

THIS ISN'T NEW

WOMEN'S HISTORICAL STORIES

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CYNTHIA SWANSON

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

THE BOOKSELLER



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WOMEN'S HISTORICAL STORIES

CYNTHIA SWANSON



Columbine York

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For my children

For all children

and

For survivors

May we work to create the future that should be theirs.

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Author's Note

The stories in this collection contain harsh truths. Although the characters are fictional, some of them face situations that readers might find disturbing or traumatizing.

As you read this collection, I urge you to, above all else, practice self-care.

For a list of content warnings and their associated stories, see “Content Warnings” at the end of this book.

In This World As In the Other

Sometimes Francine lives in a world where people take her ministry seriously. Standing in her pulpit at Dearborn Methodist on Easter morning 1872, following the Great Chicago Fire the October prior, Francine draws inspiration from the story of Mary Magdalene as she explains that just as Jesus at the tomb entreated Mary to share the good news that He had risen, she has studied and prayed upon the tragedy of the Fire, and she has joy to share. “In this moment,” Francine proclaims, “we are provided with an opportunity to demonstrate our faith. Like Mary Magdalene, we must spread the word that despite unimaginable tragedy, God and His Son are still with us.”

Francine, noting the way the congregation sits up straighter and meets her gaze, encourages them into action. “Neighbor must help neighbor rebuild,” she says. Quoting Paul in his letter to the Galatians, she urges the congregants to “*Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*”

All agree that Francine is the ideal leader for these trying times. Four years earlier, following in Universalist Olympia Brown's footsteps, Francine had made history by becoming only the second female in the entire country to graduate from theology school. She is fortunate both to live in the progressive city of Chicago and to have had a father who believed God chose her for this work. Her father was a shoemaker, not wealthy, but when he lost both his shop and his life in the Great Fire, it was Francine who counseled her mother and indeed their entire Methodist congregation, whose minister, the kindly old Reverend Patterson, also perished in the tragedy.

In this world, Dearborn Methodist, with the support of the Methodist Protestant denomination, ordained Francine and called her to be their new minister. "Having known Mrs. Williams her entire life, having witnessed her extraordinary educational achievements, and as a people who recognize her theological talents, so unusual for a woman, her unique understanding of Scripture and exceptional ability to make God's Word accessible to all," the lay leaders wrote in their appeal to the denomination, "we are confident that no other could as capably instruct our flock regarding the Good Lord's plan following our catastrophic Fire." The Methodist powers that be, understanding Dearborn's petition, made an exception, and thus Francine became one of only a handful of ordained female ministers in the United States.

Under her leadership, the church building, burnt to the ground, is reconstructed faster and better than any other house of worship in Chicago, this time of brick rather than timber. Each Sunday morning, Francine's flock swells, because one and all want to hear the lady preacher who presents such thoughtful notions, stirring them to action. Francine speaks of

commitment to Christ and one another. She makes eye contact with those seated before her—not just her mother, her husband, Norman, and her stepsons, but each congregant from the youngest child to the oldest church elder. She notices the burn scars on one's neck and the runny eyes of another, lamentably sensitive to the slightest hint of smoke following the Fire's ordeal. After services, she walks among them—shaking men's hands, pressing a palm to women's shoulders, patting children's heads. She inquires about their needs and, in a small notebook she carries, records who to connect with whom, ensuring all receive the assistance they require.

Sunday afternoons, while she takes respite in her oak-paneled office in the beautiful new church, her prayers are those of gratitude to her Creator for the good fortune of being born into a forward-thinking world, a world where she can use her God-given talents to inspire others through His Good Word. She prays for her twin brother Fred, also a minister, who has gone to the West and who writes of all he sees and those he meets, including native peoples who explain their religion to him while he introduces Christianity to them, and reading his letters, she considers how she might incorporate their lessons regarding the connection between the natural and spiritual worlds into her own sermons. Surely, God agrees with them regarding care for the earth, as Genesis 2:15 clearly states: *“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.”*

Weekday mornings, she engages in tasks related to her ministry. Then, following noontime dinner, Francine revitalizes her body by riding. She saddles up her sorrel quarter horse, Whimsy, and urges her into a lively trot toward the outskirts of town. From there, she lets Whimsy run freely, crossing southwest toward what used to be called Junction Grove but is now Englewood. Pausing while the mare drinks from a creek, Francine

gazes at the beauty of the land, appreciating its endless bounty and possibility.

During these times, Francine also reflects upon her mistakes—for she is not perfect; she makes mistakes like any of God’s creatures. She thinks of her sermon last Sunday, how she praised the congregants for their care of the new Dearborn Methodist building and of each other. “The Lord helps those who help themselves,” Francine proclaimed—words commonly mistaken as scripture which are in truth simply something Benjamin Franklin said. She observed nodding in the pews, but after the service, a woman she didn’t know came up to her, shy and hesitant, and asked Francine, what about other neighborhoods, those still without rebuilt houses and churches, those with orphaned children—even children who, through no fault of their own, have been raised in other religions. Doesn’t God obligate us, the woman asked Francine, to extend our care to such souls? Francine, red-faced, agreed. Now, she reaches into her saddlebag, draws out her Bible, turns to Proverbs 19, and finds verse 17: “*Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and He will repay him for his deed.*” This, Francine decides, will be her text for next Sunday; it will frame her forthcoming guidance to the congregation.

Then she heads home, settling Whimsy in the stable behind the humble but comfortable parsonage the congregation has erected for her family. Exiting the stable, Francine dips the tin dipper into the water barrel, drinks, and wipes the back of her mouth with her hand. She belches—not because she can’t help belching; of course she can—but it makes her feel spontaneous and silly, despite the still-scorched ruins of the town, the reminders of what they have lost and are working to regain. In the evenings, Francine, Norman, and his sons make supper as a family and clean up as a

family and later, she relaxes and whittles by the fire—because like the men and boys, she has put in a long day.

Each night, Francine curls into bed beside Norman, warm and comfortable and feeling like she—nay, the city, nay, the country—are moving in the right direction. It's a feeling that pulls one into a deep, restful sleep and allows one to awaken refreshed, ready to face God's perfect new day.



But sometimes Francine lives in a different world. In this world, she might dream of such activities but when she slips toward one—and oh, does she slip—she is scorned at best and punished at worst. Francine, in this world, manages to graduate from high school, but due to her sex, higher education is disallowed. In theory, her father supports the education of females, but owing to his station in life, he is unable to offer Francine assistance, financial or otherwise.

