself. He pulled the racing form from his pocket as I passed behind him.

"Here’s a tip to ponder in the shower. Always play the jockies. The horses are nags." He snapped open the paper.

"Is that a tip from the horse’s mouth or the horse’s ass?" I asked. He wiggled his ass in the chair.

The shower head beat a hot stream of water onto my forehead. I did feel better. How could water be so comforting? Beyond the bathroom lay the prospects of a jobless, husbandless life, with only the attentions of a drunk and a prostitute. What were my chances? In this town, pretty good. I washed my hair with Dicey’s "Midnight" shampoo, dressed, and headed to church.

The cathedral, in the shape of an angel’s wing, was wedged between a casino and a strip mall. The collection basket was filled with casino chips, said Mac. My father would have enjoyed being the usher that traded the chips for
cash. He rarely had more than a five in his wallet. To walk the strip of casinos with a basket of chips would have been more thrilling than the crap tables for him. If he was offered a free drink by one of the exotic cocktail waitresses, he would have tipped her with his own money. No harm in a free drink, he'd say, no harm to mother church. He never thought of what he was doing to himself, hitting the bars with two-for-one drinks and free food, polishing off the evening at home. I hadn't been to church since his funeral.

We walked down the center aisle and sat in the back. The only worshipper we passed was a local television reporter in shades. "Young Irishman's got Bailey's on the brain," said Mac. "Doing a mob story in this town'll get his pencil shoved in his throat. Survived his first car bombing, I'll give him that. Nobody here turns on the ignition with the car door closed. Same as Detroit. Same faces, same stunts."

"Shh!" The old woman next to us shook her rosary beads at Mac. He crossed himself and knelt down to avoid her harsh stare. Her mantilla disguised the deep grooves in her olive skin. Over the altar stretched an al fresco painting of Christ floating above lost souls licked by scarlet flames. Above Him, the Paraclete poured the sacred water over the head of Christ. The parched souls below lifted their arms in expectant penitence. Would the healing waters flow through His fluid robes? The bell was rung by a red and pustular altar boy. We rose and began the Catholic calisthenics of kneeling, sitting, standing.

The priest walked up the aisle shaking the pungent
incense holder. At the altar, he made it clear he would shout at the early crowd. His voice shattered my fragile hold on the hangover. Incense and hangovers reminded me of New Year’s Day at Dr. Bivac’s. I’d have a drink to celebrate New Year’s Eve with my dad. He couldn’t put more than a splash of water in a highball. It was against his religion. He toasted my mother, as if the year would bring her back, played his records, and fell asleep. One drink and I crawled into bed an hour after my old man. The late night sirens and dogs barking never disturbed me after his cocktails.

The next morning was filled with incense from Mrs. Bivac blessing her house, and smoke from the Romeo y Julieta cigars Dr. Bivac shared with my father. The combination made me so sick I rested on the cool tile floor in the bathroom for relief. When I cleaned the dental office, Dr. Bivac’s desk was littered with signature rings from the cigars brought by his Cuban patients. I’d wear a ring on each finger while dusting, imagining diamonds in the eyes of Julieta. My hands smelled of cigar smoke afterwards, which reminded me of New Year’s incense and hangovers.

The priest began the sermon by repeating a beatitude from the gospel, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are the poor of pocketbook, for they have seen Lost Wages,” whispered Grandpa.

The priest’s beard circled his face in the Eastern Orthodox style. His robes were wine red and covered the tips of his squatty fingers, which he pointed at us for emphasis.
"Be humble," he shouted, then whispered, "Our kingdom is not of this world. If they insult you," he started down the aisle and directed his speech at a well-dressed parishioner in a dark suit. "If they persecute you," his voice was sharper, "has Christ, himself, endured less? The ultimate sacrifice," he shouted, "endured for sinners, like us." He pointed at the dark-suited man who sat erect in the pew.

"You have heard love your friends, hate your enemies. Why should God reward us for loving only those who love us? Sir?" The priest addressed the well-dressed man who stared at the altar. Turning on his heels, so the red robe fluttered behind him, he stood at the communion rail.

"Love your enemies," he shouted, "and pray for those who persecute you." The congregation sat in icy silence. The priest whispered, "for He makes His sun rise on bad and good alike; His rain fall on the just and unjust."

A voice from the back of the church said, "Amen." The priest stared at the man down front. He returned to the altar and genuflected. "Amen," he said, and continued the service. When the ushers walked down the aisle for the offertory, the man and his entourage in the pew behind him left, as did the reporter.

Grandpa shook his head. "This priest may save our ass, but not that reporter's."

"How do you know?" I asked. By then the basket had reached us. Mac held it in his lap while he retrieved the change out of his pocket. I looked at the array of pink and blue chips that looked more like mints than money. Mac threw
in an old silver dollar and passed the basket to the old woman. Her gift was in a church envelope, a regular parishioner.

"How do you --" Mac interrupted me by putting his finger to his lips, nodding to the woman next to us. I turned to her as she held up her missalette, then opened it. Mr. Monoghan stepped to the podium and sang "Amazing Grace".

"He's Catholic?"

"Black Irish," said Mac. Also sings the 10:30 Baptist service, his only paying gigs." Monoghan's voice was strong and plaintive. When he finished, the congregation spoke in hushed whispers, as if their prayers had been vocalized and answered. The seraphim in the painting seemed to whisper hosanna. We knelt, prayed, and were called to communion. I sat back. So did grandpa.

"What can an old man do that's a mortal sin?"

"Are you tempting me?"

"I'm asking."

"I'm not answering. How about you?"

"I hate my fellow man, starting with your grandson." My whisper was more of a shout. The old woman kicked up the kneeler and climbed over us, breaking into line. The usher looked back when she complained. Mac waved to his friend from the barber shop. I hadn't recognized Marty in a suit. After mass, we met him in the counting room. Marty handed back the silver dollar.

"I saw you," he said. "Have anything else to contribute?"
Mac begrudgingly opened his wallet and dropped a twenty on the pile of ones. "What did the one dollar bill say to the hundred?" he asked.

"Okay, what?" asked Marty.

"'Where you been?' The hundred says 'I been to Cuba, Palm Springs, the Bahamas -- Where you been?' The dollar says, 'To church, to church --'"

"To church," Marty finished. "That's a Catholic for you, all full of piety and empty pockets."

"Too many kids." Mac sat down to count.

"You think?"

"Keeps you poor. Not like these Protestants who use birth control."

"Protestants never fuck -- at least with their wives."

"I wouldn't know. Even my wife thinks she's a Protestant." They both laughed. I sat down to count the change.

"Nice girl, your granddaughter. Good sport."

"She needs a favor," said Mac.

"I do?" He gave me the look he'd used to get me to drink the hair of the dog.

"Small favor," said Mac. "Vinnie needs some pictures. She needs a paycheck."

"Just temporary," I said, "till I get my license back."

"That's what we're discussing, Margaret." I shut up.

"Can you do her hair?" asked Mac.

"I have to ask Vinnie for a favor, then stick around to
do her hair?” Mac nodded at Marty. “I don’t hang with those guys anymore, and I haven’t done women’s hair since I worked at the morgue.” They both looked at me. I felt the top of my head to see if my hair was standing on end. The thought of being a corpse and having your hair done for — your funeral — made my skin crawl.

“Hair is hair,” said Mac. Marty agreed, and they continued counting. The chips were off to the side. “Double or nothing?” asked Mac, sifting his hand through the pile.

“Bad luck,” said Marty.

“Had my share.” Mac pushed the pile away like he was cashing in his chips.

“Your brother was the worst.”

“Stupid bastard. You’d think he’d smell the liquor in the tank before he lit the pilot.” Mac didn’t lift his head as he spoke. “He knew we were bringing it from Windsor in the boilers. Stupid, stupid bastard.”

“Wasn’t your fault, Mac.”

“If I hadn’t left a gallon in the tank for myself. Stopped drinking for a whole year after the funeral.”

“I remember.”

“My daughter even liked me, then.” They were finishing up. I rolled the pennies, and tried not to think of Mac blowing up his brother. Marty zipped up the folding money in a vinyl envelope. He put the rolled coin and casino chips in a collection basket.

“Keeps the rif-raff from hanging on me when I turn in the chips,” said Marty. “They won’t skim from a church
basket, most of them. See you at Vinnie’s Pair-A-Dice — half an hour?"

"Thanks, Marty." Mac looked at me like I should be thanking Marty, too. When he left, I asked why. "Because he can fix your problem."

"How?"

"Vinnie needs some publicity photos. He’ll pay you a thousand, if he likes you," said Mac.

"That’s enough to pay the fine?" I asked.

"Maybe. He also knows some people."

"Lovely. What kind of people?"

"Influential people like the man in the front row at church — Vinnie’s brother." Mac looked at me, arranging the collar on my shirt. "It would help if you could show some cleavage." I slapped his hand away.

"What cleavage? He’s going to pay me -- for what?"

"Some pictures."

"With my clothes on?"

"Probably."

"Great!" I shoved Mac and walked past him into the vestibule. The priest was returning from greeting his parishioners. As he shook my hand, he grabbed my elbow and smiled up at me. I turned to blink away the tears and walked away. The sun was blinding. I couldn’t focus. Shadows of tourists lounged under the trees, near the front steps, smoking, reading bulletins, waiting for the next Mass. The eastern men wore dark socks with their sandals, not expecting the warm weather.
"Pretty sight — men’s hairy legs," I told Mac.

"You don’t have to do this, Margaret." He squeezed my hand. All I could think of was whether I’d shaved my legs.

Vinnie’s Pair-a-Dice was a small, dimly lit tavern three blocks from church. An adult bookstore and t-shirt outlet completed the block of stores. The corner of the parking lot smelled like a urinal and the carpeting in Vinnie’s mixed the odor of stale beer with the same faint scent. The customers at the elongated bar were hunched over their morning highballs, ignoring the flash of light when the front door opened.

Vinnie was not a dresser like his brother. His slacks were shiny where he rubbed his hands on his thighs, and the creases of his dress shirt were yellow. Mac offered his hand, but Vinnie was nursing a cigarello which he waved in Mac’s direction. Marty reminded Mac that Vinnie didn’t speak English.

“How long has he been in this country?” I asked Marty.

“Thirty years.” Marty looked at me like I’d already asked too much. “His cousin, Angelo, translates.” Angelo stepped forward. He was taller than the rest of us and would have been handsome except for his eyes that seemed to focus above your head when he looked at you. I watched him gaze above Marty, then Mac, then me. I turned toward the door to see if he’d look, but he seemed fascinated by the red flocked wallpaper behind me. Mac removed his golf cap quickly, as if he was in church.
"Margaret, why don't you step down the hall and keep Tiffany company? I think she's on next." Marty lifted me lightly by the arm and escorted me to the doorway so I didn't need to answer.

"How do you know Tiffany?" I whispered.

"She's been around a long time. Here, Mac gave this to you." It was the silver dollar he'd put in the collection basket. I held it up to the light to look at the date.

"1931. The year his brother died?"

"The year Genevieve was born. Gotta go. Angelo will walk you down the hall." Angelo seemed pleased to escort me. He'd lowered his gaze to the top of my head. I heard Mac introducing himself in Italian as the door closed. The corridor seemed low and narrow, like a maze.

Angelo opened the door to a dingy dressing room lit only by the bulbs surrounding the mirror. "Let me introduce you to Tiffany." When my eyes adjusted, I saw the back of a blonde head of hair with dark roots. The hair was ratted straight up and had not been combed to place. Tiffany leaned into the mirror applying a thick layer of eyeliner to Pekinese shaped eyes.

"Looking good this morning, Tiffany."

"Shut-up, Angel." She swivelled in her chair and looked at me like I was standing naked in the doorway. Combing her hair down, Tiffany asked, "Who's this?"

"Uh --" Angelo seemed surprised that he couldn't remember. They both stared at me as if my name was written on my forehead.
“Margie,” I said.

“Margie? You’re replacing me with a Margie?” She turned back to the mirror and continued applying her make-up with an unsteady hand. “What bus did she fall off?”

“I came by car,” I said. She looked at me in the mirror and they both started laughing, but Tiffany stopped and threw down her eye pencil.

“She doesn’t have these, Angel.” Tiffany slipped her breasts out of her loose blouse and bounced them in her hands. “38 double D’s on a size 3 body. Remember?”

“I remember, Tiffany.”

“Want to refresh your memory?” She pressed her breasts together as she watched him in the mirror.

“Margie’s only visiting. Her grandfather knew Vinnie in Detroit. You girls have fun.” Angelo shut the door.

Watching the door after it closed, Tiffany let her breasts rest on the dressing table. She wasn’t much taller than the counter. The small of her back was narrow and bony. Her calves were thin and her heels were cracked and as dirty as the linoleum floor. Her feet were crossed under her, where the chipped purple polish on her toes showed in her feathered mules. Carl was right. She didn’t look like the brochure.