Meanwhile, Fred, a favored son of Dearborn Methodist whom all agree demonstrates great potential, wins a scholarship to Northwestern University. The War Between the States interrupts his education in this world as in the other, but Fred survives, graduates, and goes on to Garrett Biblical Institute, located on the Northwestern campus. Francine, for her part, devours Fred's textbooks and completes all his classroom assignments, even if she receives feedback from no one but Fred, who claims she writes with more insight than he or anyone in his classes. In the evenings, at their parents' hearth, she asks Fred pointed questions. Which, she wants to know, does God prefer: that they, as His devotees, work tirelessly converting heathens to recognize His glories—or, instead, expend their energy ensuring

the heathens' need for daily bread is fulfilled, while letting God attend to their souls? Such questions Fred relays to his professors, in turn dispatching their generally unsatisfying responses to Francine.

She learns quickly not to mention such matters among her female friends, who, the few times she attempts to engage them in theological discussion, only titter. Sometimes, in the company of men, her mouth opens before she can stop herself—such as when, standing with a group of men at Dearborn Methodist following services, she quotes Peter 3:15: “*But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.*” How vital to Peter’s message, she wonders aloud, are the words “gentleness and respect”? She hopes to engender intelligent discourse, but Reverend Patterson and the other men frown and say she must learn her place. Eventually, she makes such gaffes so many times, the reverend warns her father that if she is incapable of silence, she will be barred from attending services.

Fred graduates and goes west—and her brother, for their entire lives her closest confidant and ally, begins feeling distant in more ways than miles. In his letters home, he speaks of manifest destiny and spends pages defending his goal of converting savages to Christianity. When Francine responds that she’s unsure this is what God intends, Fred writes back that, as a woman, she couldn’t possibly understand.

In this world as in the other, Francine meets Norman, a widower, at a church social. Francine knows that Norman’s interest in her has as much to do with the stark truths that his children need a mother and she is available, as with Francine specifically. But Norman is also good-natured; they laugh together at the boys’ antics, and Francine is a competent stepmother and a

faithful wife who becomes accustomed to sleeping in Norman's bed. For all this she is grateful, because before he came along she was an old maid, and life is hostile to old maids.

The Great Chicago Fire still occurs in 1871, and afterward, Francine mourns her father and sits through the rambling sermons of the minister who takes over at Dearborn Methodist following Reverend Patterson's demise—the jowl-cheeked man who takes liberties with young female congregants, letting his hand linger on their waists in an attempt to appear fatherly but maintaining contact inappropriately long, and from the pulpit admonishing the congregation to place more pennies in the collection plate, lest they face God's wrath for their stinginess.

Years go by until one day, her mind wandering while she's seated on a rough-hewn pew in a building more akin to a shanty than a church (the congregation, lacking inspiring leadership, has thus far failed to build a new building, and in fact no one is quite sure where the collection plate funds are going), Francine stumbles upon the idea of becoming a circuit rider—a traveling preacher. Her marriage has produced no children, and her stepsons are nearly grown and no longer need daily mothering. Norman and the boys can manage without a woman constantly in the home; they know how to batch it—after all, Norman lived such before he and Francine met, while raising children, no less. That evening, she speaks with him regarding her idea, and while concerned for her safety, he is nonetheless supportive because he believes, as her father did, that she was chosen for this work. Surely, remote hamlets will welcome an educated, well-read preacher, even if not ordained and even if female.

There is no Whimsy in this world, but she saddles a mule named Ginny and sets out—Bible, notes, and sermon texts in her saddlebag. But in one

town after another, she is ridiculed and reviled. Over the course of several weeks, she becomes increasingly concerned that negative words about her might be spreading among the rural communities; nonetheless, God has given her no choice but to persevere.

And then, after another failed attempt in a town somewhere west of Springfield, as sleep eludes her while she lies upon the straw inside a barn that a solitary, kindly soul provided, entreating Francine to be gone before daybreak and please, please, do not tell her husband—as Francine lies awake, sticks of straw chafing her back, as she gives herself over to fanciful dreams of the other world, she hears them coming.

Her dreams rupturing like soap bubbles, she scrambles to her feet and throws the saddle on Ginny and prays, please, Lord, spare me, let me continue my work. But her prayers are in vain. The barn door bursts open, and through the firestorm of booming voices, in the light cast by torches, Francine catches the gaze of Ginny, who stares back at her with equal parts terror and sympathy in her eye.

Pieces of Everyone, Everywhere

Digging graves is straightforward labor, involving little more than brute strength and a sufficiently sharp blade. The job can be done with relative ease by even the most doltish of common workhands.

But here's something many do not know: *exhuming* graves, by contrast, is art. One cannot simply thrust one's spade in the ground, hack around until one hits upon some solid object, then mercilessly subtract shovelful after shovelful of raw earth until the grave's remains, treasurelike, are exposed. Nor can one wrest such treasure from the ground, haphazardly tossing fragments to the surface and flinging them into any vessel conveniently nearby.

No. Such practices would be immoral. Moreover, they would, as my Uncle August said, invite misfortune. August believed, as do I, that regardless of circumstances, the dead deserve to lie peacefully. They should be disturbed only in the most dire of situations. If a body *must* be moved, it should be done properly and with reverence.

“There’s no cause to uproot them, Sam,” Uncle August told me. “If you have to do it, you better have a damn good reason. And you better treat them with respect.”

I had, and continue to have, no argument with that. All bodies, in my belief—both the dead and the living—should be treated with respect.

Uncle August and I had this conversation last year while standing in an Iowa cornfield. Plowing a new field, we encountered a shallow grave under a meager scattering of stones. We found no coffin, no shroud, not even a scrap of clothing—just a full, adult human skeleton set into the thick Midwest soil, all flesh that once graced the bones returned entirely to the earth. That the grave was unviolated by an animal was nothing short of providence.

No one besides our family had ever homesteaded that land, so the skeleton was either an Indian’s or perhaps belonged to some white man who, decades earlier, had been making his way west and died en route. Uncle August said his money was on the latter, because Indians are smarter than that—they don’t leave their dead lying about like so much rubbish. I suspect he’s right.

Either way, Uncle August said we were obliged to move the body appropriately. We returned to the barn and hammered together a solid though simple coffin. We lugged it to the field and eased the bones into place, carefully reassembling those separated from their neighbors. Then we moved the entire affair under a willow tree—where it should have been all along, as was obvious to both of us—and ensured the box was set accurately, buried deeply. The task cost us nearly a full day of plowing, but we accomplished it with respect.

Well. What would Uncle August say about my first job in my new city of Denver, Colorado? What would he say about the merciless, hack-job labor into which I embroiled myself?

I choose not to think about it. When such thoughts enter my mind, I hang my head in shame.