“Guess you’re wondering how I keep my figure.” Tiffany was watching me in the glass.

“I hadn’t thought —”

“Strict diet. I’m a diabetic.” She was applying a false eyelash that curled away from her eye. “Only have one grape and a cracker for breakfast.”
"A grape and a cracker?"

She turned towards me and her breasts fell to the level of her navel. There was a bruise near her left nipple. "You know. Fruit and carbohydrate. The four food groups?"

"I've heard of them."

"Well, a diabetic has to be careful." She must have caught me staring at the bruise. "Oh that." She rolled her breast between her fingers. "I'm running out of places to shoot myself." Tiffany picked up the brush and turned back to the mirror, arranging her hair. There was a piece of the false eyelash that wouldn't glue down at the corner, giving her a quizzical look. When I walked to the window, which was painted over, there was a soda machine in the corner with little doors to view the bottles. Ten cents, it read. I felt the silver coin in my pocket. My purse was in the car. I pushed the worn lever and it released.

"Free pop?" I asked as I twisted off the cap.

"Never drink it," she said. "Not in the four food groups."

I walked into the bathroom and put the lid down to have somewhere to sit. There was a day bed next to Tiffany but her clothes were spread all over it. The sink was as grey as the linoleum. On the backsplash was a row of tin spoons. I opened the medicine cabinet to see if Tiffany kept her insulin there. An empty bottle of fiurinal for Vincenzo Civello was on the shelf with an unopened vial of nitrostat. Cigarettes, bad heart, chest pain. Vinnie was as mortal as the rest of us.
When I walked back in the room, Tiffany was struggling with a bikini bottom that looked like a chandelier. "Could you give me some privacy?" she asked.

"Why now?" As I turned to the bathroom, I heard the tinkling of beads, then a heavy thump. Tiffany lay in a mass of crystal tear drops that were blinking. Her breasts were pasted with two tiny light bulbs. The power pack was in her outstretched hand.

I yelled down the hall. "Marty! Could you come in here?" The door opened and Angelo stuck his head out. Marty was behind him followed by Vinnie who could barely be seen behind the bulk of Marty.

"Where's Grandpa?" I asked as they passed me. No one answered. They looked at Tiffany sprawled out on the floor. Angelo leaned over and checked the pulse in her wrist. He turned off her power pack, and stood up.

"Diabetic coma?"

"Is that what she told you?" Angelo translated for Vinnie and they both laughed. He nodded to Marty and they lifted Tiffany onto the daybed. I followed with her shoes that had slipped off her tiny feet. They dropped her on the pile of clothes and turned around. Vinnie spoke to them in Italian. I straightened Tiffany's legs, replaced her shoes, and covered her with a dressing gown. Her face was expressionless; not young, not old. Only her hands looked old. Her long gloves lay across the swivelchair. Marty repeated "photographia" to Vinnie. I picked up the gloves and sat in her chair.
Angelo said, "Margie, you have the opportunity to do Mr. Civello a favor, and he is willing to do you a favor." Marty nodded encouragingly. "Of course, the favor we ask is small, in comparison."

"Small?" I looked at Marty who bowed his head.

"Tiffany has only one show before her replacement arrives at one. The bar is empty."

"Empty? There were four or five men an hour ago." I sat up in the chair not knowing what I was arguing for or against.

Vinnie said something to Angelo. Marty agreed. "We could take the publicity photos when you fill in for Tiffany," said Angelo.

I looked at Tiffany who was snoring with her mouth open. "The costume's too small," I said.

Vinnie spoke to Angelo who smiled and said, "It's elasticized, and she's larger than you in some areas."

"If your customers would be disappointed --"

"It would help if you didn't wear the pasties," interjected Angelo.

"No."

I looked over at Marty who repeated, "No."

Vinnie conferred with Angelo, then spoke to me, "As you wish," he said, then gave Marty instructions in Italian. Angelo slammed the door as they left. Marty shrugged and started fingering my hair. I pulled away.

"Where's Mac?"

"He left."
“With my purse? I don’t have any money if I want to leave.” Marty started rattling my hair. “Do you want to leave? I’ll give you some money,” he said.

I turned to look at him. Marty was a big man, but he had a sweet face with feminine lips. “Do I have a choice?”

“Always.” He stopped fussing with my hair.

“Can I use the phone?”

“There’s one behind the stage. I’ll walk you out.” When I parted the curtains, there were four old men in various stages of baldness dropping coins in the bar slot machines. At the end of the runway was Angelo setting up his camera. I called Dicey.

“I thought you wouldn’t run off, Honey.”

“I got a job, of sorts. Have you walked down a runway with half your clothes on?”

“Yes. Who got you this job?”

“Mac. It’s only for one show -- publicity photos. Marty said he could make me up so no one would recognize me.”

“Marty?”

“Mac’s barber.” Marty walked towards me when he heard his name. “He’d like to meet you.”

“Who are you talking to?” he asked.

I covered the phone, “Dicey. She says she’d like to meet you, too.” He straightened his tie.

“Margaret, are you there?” asked Dicey. “When you sleep with Carl, do you ever have to separate yourself out, like when you’re not in the mood?”

“I don’t think I’ve had that problem, Dicey. Carl hardly
sleeps with me, but I know what you mean."

"Well, you just step out of yourself, walk down that aisle, dip, turn, and bring it home."

"Sounds easy."

"Easier than slopping hash for waitress wages. I've done that, too."

I whispered, "I'll have to shave my pubic hair."

"It'll get Carl wondering."

"If he ever comes back."

"I'll see to it."

"All right. I guess I'm a big girl. It's just that --"

"You didn't choose this for yourself?"

"No."

"You're a nice girl, Margaret, and you'll still be a nice girl after you walk down that aisle."

I couldn't speak, so I hung up the receiver. Was Dicey a nice girl? Had she chosen her life? She was nice to me. That's all that mattered.

Marty took me by the hand. "We're running out of time," he said. We wrestled Tiffany out of her costume and rolled her in the gown. She slept soundly except for the snoring. The taped music started as I was shaving in the bathroom. When I knicked myself, I hoped it was Vinnie's double-edged razor and not Tiffany's. I tried to roll my underwear under the bikini bottoms, which looked ridiculous. The pasties would not paste. As the music rose to a crescendo, I asked Marty for help. He found the glue in the drawer. As I pasted, he gave me big hair.
“Does it hurt to take these off?”