Upon arriving in Denver, I'd spied the undertaker's notices all over town. Posters were tacked to trees; advertisements took space in the local papers. *Gravediggers needed for extensive exhumation project. Apply in person, E.P. McGovern, Undertaking and Embalming, 549 Larimer St. Strong white men only.*

Inspecting one such sign, I inquired of a bystander how to find Larimer Street.

He glowered. "Cursed Tammany crooks. Think you're free of them, out here in the West? Think again, son."

I shook my head. "Sir?"

"Mayor's out of town," the man explained. "Acting Mayor is in deep with the local Tammany Hall cronies. Crooks pushed through a downright pointless contract to relocate those graves." He shook his fist. "It's nothing but taxpayer money lining wicked pockets, son."

None of this made the least bit of sense to me. I asked again for directions to the funeral home.

"God'll smite me, aiding such sinful jobbery." He looked me up and down, appraising my shabby hat and coat. "But I can see you need the work."

Indeed, I did. When the gentleman gave me directions, I thanked him and hurried away.

Applying for the job at McGovern's funeral home, I was given a brief account of the situation. The graveyard in question, named City Cemetery, was located east of the Capitol and just a few blocks south of Colfax Avenue. For a time, this area had been the outskirts of Denver proper. As the city grew, a larger and more remote cemetery, Riverside, was established some miles north. At that point, City Cemetery was essentially abandoned—the graves uncared for, the tombstones crumbling, the entirety of it an eyesore. Now, the city planned to transform it into a park. The land would, as it was explained to me, become a green, grassy setting, intended for the leisure of those who lived nearby.

The next morning, upon arrival at City Cemetery, I glanced around at the nearby homes. They were nothing short of mansions, each larger and more elaborate than the next, positioned like well-trimmed rosebushes along the cemetery's perimeter. No surprise that well-heeled homeowners were loath to gaze upon an unsightly public space.

The crew that assembled that day numbered approximately thirty, each stronger than the next. It was a warm spring morning—the type of day that, upon other circumstances, might inspire hope within the soul. In outlying cottonwood trees, sparrows chirped. Closer by, robins pecked for worms, and sunlight-seeking wildflowers broke through the dry earth. Along the boundary of the cemetery, curious onlookers gathered, arranged in a muddle that reminded me of the disorganized shelves at the unkempt country store back home.

The laborer next to me grinned. “What sport,” he said, striking the blade of his shovel into the scrub grass, where it met, clanging, against a rock.

“What d’ya think we’ll find under there, lad?” He clapped me on the shoulder. “Nothing but thieves and degenerates, I hear. Bastards gettin’ what they deserve.”

Not entirely convinced of this, but disinclined to engage in argument within my first few moments on the job, I dipped my head just enough for my gesture to be recognizable as a nod.

In some areas of the soon-to-be erstwhile City Cemetery, graves had already been exhumed. Long before Undertaker McGovern was hired to finish the job, city officials had put out notices that any Denverite who had relatives at City Cemetery would be wise to have them removed to Riverside. The Jewish graves on the hill were relocated, every one of them, carefully and with respect, by families and synagogues. The Catholics negotiated a deal with the city to purchase their parcel of the graveyard, leaving those who had worshipped both God and the Pope to continue peacefully resting in their current locale.

The remaining section of City Cemetery—“the Boneyard,” as I learned it was called—was where paupers, thieves, and unclaimed, disease-ridden bodies were buried. No surprise, then, that most of these bodies were unspoken for. Who’d speak for them?

Wagonful after wagonful of rudimentary caskets were brought forth and unloaded. “Dig,” the foreman—a bulky, weather-beaten fellow named Rudiman—instructed us. He told us not to attempt salvaging any containers we encountered; most, he said, would be cheap construction, not worth the cut-rate lumber comprising them. Instead, we were told to put the bodies in the delivered caskets, mark them with the identifying tags provided, and keep going.

“There are thousands of bodies in this soil,” Rudiman shouted to the assemblage. “You’ll be paid for each one you tag. The faster you dig, the more money you make. Have at it, men!”

Someone let out a holler. “Let’s do this, boys!” Enthusiastic spades were raised, and piles of dirt and rubble soon began to dot the landscape. Less inclined to revelry but nevertheless eager to demonstrate my strong work ethic, I grasped my shovel and began to dig.

“Respect them.”

I looked up. An elderly woman, threadbare shawl over her head and shoulders, had quit the onlookers and was making her way among the working men.

“Respect them, I say,” she told the laborers. “Say a prayer for each man’s soul as you raise him. Treat his body with tenderness—for tomorrow, it will be your own.”

They brushed her off. “Go away, old woman,” one man growled, raising his shovel in a half-threat toward her. “Leave us to our toil.”

Across the clumps of earth, the woman’s eyes met mine. She hobbled over, gripping my shoulder, pulling my head toward hers.

“These men are unwise. But *you* possess prudence,” she whispered in my ear. “Do right by them, girl.”



She knew. *How* did she know? I’d hidden it so well—or so I’d believed.

Before I left Iowa, Uncle August had been the one who’d shorn my hair, handfuls of my rich dark locks stuffed into a bag for me to tote on my journey, in hopes of selling it at some future date. August loaned me britches, a belt, and two work shirts, one to wear and one for a spare. He

handed me a long cotton cloth and told me to bind my—providentially small, anyway—breasts.

“You’re safer this way, Samantha,” he said.

I eyed him. How could I—whether dressed as woman or disguised as man—feel more threatened elsewhere than I was in my own home?

Three nights earlier, August had discovered my father at me. August did his best to haul Father away while I lay helplessly, my eyes filled with terror. August cursed and yelled and took the blows that blackened both eyes.

Only a few weeks prior, Uncle August and I had mourned the loss of my mother, who’d contracted influenza in early February. Before then, she’d done all she could to keep Father from me. So did August, once he knew. But like his sister and like me, August had no power over that man, who dwarfed him. Father had Uncle August by close to a foot and more than seventy pounds.

I’d inherited my father’s coarse facial features and his height, but not his girth. I was gawky and thin-limbed, my strength stringy at best. I could not fight off my father.

A disguise, on the other hand, I could manage.

And so it was Uncle August who helped me prepare for my journey—my mother dead and my father drunk and snoring in the barn. Harmless then, but he wouldn’t stay that way; we both knew it.

“Join me,” I said to August.

He shook his head. “You know I can’t, Sam. Not with what I owe him. He’d come after me—and where would that leave us?”

Father had paid for August’s passage from England—and paid, as well, the hefty gambling debt that caught August in Chicago, before he made his

way west to our homestead. "I'll keep working, pay off my debt. Then I'll come to Denver, if I can," August assured me. Gently, he touched my cheek. "I can pay your train fare and put a few dollars in your pocket," he said. "After that, you're on your own. I'm sorry, Samantha. I'd do more, if I were able."

"I know you would." I nodded. "Thank you, Uncle."

He reached into the pack beside his cot, the canvas knapsack he'd toted across the Atlantic, in which he kept all his worldly possessions. "I did set aside a small sum for this."

Into my hands Uncle August pressed a slim volume: *Poems: Second Series* by Emily Dickinson.

I opened to the title page: "Robert Brothers, Boston, 1892."

"Hot off the press, just last year," Uncle August said. "I know you love your words, Sam." In the lamplight, his eyes dimmed. "I wish things were different. You should've had the opportunity to continue your education. You should..." He drifted off, turning away from me.

I laid a hand on his shoulder. "It's all right. This gift means everything to me."

I thumbed through the beginning of the volume. Several pages in, I stopped. Over my shoulder, Uncle August read, as well.

*We play at paste,
Till qualified for pearl,
Then drop the paste,*

*And deem
ourself
a fool.*

*The shapes, though, were similar,
And our new hands
Learned gem-tactics
Practising sands.*

I looked up at Uncle August. “Thank you,” was all I could manage to whisper.

He gathered me into his arms. “You’re the pearl, Samantha,” he said. “You’re the pearl.”



I nodded at the old woman, who nodded back and left my side. I gripped my shovel’s handle, contemplating the humble tombstone at my feet. *Ernest Smith*, it read. *1855–1872*.

No other words. Nothing indicating how young Ernest—aged seventeen at time of death, precisely my own age—had met his fate.

I bent to the ground, my index finger tracing letters on stone. “What happened to you, Ernest?” I whispered. “What happened?”

The foreman, striding among the headstones, spotted me. “Get up,” he said.

I stood, shovel in hand.

Rudiman considered me. His eyes beheld my shorn, capped head, then took in my smooth cheeks and jaw. His gaze lingered at my collarbone, where the top button of my shirt was unfastened against the warmth of the day. From there, his eyes roamed the length of my body and came to rest on my long, booted feet.

He gazed upward, meeting my eye. "Get to work, boy," he growled.

I took up my spade. My arms, in Uncle August's shirt, were wiry. Plain of face, with no brothers to assume the field work and no prospects for leaving my father's homestead and becoming some other farmer's wife, I'd left school at fourteen and taken my place in the fields. There, I'd been paid nothing for my work. But here on this rubbled turf, laborers would earn twenty-five cents for each body we removed from the ground and transferred to a new casket. Undertaker McGovern, I suspected, was being paid many times that amount by the city. Rudiman, self-importantly stomping amongst the workers, likely also received a healthy cut.

But I would earn nothing unless I started to dig.

Nonetheless, I was careful. I removed dirt from Ernest's grave, the mound piling up until I encountered a rotting wooden box, sunk in the middle and exposing a skeleton's torso.

Ernest had lain here for over twenty years, almost as long as the cemetery existed. What had he done? How had he died?

Gently, I shoveled my way around the decrepit box. When enough of the ramshackle casket was exposed to begin raising it, I set aside my spade and bent to the earth.

"Need a hand?"

A fellow laborer, young and handsome, smiled at me. I admired the well-defined shoulder muscles I discerned through his faded cotton shirt. His

beard was full and neatly trimmed. I had to resist an impulse to touch it.

We each took one end of Ernest's crumbling coffin. As we raised it, the bottom collapsed. A stench erupted, and I covered my nose with my neckerchief. The corpse, primarily skeleton but for a few persistent scraps of flesh, tumbled to the earth.

I fell to my knees. "I'm so sorry," I whispered to Ernest Smith's remains. "I should have been more cautious."

My associate knelt beside me. "It's all right," he said. "You did your best."

We looked at one another, and without a word, folded our hands in prayer.

"May God have mercy on this dear, departed soul," my companion said.

"Amen," I finished. "Amen."



On the second day, we sat amongst the dead eating our noontime sandwiches. I had my Dickinson with me, and I read beneath the shade of a cottonwood.

*And so, upon this wise I prayed,—
Great Spirit, give to me
A heaven not so large as yours,
But large enough for me.*

"Rise, you men!" Rudiman shouted. "Cease your loafing and get yourselves unloading."

I looked up. A fresh shipment of caskets had arrived. Tucking the book into my knapsack, I got to my feet.

Hauling coffins from wagon to ground, we noticed something portentous.

Someone spoke. “Sir,” he said to Rudiman. “These caskets are mighty small.”

Shielding my eyes from the noonday sun, I observed that the man who spoke was none other than yesterday’s fellow precant over Ernest Smith’s remains. Again, my fingers itched to stroke the smooth hair along his jaw.

Rudiman approached, joined by our employer, E.P. McGovern. “What’s your name, man?” McGovern asked.

“Walter Perry,” came the reply.

McGovern lowered his hat over his brow. “Well, Perry, I don’t see as how it’s your place to ask questions. But as you ask, these caskets are all I was able to get on short notice.” He held up his hands in a gesture of helplessness. “You hear about the accident at that mining site out in Utah? Can’t tell you how many dead, but every remaining full-sized casket in Denver has been shipped west. Can’t find one to save your life—much less theirs.” McGovern waved one hand dismissively at the graves, then shook a finger in Perry’s face. “Way I see it, sir, you got two choices: either you find a way to fit these bodies in the caskets provided, or you set aside your shovel and leave the work to those who have the stomach for it.”

McGovern and Rudiman waited. Walter Perry eyed one man, then the other. Then he stuck his shovel in the ground and crossed the field. Exiting the cemetery, he broke through the assembled onlookers and disappeared.

The undertaker and foreman exchanged sniggers. “Anyone else?” McGovern called out. “Or are the rest of you *real* men?” He looked around the decaying field. “Your decision, gents.”

I felt my shoulders stiffen. I saw no possibility that a grown man's body could fit into so small a casket. And yet, I lacked the courage to do what Walter Perry did—simply walk away.

My dilemma seemed to elude the others. Indeed, it appeared, they relished the task ahead. With fresh enthusiasm, shovels were raised. Skeletons were hacked apart—torso, upper limbs, pelvis, and lower limbs separated with the swift strike of metal on bone. Skulls were carelessly cracked from the rounded bone at the pinnacle of the spine. All these bones were then crammed into tiny caskets, intended for children who left this world before their third birthdays.

Naturally, most of the disconnected frames did not fit, no matter how valiantly the men—at first—attempted ramming them into the miniature boxes. The remains of these unfortunate souls were, instead, distributed to secondary and sometimes tertiary caskets. “All the better,” one worker said. “We’re being paid by the casket, right?”

Overhearing him, McGovern grinned. “That we are, mister.”