“I wouldn’t know, but I’ve heard screams from the dressing rooms.”

“Very funny. You used to work here?”


“I thought you were going to help me.”

“I’m finishing your hair. Just put on twice as much as you’ve ever worn.” He showered me with hair spray. “Wow,” he said.

“I know. I look better than a corpse.” I was finishing with the mauve lipstick.

“I even hid your bald spot. How’d you get that?”

“Someone tried to pull me in a car when I was a kid.”

“If someone did that to my daughter, I’d —”

“Are we ready?” Angelo stuck his head in the door without knocking. I covered my breasts and then reconsidered.

Marty looked at me. “A work of art,” he said. I turned on my power pack. Angelo rolled his eyes and left the room.

Picking at the loose ends of my hair, Marty said, “You almost look Italian, except for your blue eyes.”

“Could be. Didn’t know my mother’s pedigree.” I stood up and Marty tucked in my electrical wiring. Tiffany’s mules were tight. Half my foot fell out the back, but I squeezed Mac’s lucky coin under the arch and balanced my weight on the low heels.

“Those are her house slippers,” said Marty. He brought out a pair of stiletto heels.
"No, thankyou." The drum roll began.

"That's your cue. Here's cab fare." He placed a twenty on the make-up counter. "I'm leaving."

"Thanks, Marty." I hugged his big neck and got caught on his breast pocket. He untangled the beads from the front of my costume and blushed.

"By now, these dopes are too bleary-eyed to focus," he said. "Just walk. And don't smile at the camera - it's bad for business." He patted my bare shoulder for encouragement, then left.

I made it down the aisle in spite of Tiffany's shoes, which felt like doll slippers. When I dipped at the end of the runway, Angelo snapped my picture and almost blinded me. I stepped back and he snapped two more shots. The lights were so low near the bar that I staggered back to the curtains. There was no applause. From the photo, my head was attached to Tiffany's torso. The ad was plastered on the back of city cabs for months. When I returned to Dicey's, my purse was laying on the bed. The separation check was in it with a note from Mac. Gave other check to Carl, it said. He'd had my money all along.

Carl was making a new denture for Dicey, so he'd gotten his license back. My hair grew back, but without the curl. Dicey laughed at this intimate news. Her good nature almost glossed over my loneliness.

I joined the laundry business with Betsy. She knew how to starch laundry in the rinse cycle. I ironed the shirts for
the casino workers that lived in the park. Betsy collected, sorted, and washed, so I could avoid Carl. Mr. Monoghan’s shirts were challenging because of the ruffles on the front panel. To make crisp rows of gathers kept me busy for half an hour, for which we charged two dollars. The laundry bin was filled with rows of damp shirts when I started at eight. We delivered by five.

Mr. Monoghan’s shirts were delivered on the hanger. I walked on the far side of Gentry’s trailer to avoid being seen. His lot was piled high with trash. A truck bed held a rusted refrigerator with the door partially unhinged. Two greasy engines dangled from cables in the driveway surrounded by stacks of auto parts and overturned oil cans. The porch was lined with boxes of ladies’ clothes, the sleeves dangling out of damaged cardboard where Gentry had kicked holes in the sides. Cartons of Chinese takeout and dried chicken wings were strewn over the boxes, where flies swarmed.

Serena broke into the trailer on a day her dad was working. She packed their clothes in boxes and sat them on the porch. Rolling her best jeans and her mother’s pawn jewelry in a Navajo rug, she noticed her dad pulling in for his noontime beer. Grabbing the portable sewing machine, she jumped off the porch. The lock on the machine caught in some hangers. She was struggling to free herself when he rounded the corner. Dropping the machine, which spilled spools of thread, Serena took off running. His backfiring truck was gaining on her when she jumped Dicey’s fence in full stride, and never lost the contents of the rug.
The sewing machine sat in the front yard with broken fifths of Jack Daniels surrounding it. Crushed beer cans formed a trail from the house to the driveway. If Gentry was sober, he worked on his vintage Dodge truck, banging tools and throwing parts. He had pulled the engine twice but couldn’t stop it from backfiring. Cursing and a case of beer didn’t improve the rough-running engine, but kept the neighbors annoyed.

Caroline wanted Gentry kicked out. He was a health hazard, she said. “Patience,” said Monoghan. “He’s two months behind in his rent.” That’s how long Betsy’d been gone. She paid the rent out of her laundry money. When Gentry found out Caroline had complained, he went down to the laundromat and pulled her off the stool in front of the slot machine by her neck scarf. She got a well-placed kick as Carl pulled Gentry off her. He went to work bent over the next morning, but the police report went nowhere. Monoghan assured her Gentry’d be evicted at the end of the month.

Serena wasn’t sure he’d leave peacefully. She sat at the kitchen table twirling two antique revolvers Dicey kept in the cupboard. Ironing at the back window, I watched the small changes in the fall weather. Dried tumbleweeds uprooted and blew across the yard, collecting in the fence near the trailer park. Trees clung to the last leaves that weathered from green to a dull shade of brown. The hay bank had turned golden near the edges where the desert sun and wind beat fiercely against it. The cool air enlivened the paint horse which ran circles around the mule nipping at his flanks. More
interested in leaves of hay that broke loose in the wind, the mule followed any branch that flew across the yard for a sliver of sweet bark that hadn't shrivelled in the sun.

Near the kiva, Hosnee carved the handle for a gourd rattle. He and Betsy were returning to the reservation to sell sand paintings and the rattles which she adorned with beaded strings after Hosnee finished. She needed Juniper limbs to make a loom for her rugs. Her last loom was made from an old bed frame which Gentry had kicked across the yard one morning. No matter, Betsy told Serena. The wool in that loom was machine-dyed. She would collect sage and rabbit bush for the subtle colors of her native rugs. The rug she gave Dicey was a wavy slice of desert landscape. Gentry had pushed her to make Yeibichai rugs with store bought yarn because they sold well. She kept putting in a spirit line which looked like a flaw to Gentry. He told her to cut it out. That was the rug that was on the loom when he broke it. "Without the spirit line, my spirit is imprisoned in the rug -- it's better that he broke it," she told Hosnee, who told Dicey. She asked Hosnee to bring back some sheep. He said the fences wouldn't hold them. Betsy wanted Serena to learn to butcher and shear sheep so she could become a Navajo princess. "If she'd learn to weave, she could tell her own story, find her own pattern to follow."

Spinning a palm-sized revolver around the tip of her index finger, Serena made me nervous. It was hard to watch her out of the corner of my eye and not burn myself ironing. "Are you sure that's not loaded?" I asked.
"Let's see." She held the barrel to her temple and pulled the trigger. The gun clicked. Serena stuck out her tongue. "Want to see the bullets? They're pure silver." Four shiny cylinders, as small as the nail of her little finger, lay in her palm. "Aren't they pretty?"

"Where are the rest?"

"In the gun. Ever played Russian roulette?" She clicked the gun against her forehead. After a moment, she laughed and lifted the molded velvet base of the antique case to show me the last two bullets.

"Please, Serena. I'm scared of guns." I looked away and heard her loading the chambers. Searching the stretch of northern sky for a cloud filled with moisture, there was only the thin film of stratus high in the distance. No rain. No thick rolling clouds raced over the plains, dark and menacing. The dust pulled the moisture out of thin, lifeless clouds that drifted too high to be pierced by the parched mountains. Ground water drained into the reservoir, diverted west, away from the Paiutes who were once mud people, frog eaters. The frogs petrified into sandstone which crumbled to dust. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. A loud pop rattled the plate glass window.

"This cap gun couldn't kill a rat," said Serena. She picked at a bullet lodged in the kitchen cabinet with her pocket knife.

"Did you see a rat?" I asked.

"Not in this house."
“Please put the — revolvers away.” I was holding the iron up without realizing it.

“What are you so afraid of?” she asked as she placed one of the matched guns in its case. She slammed the lid shut, and I jumped.

I don’t know, Serena. Just — ” the wide expanse of sky that has no frame, the dried prune earth that has no limit. She walked out the back door. Hosnee was scraping manure from the bottom of his boot with a knife that was as long as his hand. Serena sat down beside him. He replaced the knife in the side of his cowboy boot. She slid a revolver in her boot. They both laughed. Hosnee wiped his eyes with the back of his fist. He was laughing hard. When they walked to the barn, he waved.
PART II: A BOX OF ONE’S OWN
Sweeney

That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks:
Birth, and copulation, and death.

T. S. Eliot
from Sweeney Agonistes

Carl’s Statement

“She was living at Dicey’s. I hadn’t kicked her out, she
just left. Grandpa showed up with a check that was supposed
to make it right. I saw her walking behind Gentry’s trailer
that night, carrying another man’s laundry. I didn’t know
what she wanted. She either cried or made no sense when she
was with me. So I let her go. If she’d stuck with it, she
could have made more money with me.

“Grandpa was at the back door. ‘Carl, are you in there?’
He said. Where else would I be? But I was never mean to the
old man. He’d been to gcxxi to me. Opening the door, he slid
under my arm like a mole with his head tucked to his chest.

‘Just finishing up,’ I said. He couldn’t find a place
to sit down for all the cases that needed work. ‘Could use
some help,’ I said and moved a pan of dentures off the stool
so he could sit. ‘What can she make ironing shirts?’

‘Honest wages,’ said Mac.

‘Yeah. Not like the money she made off that picture on
the back of every cab. The neck doesn’t even line up with her
head -- How could she fall in with Dicey so quickly?’
"Grandpa didn't answer. I turned off the gas burner, too tired to finish. Mac was hunched over, rubbing his hands together. With the burner on, I kept the heat down most of the day, but a chill was settling in with the dark.

"'Pay your utilities?' he asked.

"'Golden. All bills paid. Need some pocket change?' I showed Grandpa the roll of bills in my pocket.

"'Margaret's money?'

"'No! I used that to pay the fine. Dumb bitch. I knew Gentry's cousin was a dentist. Only needed one guy to complain named Perry.'

"'You can't fault her for helping Betsy.' Mac was shivering so I threw my jacket over him.

"'She should have helped her husband first,' I told him.

"'Maybe you didn't act like her husband.'

"'Did she tell you that?' I was getting mad.

"'No.'

"'I brought her out here. Gave her a job. What was she going to do when I left Virginia? Couldn't even pay her rent.' Mac was annoying me but I zipped up the jacket for him.

"'Wasn't your step-dad helping her?'

"'Never gave her a cent. Never checked on her. Only person he'd help is himself. He was short-handed in the lab with all the vets coming home. Lots of faces to reconstruct. In six months he didn't teach her one thing he promised. No gold work. No crowns. Just dentures with cheekbones added on.
Not much call for that out here. I don’t know why my mom ever trusted him.’

‘Heard from your mother?’ asked Gramps.

‘Not lately.’ I thought of the unopened letters in my dresser.

‘Guess you wouldn’t know if she needed your help.’ Mac was looking out the window as the park lights turned on. The row leading passed Gentry’s trailer had been shot out when he couldn’t get Monoghan to lower the wattage on the bulbs. Said it kept him awake at night. How could he tell? He was mostly drunk.

‘I tried to help my mother, once,’ I said.

‘Was that any different than Margaret helping Betsy?’ Why was he bringing that up?

‘She should have asked me. I told her it was no use helping a woman like that.’

‘Like your mother?’ I wasn’t going to answer.

‘Why don’t you help Genevieve? She’s your daughter.’

‘She won’t let me, and I don’t think the captain’s so bad. He got my grandson a job.’

‘And dragged your daughter in the house when she’d tried to beat him off.’

‘You don’t know your mother when she drinks. She can’t hold her liquor like a man.’

‘No. And she can’t punch like one. But she tried.’ I was tiring of that noise. Mac looked tired, too. It wore him out to talk about Genevieve. I stood up and walked towards
the back door. He reached under the jacket and pulled out a letter.

"'You might read this one,' he said.

"'Why don't you open it?' I tried to hand it back. 'She owes you plenty. I've lived here half my life.' He shoved the letter back at me.

"'Your mother doesn't owe me a thing! I owe her -- for giving me a grandson, forgiving -- When you're young, Carl, it's easy to tell yourself -- 'I'm tough. I'm smart.' Young men tell themselves these things. It got me through the war.' I couldn't deny he was right. 'When they're digging the ditch that you're going to lay in -- those lies come back to bite you in the ass.' He was shaking, so I put my arm around him.

"'Because of you, Gramps, I never missed my dad -- or my mom when she was away, not much.'

"'She has her regrets. I have mine.' We stood together. I let my arm fall when he stepped to the door. He was a funny old man, but I'd never cross him, even if he stood up for my step-dad. I knew what I saw.