Something else happened then, too. Perhaps the men had exceedingly enjoyed the contents of their whiskey flasks during the noon hour. Or perhaps it was simply that the notion of what was being asked of them, the notion of dismantling and cramming adult skeletons into diminutive caskets, brought out something animal-like in the workers.

I can't say what it was. Regardless of the reason, tactics became increasingly macabre. Men warmed to the task, and their inhibitions, if they had any, loosened. They worked faster and rougher, gleefully shouting obscenities at one another and at the cemetery's remains.

Then began the looting. Laborers examined bodies for jewelry. Cigar boxes filled with treasured possessions, buried alongside some of the

deceased, were opened and rifled through. Anything of worth was stuffed into laborers' pockets.

I glanced about. The old woman was nowhere to be seen, but I could hear her words in my head.

Respect them.

I nearly put up my blade. How could I go on? How could I, recalling young Ernest Smith's decomposed body, continue this mockery of a job that McGovern and his henchman Rudiman required? How could I—remembering my first exhumation, the one in an Iowa cornfield, remembering my uncle's kind eyes and warm words—how could I, under these circumstances, attempt to transform such gruesome work into art?

But I needed the work. Afraid to try my luck at a boarding house, fearful my secret would be revealed, I'd been spending my nights in a bedroll, curled up in an alley off Colfax Avenue, all night slapping my palm against the dry dirt to ward off the rats who scurried and sniffed nearby.

My plan was to save up sufficient funds to take off my mantle of maleness. Using what I earned from this repugnant job, combined with what I could get for the mounds of hair stuffed in my knapsack, I'd buy myself a frock or two. Then I'd figure out what, in this new life of mine, came next.

And so I hoisted my shovel and commenced exhuming the next grave in my path. Trying, as best I could, to disassemble the corpse slowly and carefully—and then fit it like puzzle pieces into a juvenile casket.



I left the job site at dusk that evening, walking north on Franklin Street and turning west onto Colfax. My pack over my shoulder, I focused my eyes

ahead, taking in the tableau of the under-construction Colorado State Capitol building and the setting sun dropping behind the Rocky Mountains.

Despite the ghastliness of my first job here, my sense of Denver was that it was a city of opportunity. In such an environment, one might achieve success—or, better yet, happiness. Provided, of course, that one was able to find one's footing.

As I breathed in the combined scent of horse droppings in the road, refuse in the alleys, and frying meat in the boardinghouses, I heard the clomping of boots behind me. Prickly, I forced myself not to turn my head, hoping that in refusing to acknowledge whoever trailed me, I might will them away.

The footfalls came closer, and hands grabbed both my arms. I twisted my neck, coming face to face with Rudiman and McGovern.

"You, *boy*," McGovern sneered. "You work for me, don't you?"

Swallowing hard, I nodded. "Please, sirs," I said, in my practiced gruff voice. "Take your hand off me."

"We will not," the undertaker replied. "Not until you explain yourself."

I shook my head, feigning ignorance. "Sir?"

Placing a hand on the small of my back, McGovern thrust me into the closest alleyway, shoving me behind a wooden barrel beside a brick wall. My pack tumbled from my shoulder and rolled across the dirt.

McGovern nodded at Rudiman, who pressed on my shoulders until I sank to the ground. "You work too slowly," Rudiman said. "You're not man enough to be on this crew." He shoved me backward, and my head snapped against the bricks. My eyes closed, then opened again, trying to focus on Rudiman's jeering face. "But then again, you're not *man* enough for anything—are you?"

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” I croaked.

“You know exactly what I mean.” Rudiman took one hand off my shoulder and gripped my chin, tilting it toward the twilit sky. “Such smooth skin,” he said, and his voice bore nearly the softness one might use when addressing a lover.

“Please,” I begged.

He shook my jaw from side to side.

Arms akimbo, McGovern eyed me. “You’re fired, *boy*.”

Jerking my head, attempting to release myself from Rudiman’s grasp, I said, “You owe me for two days’ work.”

“Such cheek,” McGovern snapped. “I owe you nothing. You deceived us—and liars deserve no wages.”

I stared him down. “Please tell your henchman to unhand me, sir.”

Rudiman sniggered. Grinning up at McGovern, he said, “Whad’ya think, boss? Let’s have some fun, eh?”

I opened my mouth to scream, but Rudiman clamped his hand over it.

McGovern shrugged. “I don’t get into any of that business.” He turned on his heel. “I’ve said all I have to say on the matter. What happens from here is of no accord to me.” He exited the alley.

Rudiman watched him go, then turned back to me. “Try to make fools of us,” he said. “I’ll show you a fool.”

He tightened his hand over my mouth. Forearm pressed to my collarbone, he snaked my belt from around my waist and tore at my britches until my body lay bare and exposed beneath him.



Afterwards—after he buttoned his pants and left me lying in the dirt—I tried to catch my breath, half naked and crumpled on my side.

In my mind, I played the prior moments back, wishing I'd had a knife or a gun. Or even a stick to poke in his eye.

Anything. Any object to make me feel less vulnerable than this.

Fumbling in the dark, I pulled on my tattered clothing and reached for my pack. I patted it, assuring myself that its humble contents—my bedroll, a flannel cloth to wipe my laborer's brow, a shirt that had at one time been my uncle's and at one time had been clean, and, most importantly, my hair and my *Poems*—were safe and intact.

I doubted Rudiman would come back, but just in case, I made my way to a different alley. Was one safer than another? Likely not, but I had to take my chances.

There would be no sleep for me that night. Once the moon rose, I read by its faint glow.

*Through the straight pass of suffering
The martyrs even trod,
Their feet upon temptation,
Their faces upon God.*

Determined, I looked up at the sky.

I would be no such martyr.



The offices of *The Denver Republican* were two stories tall, composed of brick, with heavy cornerstones and a wide oak door. They'd be imposing to one who had fear.

But I no longer had fear.

Upon that morning, and every day of my life thereafter, this is what I stored in my heart: when we are filled with fear, no others fear us. But when the chin a man grasps becomes the chin tilted high and proud, above a neck long, upon shoulders squared, fear dissipates like a blown-over cloud.

"I wish to speak to the editor-in-chief, please." Before the clerk seated at his desk could respond, I went on, "I have a scoop for him. I believe he will be most interested."



Seventeen years later, on a warm day in the spring of 1910, I stood pencil and pad in hand amongst the crowd at the newly christened Cheesman Park. As each speaker took the podium, I scribbled notes for my story about the dedication of the park's neoclassical marble pavilion. A thing of glory, the pavilion stood in the east portion of the park and oversaw the lush green lawns that last century's city elders had envisioned—those green lawns that the Tammany politicians, now long gone, were unwilling to lay over paupers' graves.