"'Your grandmother wants you home for dinner early,' he said. 'Card club at Caroline's.'

"'Oh, yeah? I thought she was still bruised up?'

"'Wouldn't stop the girls from playing -- gives 'em more reason to talk about men.' He winked. I knew he was feeling better. 'So you'll forgive Margaret?' He looked up at me. All I could see was my reflection in his thick glasses.

"'For what? Walking out on me? Working in a strip joint?' I was holding the door open for him.
"'Whatever it is that’s keeping you apart. Forgive her and she may forgive you.' I let the screen slam shut.

"'What'd I do?' I yelled after him but he was walking up the road toward Monoghan’s. How could he see in the dark? Even with glasses, Mac was half blind. So was she. They’d bump into each other if she hadn’t walked home.

"I was locking up when I heard Grandpa shout. Trash cans fell and rolled on cement. I ran up the road. Mac was yelling at someone when Caroline turned on her porch light.

"'What’s up, Carl?' Caroline held her shotgun as she stood on the porch.

"'I don’t know, but don’t shoot me, Caroline.' She had grazed one of her tortoises taking a pot shot at Gentry.

"Mac was sitting in the gravel duck pond at Monoghan’s. His leg was twisted under him and the railing of the porch was broken.

"'In the house,' was all he could get out. I stepped around an autographed picture of Charley Pride. The wall of publicity photos had been knocked on the floor, and the lighting was low. White shirts were strewn across the carpet like cardboard cut-outs. When I stepped over the laundry and broken glass, I noticed Margaret by the bedroom door. Her blouse was ripped down the front and her eyes were wide open. I was afraid to touch her, she seemed so startled. Someone grabbed her ankle. I stepped on their hand and steadied her against the door frame.

"She almost bit off my tongue," said Gentry. He was bleeding all over himself. I dug into his hand with the heel
of my shoe. He yelped like a dog, so I let him go. When he sat up, a tooth on the right side was hanging funny. His teeth were so rotten, it wouldn’t take much to knock them out.

"Just wanted to see if those tits in the ad were real," he said and spit out the tooth. I heard Margaret run to the door, stepping on the broken glass. I was sorry I hadn’t worn boots. When I kicked his ribs, they didn’t crack. Gentry wasn’t much. Always picked his fights with women. Told him so when I picked him up.

"Your wife’s got a better upper cut," he gurgled. That was it. I know I broke a rib with my fist. They found it on the autopsy. But I didn’t kill him. When I passed Monoghan coming in the door, he was holding Charlie Pride’s picture.

"I opened for this man," he said.

"Save what you can, Mr. Monoghan. I’ll pay for the damages." Gentry crawled into the room until he felt the broken glass. Monoghan picked him up by one hand and slung him over his shoulder. ‘You’re bleeding on my rug,’ he said. Taking a paper out of his desk, he shoved it in Gentry’s pocket. ‘You’re evicted.’ It was December. Three months since Gentry had paid his rent. He moaned as Monoghan twisted his head to get through the door.

When I walked over to Mac, Grandma was wrapped around his neck. ‘His hip is broken,’ she said.

‘My neck will be broken if you don’t lay off!’ He smiled when I leaned over him. ‘See about Margaret. Gert’s choking the life out of me. Deal with the living.’ When I
stood up, Caroline was standing guard over the yard, but she didn’t know which way to aim. Her tortoises moved slowly toward bunkers under the trailer.

"Can you put that gun down and call an ambulance?" Caroline didn’t think straight when she was hurried.

"Sure, Carl." She ran in the house, happy for something to do.

"Monoghan’s cabbie waited for his fare while he carried Gentry home, so I handed the guy two twenties. ‘Are we square?’

I’m not bringing a fare out here again, Man.’ He drove out the gate kicking up dust on Margaret’s picture. In the distance, the circle of the ambulance light grew wider.

It was tricky jumping Dicey’s fence after dark. The electric wire was just below the high rung. Serena scissor-kicked over it, but I didn’t want to look like a girl. I checked the front gate, but it had been locked since the sheriff quit visiting. I started from across the road and cleared the rail but tumbled into the front yard.

'Where you been, Carl? We’ve had to keep your wife company.' Serena had her arm around Margaret. ‘You didn’t jump the highest spot. I still have the record.’ Serena was like that. For a young girl, she never backed down. Could rope as well as Hosnee, and throw a calf on his back as fast. She wasn’t strong, but she was quick. In the shadows, I could see my wife trying to button her shirt.

'My dad’ll grab anything that walks past him, if he’s in a mood. Tried to grab me this last time. I side-stepped
him but Betsy was standing behind me.' Serena was stroking Margaret's hair.

"'I've been grabbed before,' said Margaret. 'Some man tried to pull me in the car by my pony tail. I had my arms wrapped around my books. All I could do was drop to my knees as he drove off. It tore out my hair.' I sat in front of them, but Margaret wouldn't look at me.

"'Gentry says you've got a better upper cut than me.' I tried to hold her hand. She was playing with the waxed leaves of the hedge. Serena stood and took her time dusting off her small, round butt, running her fingers down the tight seams of her jeans. Her legs were thin and muscular from riding. She didn't look like a young girl. Serena's shirt was tight against her chest. She watched me looking at her and laughed. 'I'd better go,' she said. That was the last time I saw her.

"'Can I sit down?' Margaret didn't answer, but she moved over. The cement steps were cool. Zoe licked my ear. I hadn't seen her yellow eyes shining behind us.

"'I didn't bring you here to end up like this,' I told her.

"'No. You brought me here to get your honorable discharge.' She scooted into the bush away from me.

"'At first, yes. I was mad I got roped into marrying you. But I'm over that, now.'

"'Good for you.' I wasn't explaining myself well. I turned her face toward me.

"'Are you okay?' I asked. She was shivering. 'You gave Mac a scare.'
"Mac grabbed Gentry from behind, but was thrown off the porch like a rag doll. I was lucky to surprise him with a left. I learned that much from my dad.' I put my arm around her. 'My dad was always decent to me. Why would Gentry grab his own daughter?'

'She may not be his daughter.' Margaret pushed me away.

'That doesn't excuse him. Even your grandfather --'

'What about him?'

'Oh, he tried to kiss your mother one night when he was drunk. Tried to blame Gert when she surprised him. Said she never slept with him. Gert smacked him with a frying pan. Knocked him out cold. I guess you slept through the whole thing in your crib. That's why Genevieve moved away.' I felt sick. I pulled my arm back, but she continued.