And yet, exactly that happened. After *The Denver Republican* broke the story—"The Work of Ghouls!" ran the headline—the city immediately shut down McGovern's horrific operation. For a time, nothing else happened; the graves remained opened, pieces of everyone, everywhere. Eventually, Denver's first bipartisan mayor was elected, and a different company was hired to set the skeletal fragments into the earth from whence they came. At

that point, properly reassembling corpses was impossible. Bones were transported as they were into the exhumed graves, covered and tamped down. Folks say the poor, restless souls still wander the park, especially by cover of night. I don't doubt it.

After they followed my lead and scooped the story before any of the other papers got wind of it, I talked my way into a job as the *Republican's* first female cub reporter. My initial stories were trivial, many of them relating to ladies' charitable activities. Eventually, Ellis Meredith, suffragist and reporter for *The Rocky Mountain News*, took note of my work, finding in my stories the lyricism and authenticity I pursued regardless of subject matter. Ellis took me under her wing and helped me get hired on at the *News* as beat reporter covering civic issues—a position I hold to this day.

I never saw Walter Perry again. I kept an eye out for him, but if he was still in Denver, our paths failed to cross. Perhaps because no other man I met had Walter's integrity—or perhaps simply because my lifestyle is incongruous with it—I chose never to marry. It's a decision I've yet to regret.

In 1896, three years after I left Iowa, I heard from Uncle August that my father had died. Threshing accident, it was, terrible shame—apparently, someone had emptied the water from the steam thresher's tank, causing an explosion when the machine was fired up. Father, standing nearby, was effectively blown to bits.

No one besides August knew my whereabouts, and since he was not a blood relation, Father's homestead passed to distant relatives in Cedar Rapids. Then August joined me in Denver. Our reunion was a delightful one, although he only stayed a few months before marrying a young widow and moving with her and her children to California.

And Rudiman? That lecherous soul was not difficult to locate. The day after the city fired McGovern, the undertaker dismissed the laborers and left Rudiman alone to close up the City Cemetery jobsite. The wretch did so in near darkness, swilling from a flask as he went about collecting pickaxes and shovels.

This time, I was prepared. As night fell, I selected from the discarded shovels the heaviest and sharpest one I could find.

Approaching Rudiman from behind, I swung with all my might and all my care—ensuring that when his head split open and his body collapsed, it did so into an empty, waiting, desecrated grave.

Baby Doll

Ava's daughter is five, and Ava is troubled. The child, whom Ava and Louis call Baby, slipped easily into life on the exact November day when the Great War ended—her birth, in its grace, feeling to Ava like the symbol of a world at peace. It was nothing like the ferocious, animal births of Ava's older two, Louis Junior and Rex, both of them oversized infants who'd nearly torn Ava to pieces. After Rex, the thought crossed her mind that if she hadn't made vows to honor and obey, she might well have said to Louis, *that part of our relationship is finished*.

But of course, no wife could do such a thing. The ensuing years brought two miscarriages before, finally, Ava was rewarded for her fidelity by the smooth pregnancy and effortless arrival of dainty yet healthy Baby. From her first breath, Baby emanated sugar and spice, as if she weren't a child but rather a cake delicately flavored and generously sweetened. She took naturally to the breast, cuddled in Ava's arms and sucking politely until she'd had her fill. She burrowed into her cradle, tiny bottom in the air, no hint of colic or fuss. It was impossible not to compare Baby's infancy with

those of Junior and Rex, who until well after their first birthdays had kept Ava awake nights with their testiness and appetites. They'd since metamorphosed into robust, rowdy boys, tearing through Ava's house and making no excuses for their behavior. Why should they? They're boys, after all.

But Baby was born sweet and stayed sweet. She smiles often, laughs often. In her infancy, her big brown eyes, merry and alert, followed her parents and elder brothers about a room. Baby spoke and toddled early, and this Ava found appropriate. A girl needed to be swift on her feet and clever with her words if, when the time came, she hoped to attract the right kind of attention.

It's the day after Baby's fifth birthday, and Ava tells herself nothing has changed. Baby is still her baby, still a dripping honeypot of sweetness.

Ava is carrying her clean Monday washing into the yard. It's a warm day for November and she's grateful for the opportunity to hang the clothing on the outside line rather than string it throughout her basement, as she does for most of the chill-wind, frozen-grass Wisconsin winter. Standing on the back stoop, wicker washing basket on hip, she shields her eyes from the sun and looks around the fenced yard for Baby, whom she locates on the concrete pad by the back gate, beside the burn barrel. Baby is doing a childish hop-step dance. How charming, Ava thinks.

But no—something else is going on. Baby is stomping on something, her small feet in button-up boots coming down heavily.

"Whatever are you doing, darling?" Ava calls out.

Baby looks up. "Stepping on her," she replies.

Ava sets the basket on the stoop and crosses the yard for a closer look. Beneath Baby's feet, Ava spies what used to be the intact head of a china

baby doll.



The doll was a fifth-birthday present to Baby from Louis's relations, given to the child yesterday afternoon when they stopped by for a visit. Blue eyes, a molded curl of blond hair on her otherwise bald porcelain head. China legs and arms, body stuffed with matting. A pink dress with sateen flowers across the bodice. From beneath the skirt, a tiny pair of pantaloons peeking out.

"Isn't she precious?" said Doris, Ava's sister-in-law. "Baby, don't you love having a baby of your own?"

Baby's eyes darkened. "I...told...you," she said—her voice, in its startling hostility, sounding like that of one who should have many more candles on her birthday cake than five. "I told you that if you got me a doll, I'd throw her on the ground and step on her."

Truthfully, the child *had* said this. Last week, one evening at supper, Louis had asked Baby what she wanted for her birthday. She'd replied with those exact words—and Ava, Louis, Rex, and Junior all laughed. "You're such a hoot, Baby," Rex had snorted.

Seated in the living room with the relations, Ava felt her cheeks redden. Around the family supper table is one thing, but what kind of mother lets her daughter get away with such words to guests who arrived bearing a gift? "Yes, Baby," she said. "You did tell us that. But you never told Aunt Doris, did you?"

Baby swung her head from side to side. "*You* should have told her, Mama!" she shrieked. "You should have told her!"

Arms waving in the air, Baby ran from the front room. Dark curls bounced as she clambered up the stairs on all fours. At the sound of a slamming door, everyone—Ava, Louis, Doris, her husband George, and their nine-year-old, Sally—exchanged glances.

“Heavens, I don’t know what...” Ava stammered. “Doris, please forgive Baby. I don’t know what got into her. She’s never acted like that before.”

A single tear formed in the corner of Doris’s eye, and she dabbed it with her handkerchief. Sally rose from her seat on the floor and patted her mother’s shoulder. Doris reached up, squeezing the girl’s hand. “It’s *I* who should be comforting you, dear girl,” she said to Sally. Then she turned to Ava. “Sally helped me pick out the doll, you see. Something special for her little cousin.”

“Again, I’m so sor—” Ava began.

“No girl will talk to my sister, or any adult, in this manner,” Louis broke in. He crossed his arms over his chest. “She’ll go to bed without supper tonight, Ava,” he said. “And no birthday cake, either.”

Louis is a man of principle, firm when necessary. But hearing him speak such of Baby, this child he cherishes...Ava wasn’t sure, at first, that she heard him correctly. But Louis’s eyes were bearing into hers, waiting for her response.

“No supper...or cake?” Ava shook her head. “Don’t you think, Louis, that’s a bit harsh?”

“I think no such thing,” Louis said. “She has to learn her place, Ava.”

Doris stood. “We should be going anyway.” She glanced at Ava. “I regret selecting such an inappropriate gift.”

“No, no, not at all.” Casting her eyes upon the doll, nestled in tissue paper in a white box, Ava wrung her hands. “She’s a beautiful little doll, and I’m

sure Baby will come to love her.” Her eyes pleaded with Doris’s. “Please, won’t you stay for supper and cake?”

The boys trooped in from the street then, dirty and perspiring from a game of stickball, both of them asking when supper would be served. “I’m starving,” Junior said. “I could eat this entire house.”

Louis roared with laughter—the hearty laugh that Ava fell in love with when she met him fourteen years ago. “You’d best feed your sons, Ava.” He stood, slapping George on the back. “No hard feelings, chum?”

George shook his head. “No hard feelings, Louis. But Doris is right; we should be going.”



In the light of a new day, Ava thinks it might be all right. This morning, she’d set the doll atop the oak toybox on the sun porch, the box Louis built to hold baseball gloves, toy trucks, wind-up animals that teetered across the kitchen linoleum to the delight of all three children when they were small. Perhaps, Ava thought, when Baby’s bright eyes lit upon the doll again, she’d change her mind.

But Ava was careless. She should have watched her daughter today, rather than busying herself with housework.

Baby takes her foot off what’s left of the doll’s porcelain head. It’s in pieces, a scattering of large chips and a dusting of smithereens. The doll’s puckered lips are split in half. A fragment of pretty pink cheek glitters in the sunlight. One reproachful eye looks up at Ava, as if asking, *Why didn’t you protect me?*

Ava’s daughter raises her foot again, but before she can stomp on a limb, Ava snatches the doll’s headless body from the concrete. “Baby,” she says

sternly. “What made you do such a thing?”

Baby crosses her arms over her chest. “I did what I said I’d do.”

It’s such a simple statement, and in it Ava cannot hear the child she’s known these five years. Observing her daughter’s resolute expression, Ava cannot envision Baby’s sweet smile and merry eyes. She cannot hear Baby’s giggles. She cannot picture the characteristics that compel everyone to adore Baby, to make Ava and Louis want to dote on her.

I did what I said I’d do. A girl who speaks this way, acts this way—that is a girl who will not, cannot, be doted upon.

It’s Ava’s fault. She has spared the rod and spoiled the child.

“You need a spanking,” she says.

Ava has never spanked Baby, has never in fact given any of her children a licking. The boys sometimes need one, but Louis handles that. Never before has it occurred to her that Baby might someday need a spanking. Not such a sweet child.

With the boys, there have been occasions when she felt Louis was too forceful—but she tells herself their father knows best. They’re boys, and other than cursory scoldings when, for instance, they track mud into her kitchen or burp at the table, disciplining them is a man’s job.

As for Ava herself, as for the intimate moments when Louis raises his hand and brings it down, hard, onto her bare bottom cheeks—well. Ava isn’t fond of the practice, doesn’t find it arousing, but it’s her duty to tolerate Louis’s desires. She recalls the afternoon shortly before she married him when she and her mother returned home from a wedding-dress fitting, and her mother sat her down, telling her in no uncertain terms that the husband decides what happens in the bedroom. “A happy marriage depends upon it,” she said, and Ava took those words to heart.

But Baby—no, she will *not* let Louis hit Baby.

She'll have to do it herself. She will have to ensure this is an isolated incident, ensure Baby learns her lesson. Why in heaven's name wasn't the missed supper and birthday cake enough for Baby? Yes, she's a small child, and small children are unpredictable. Nonetheless, Baby is old enough to learn that she can't go around saying and doing whatever she pleases. The world is a cruel place; Ava shudders to think what might happen to a girl who behaves such.

Like a sinkful of greasy dishes, the situation needs to be immediately addressed. She'll punish Baby, the child will take her licks, and that will be the end of it. Thank goodness it happened early in the day, when Louis is downtown, working at the bank, and the boys are at school. Ava will dole out punishment as gently and lovingly—but also firmly—as possible. Everything can be taken care of, lickety split, before the males return to the house. As for the doll, she'll wrap it in bunting and hide it deep in her hope chest, a sacred vessel in the corner of Ava and Louis's bedroom, given to Ava by her mother when she was a girl. Like all girls in those days, Ava used her hope chest to collect the tea towels and bedsheets and napkins she hemmed and trimmed with lace over the years for her someday-marriage. She still stores her linens in the chest, and no one ever opens it besides her.

She bends down to pick up the china pieces. A jagged edge, part of the back of the head, cuts her finger, and Ava wipes it on the waist of her dark wool dress.

"Baby," she says, lowering her voice to an unnatural level of sternness—and it's difficult, terribly difficult to speak such to her adorable child. "Baby, come inside with me."

She takes Baby's hand and leads her through the back door, up the half-flight to the kitchen. The house, which was brand new when Louis bought it for his bride in 1910, is enchanting. Built of Milwaukee's famous Cream City brick, it has a spacious front room and wood-paneled dining room, three bedrooms, and a full, modern bathroom. Bride-to-be Ava, giving tours to her girlfriends, was the envy of her social set. "If only we could all find a Louis," one of them said. "You're the luckiest girl in the world, Ava."

Ava's kitchen linoleum is green with white speckles. Ava's cabinets are pine. Ava has a brand-new electric icebox.

She is, indeed, the luckiest girl in the world. And she'll be damned—the word, even in her mind, startles her, but given the situation, it's warranted—she will be damned if she'll let her daughter miss out on the opportunity to, in her own time, become the luckiest girl in the world.

Seating herself on a kitchen chair, Ava beckons Baby. The unpleasant task must be carried out. But first, she asks Baby, "Were you unhappy with your birthday presents?"