'When you made love to me, I always wondered what it would be like. Your breath smelled like my father's. He was a drunk, but kind to me. If I scribbled in the margins of my paper, he thought it was a work of art. He was my world for nineteen years. If he passed out, I covered him. If he coughed up blood, we rode the bus to the doctor. When he sighed, I put my arm around him. His loneliness filled my heart. I would have done anything for him, but he never asked. When Gentry grabbed me by the shirt and shoved his tongue down my throat -- I could have been Serena -- he didn't care. That spell was broken.'

'I didn't want to sit by her. She felt too old. She knew too much. But she slipped her hand between my legs and I met her grasp. It had been so long. She unzipped my fly and
reached in. We were on the grass and it was damp. She left my jeans around my ankles, my shorts around my knees. I was looking at the half moon when her breast fell into my mouth. It had been so long. I tried to hold back, but felt the pulsing, her holding me, settling against me. I faded.

"It was dark, quiet. I didn’t think of the neighbors until Zoe came back and licked our faces. She must have followed Serena and couldn’t jump the fence. We sat up. I had kicked off my underwear. Margaret laughed. Said the dog had run off with them. It wasn’t funny when they issued jumpsuits at the jail. The crotch was too short. We were playing with the dog when I heard Gentry’s truck backfire.

"‘I thought I knocked him out.’

‘With my help.’ Margaret sat up with her blouse off, listening. I put her breast in my mouth but heard the truck down-shifting up the hill. The headlights passed the front yard and I caught a glimpse of her naked in the pale light.

‘He’s going up to the gravel pit.’ I looked through the bushes for my shorts.

‘That was Gentry that passed?’ She felt around for her bra. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Just up the road. See what he’s up to.’ I was standing, slipping into my running shoes.

‘Take Hosnee with you,’ she said, but there wasn’t time. My shirt was unbuttoned and I gave up trying to follow the winding road and dress. The night air was gritty from the pick-up that was just ahead of me. I kept pace, but he hit a flat spot and accelerated. The head lights kept me on the
road, but he reached the cliff and turned off the engine. I lost my compass and fell into a prickly pear. No socks. I took my shirt off and wrapped it around the cactus to pull it off my ankle. While I was hobbling, Hosnee passed me. He stopped to recognize me, then pulled away. Betsy was next to him. His gunrack was loaded.

"The cactus hairs stuck through the shirt into my hand. Stumbling into the ditch next to the road, I threw the cactus and my shirt away. The sheriff thought I removed it to hide blood stains, but Zoe found it searching with Margaret, and they gave up on that idea. She also found charred pieces of The Navajo News in the gravel pit. I picked up my pace when I heard the crack of a rifle. One more turn. The sound of my feet hitting the pavement was all I heard after that.

"Hosnee had left his lights on, but the engine was turned off. Betsy sat in the passenger seat staring straight ahead. Hosnee was climbing out of the gravel pit with a body thrown over his shoulder. He's killed him, I thought, and slid down the bank to meet him. The gravel was soft and I fell into Hosnee knocking him back on his heels. Serena's head was in my face. Her neck was twisted to the side and her cheek was cool. I was covered with her long hair. We struggled to lift her between us, but she fell and was covered in white dust. As I steadied her against me, I saw Gentry laying face up in the bottom of the pit. Lifting Serena on his shoulders like a felled deer, Hosnee struggled up the hill.

"I tried to follow, but the gravel gave way. I slid to a
log braced by a rusted piece of heavy equipment. That's where the blood on my jeans came from -- I cut my knee in the fall. When Hosnee passed me again, I smelled the kerosene. He took a knife out of his boot and removed the bullet, then slit Gentry from his fly to his breastbone. Cut open like an overstuffed package, he glistened with kerosene poured over the ropes of his intestines. Hosnee lit a torch of rolled newspaper. Gentry burned like a dry Christmas tree. Flames leaped up the sides of the canyon when Hosnee threw on the can. 'Ho'go'ona,' he said, as he passed me, tipping his cowboy hat. That hat with the eagle feather and rattle snake skin -- I'd always admired it. I watched till the charred flesh crinkled like cellophane.

"They must have rolled down the hill with the lights off -- I never heard the engine start. It was Zoe at my back that woke me to the pale light that was the moon overhead. The cowboy hat on the rim of the canyon was the sheriff's. With the lights of his pick-up behind, I mistook him for Hosnee.

"'Where's Betsy?' I said. 'Does she know?'

"'Know what?' The sheriff stepped towards me so I'd recognize him. That's the last I said about the murder. I looked around for Margaret, somebody I knew. The dog must have followed the sheriff's truck. He asked me a few questions to which I had no answer -- where's Hosnee, Betsy, Serena. We sat in the cab of his pick-up and he poured me coffee from a thermos like Dicey's. When I asked him to drop me at the house for a shirt, he pulled one from under the
seat. It was boxed from the cleaners, and I felt half-bad getting dust all over it. The snaps of the cowboy shirt kept popping over my chest. He laughed and said, ‘You’re not little, like your leprechaun grandfather,’ but he gave me jail overalls that would have fit Mac.

“Zoe rode in the back. We stopped just long enough to let her out of the truck. 'Don’t want to disturb the ladies,' he said. ‘It’s early.’ In the red glow of the tail lights, I saw Margaret and Zoe trailing us. She blew me a kiss, then they were lost in the dust of the pick-up.

“So Grandpa’s in the hospital and I’m in jail. He says I’ve got the best of it because the uniforms have backsides and I don’t have some ugly nurse sticking something up my ass every minute. ‘If they want us to get well, why do they put the ugliest nurses in the ‘Gery’ ward?’ he asked me. ‘I’m old, but I’m not blind.’

“You said there’s some confusion about Gentry killing Serena? If you don’t have a birth certificate you don’t exist and no one can kill you, have I got it right? Serena was born on the reservation? So, she really doesn’t exist.

“They didn’t know if Gentry and Betsy were married? But, they had a kid together. They can’t find the marriage license? They can’t find much on the reservation. How long have Betsy and Hosnee been gone -- three weeks?

“Dicey told you Gentry’s uncle, the one that owned the trading post, stood up for them. The other witness was Betsy’s mother? She’s dead. You took a visit to that trading
post? Who drove, Mr. Rabinovitch? You’re as blind as Gramps. Your wife -- she’s not so blind. Okay, why would they talk to you? You have a hook nose and dark skin -- yeh, but your accent’s from New York. So you bought Hopi jewelry from a guy your wife read about in Arizona Highways -- Charles Lolama. He’s a relative of Hosnee and told you who to speak to at the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

“So what’d you get? A certified copy of the marriage license and school pictures of Serena from Betsy’s sister. Hosnee sent them from the Paiute school. Serena looks like Hosnee, you think? They were both bear clan. So? The elders forbid marriage in the same clan. Was Serena Gentry’s or Hosnee’s? That’s true. She’s dead.

“She’s not dead? The sheriff said the school pictures didn’t identify her by name. If she’s not dead, what is she? Serena barrel raced in the sheriff’s arena -- was she a ghost? We know her horse existed. He was registered. Who bought the horse?


“A small caliber bullet wedged in Gentry’s pelvis. No, never owned a gun. Dicey did? They dusted it for prints -- not mine. The matching revolver’s missing? Margaret said Serena played with the antique guns. Showed the sheriff where Serena shot the cabinet. Dicey wanted to be arrested for the murder?
The sheriff backed off and lowered my bail? I still can’t make it.”

Mr. Rabinovitch said something about my mother posting bail and sending a fifth of Jameson’s to Mac, in the hospital. He closed his briefcase, which was so full the papers were crushed in the hinges. I shook the judge’s hand and watched him disappear down the hall, drifting to the left with the weight of his case. He was an old man who didn’t miss much.

I was glad to be in solitary, but the quiet that drifted up from cement floor was deafening. It was the holidays and the non-violent offenders had been released. The bars near the elevator had twinkling lights that blinked silently. I tapped my wedding ring on the iron bedpost.

Being in jail was like being in the service, only the food was better. Get up, take a shit, salute your commanding officer -- the guards didn’t appreciate that, take a piss -- all in the same cell. Schedule your day at the duty station, your bunk -- write mother. There was no one to talk to except Mr. Rabinovitch, my lawyer. Grandpa called once a day.

Margaret and Gert called, but they cried too much. I asked Margaret if she knew any other topless bars to dance at, if the judge couldn’t get the charges dropped. “How long was I in for?” asked Gert. I haven’t been convicted of anything, I told her, but eight years in the military should be enough. I looked under the mattress for a pen and paper to write my mother.
I know I am not fit to stand
A virgin's sweet, yet steamy glance.
My sweetness wrenched by birthright foul
And cauterized by swift denial.
So further copulation spread
The guilt to many lesser heads,
Till anger, furor, paled and lost
To men that were the demon's friends.
The demon's friends turned round again
To hide behind a lesser sin.
Woe to Angels -- dare to crush
The trivial nature of the slut.
For I am naught but spit discarded
On a seemly worthless carcass,
And the stain has swept the dawn
From my childlike visage -- gone.

Elizabeth Sloane
Dicey Changes Fire to Water

"I wrote that poem when I was your age, just after my dad died. I had money for rent through Christmas, that year. Yes, I put the lights on the hedge out front, but there's no one here to celebrate. Betsy and Hosnee ran off. Margaret moved home. Carl should be out of jail by Christmas. They can't hold him when you're missing and your daddy's a pile of dust. Just you, me, and your saddle -- I had a hard time squeezing it through that mouse hole Hosnee calls a door. Carl's dog was nipping at me to stay out of this cave. Thought I was burying myself, like a bone. Hosnee knows, his painting shows, death in life. We've lived it. The kiva seems comfortable to me -- do you like it?

"Your saddle's not thrown on the floor! I shoved a small barrel through -- like delivering a baby -- and laid your saddle over it. Satisfied? I got the rodeo pictures off the wall. Your father never turned the lights up. Guess he forgot you were staring down at him. Didn't give him more of a conscience to have you watching. He was mean with or without an audience.

"Your Aunt Perry said he was a nice boy till their daddy beat the piss out of him for getting a girl pregnant. What does she know? Not much, but she did keep a picture of you
when Caroline and Monoghan cleaned out the trailer. First time she crossed the street. Took Gentry's dress boots. That was the only decent piece of clothing he had -- never dressed -- not even for the funeral.

"No, he wasn't buried in his boots. They added dirt to fill his box -- and the few teeth he had left. That's how they identified him. Your bullet led back to me, Girlie. I told the sheriff to arrest me. He knew I'd make the papers -- I have a few friends left. The sheriff wouldn't cross me. He was a gentleman, most of the time. I don't know why your aunt was mad. The sheriff stayed with her.

"Monoghan found the gun under the trailer yesterday. I knew your prints were on it, so I put it in my pocket. He didn't say anything because I sold him my place. Serena, if I was going to shoot a man in the groin, I'd have chosen a bigger gun. Guess you were judging by the size of your daddy's --

"Would you like to hear about this poem or not? You never wrote or learned to weave, like your mother. No wonder you were wild. Wilder than your horse. All that's left of you is your saddle. Yes, you were a fine horsewoman, but I had to sell your paint to Charmayne. She'll have a turn on your horse. Too spirited for an old lady, like me. Mr. Monoghan is changing the park to homes for retirees. He's had too much trouble. If you weren't dead, you couldn't live here. I'm not ready to rot in a senior park. Have to find a new game, like you.

"I learned to play poker from my father. He played most
Friday nights. When Hoover dam was finished but the Depression dragged on, he was forced to play with the same crowd each week. Every man knew the other’s tricks and no one liked it. I served them drinks, reading the cards as I set the glasses down. I was a small Mexican, and the guys thought I couldn’t count. I patted my father’s back, squeezing one finger for each face card that his partners held — his left shoulder or right — it was easy.

“But the old boys lost every week and got suspicious. I couldn’t read people well, then. ‘Poker is nine parts watching players, one part counting cards,’ Dad said. He played one week too long with those men.

‘Hurry up, it’s time.’ I rushed the game if he was winning. It was my bed time, I said. The men played on.

‘Hurry up, it’s time,’ I repeated.

‘Ante up,’ said the red bearded man. I remembered him because of his dirty beard. My father was out of cash. He’d bet heavily. ‘Throw in her panties,’ he said. Dad looked at me. I looked at his cards — three kings.

“He bought me panties with the days of the week on them. I put on every pair on Sunday and pulled one off each day. Remember I had no mother, so I had some strange habits. Checking the number of panties I had left, I threw blue Friday on the pile. I didn’t know why they wanted my panties. Dad looked worried.

“The men laughed, but their voices lowered. The cards and cash were exchanged. My dad was thrown out the front door. I heard the bolt locked. The man with the red beard was