Vigorously, Baby shakes her head. "Oh, no, Mama, no," she says. "I love the painting kit. I love the ukelele you gave me."

Ava beams. First thing this morning, Baby asked if she could begin using the painting kit; Ava has promised that after lunch, she'll set it up in the basement for Baby while Ava finishes running another load through her Maytag aluminum washing machine. As for the child-sized ukelele, Ava saw it in a music shop window several weeks ago, stepped inside, and bought it—perhaps impulsively; it was not an item Baby had requested for her birthday, but something about the charming little instrument made Ava think of her daughter. All day yesterday, before Doris, George, and Sally arrived, Baby played the ukelele—her strumming unsophisticated and yet

so enthusiastic, Ava couldn't help smiling as she baked and frosted Baby's birthday cake. Today, Baby was at it again, contemplatively plucking out one chord after another. Ears cocked as she went about her chores, Ava decided that Baby's style was improving. Perhaps, Ava thought, the child's musical talent was natural.

Baby's zeal brings to mind Ava's own childhood passion. When Ava was only a few years older than Baby is now, her elder brother, Harold, received a Sterling Safety Bicycle as a birthday gift. It was a fine machine, crafted in nearby Kenosha, metal gleaming like Ava's Maytag does today. She begged Harold to let her try the bicycle, and when finally he did, she took to it so naturally she surprised everyone, including herself. Atop the Sterling, Ava felt for the first time in her life that she was in control of her outcomes. She could modify her speed by pedaling faster or slower. She could—just for fun—lean one direction or the other to shift her balance, challenging herself to keep the bicycle upright if circumstances unexpectedly changed. If she so desired, she could stop by pressing the brake lever.

But Ava didn't want to stop. She rode the bicycle whenever Harold permitted her to. It was the late 1890s, and cycle racing was all the rage for both men and women. Ava followed stories in the *Milwaukee Journal* about women's cycle races in other parts of the country. Once, she clipped a photograph of Tillie Anderson, one of the "Big 5" women who raced against each other. Like all female racers, Miss Anderson wore bloomers, and Ava relentlessly implored her mother for a pair so she could go faster on Harold's bicycle.

She recalls, now, the day her mother threatened that if Ava said one more word about bloomers, she would no longer be allowed to ride the bicycle.

Ava, age nine, couldn't help herself. She said the word—and lost her cycling privileges forever.

“It's better this way,” her mother insisted. “Cycling isn't a proper activity for a young girl.” She eyed Ava's pink dress with its lace hem. “You look so pretty in that frock. Why would you ever want to dress like a man?”

Defeated, Ava went to her room. She remembers sitting on her bed fingering the lace trim on the edge of her skirt, fighting with herself to prevent her fingers from ripping the trimming off, perhaps going so far as to tear the entire dress to shreds. How satisfying that would feel!

But she didn't do it. Her mother was right. Ava was growing up, and the time for childish pursuits was past. She'd taken a breath, poured water into the washbowl to splash her face—and vowed that she would, forever, forget about bloomers and cycling.

But this, with Baby, is different. Ava had considered ruining her dress, but she didn't do it—unlike Baby, who smashed her doll. So the situation was entirely unrelated. Wasn't it?

“I'm glad you like the gifts we gave you,” Ava says to her daughter. “Nonetheless, there's no excuse for destroying the doll Aunt Doris and Cousin Sally picked out for you.”

Tears come to the child's eyes. Ava, resolving to be steadfast, sets her knees together and leans forward. “Pull down your stockings and panties,” she commands.

Baby has seen her brothers on Louis's lap with uncovered bottoms, hollering that *they're sorry, they're sorry, please stop, Daddy, stop!* She trembles.

“Now, Baby,” Ava says. “Let's get it over with. It won't be as bad as when Daddy does it to the boys.”

Baby seems to understand this logic. She reaches under her dress, pushing her wool stockings and cotton panties down to her ankles. Then she waddles toward Ava, who pulls the child onto her lap, belly down. “I’ll make it quick,” she promises.

The girl squeezes her eyes shut, shifting outward to expose less of her bottom to her mother’s hand. Even with Baby’s eyes closed, Ava cannot bring herself to look at her daughter’s face. Instead, as she raises her hand, she focuses her gaze on the little bottom presented to her. Baby’s bottom cheek is flush with color, as rosy as the facial cheek of the painted china doll.

Ava pauses, striking hand midair. In her mind’s eye, she sees Baby as an infant in her cradle—head turned to the side, knees hunched, diapered bottom adorably raised. Ava sees Baby’s sweet sleeping face—her long lashes, the wisp of dark hair across her forehead.

Then she sees Baby of yesterday, Baby of this morning. Baby with her foot in the air, stomping. Baby with her arms crossed and eyes narrowed. Baby who did what she said she’d do.

How, Ava wonders, does a girl become lucky in this life? By being pretty, certainly—and Baby has that, same as Ava has always had that. Good looks and grooming matter; it’s foolish to pretend otherwise.

But does a girl also need to be docile? Does a girl have to desire, above all else, to dream of marriage and motherhood? Is that the singular definition of female aspiration?

Ava was raised to believe it was so. Ava has never—not even when she was flying freely on Harold’s bicycle—questioned whether it is so.

But now she wonders, does a distaste for dolls equal a lack of desire to someday give birth? Could Baby grow up to, say, play an instrument in a

band *and* be a mother? Was such a thing possible?

Ava lowers her hand. She spreads open her legs, setting the child on the floor between them. Reaching down, she pulls up Baby's panties and stockings, securing the waistbands around the child's middle.

Then she draws Baby onto her lap, wrapping her arms around her. The girl rests her head on her mother's shoulder. "Thank you, Mama," she says quietly, "for not hitting me."

Ava smooths her daughter's hair and leans her back so they can look one another in the eye. "You're welcome, Ba—"

She pauses. The child's dark eyes meet her mother's.

"How would you like it..." Ava takes another breath. "How would you like it, Veronica, if we began calling you by your real name?"

The Unlived

Like a rubber band snapped from overuse, it was the fifth pregnancy that broke her.

Claire Miller became pregnant five times but had only one child. A healthy and chubby girl arriving when Claire was twenty, Kitty was firstborn in the large family Claire and Tom planned—at least four, perhaps five. Following Kitty's birth, Claire was pregnant again within the year—then again two years later, and a third time when Kitty was seven. All three pregnancies were the same. Smooth, uneventful months with minimal nausea, accompanied by the expected level of fatigue—she was mothering a young child, after all—and lively kicks against the confines of her belly. Full-term labors, babies close to eight pounds each. Boys, each and all.

But none of Claire's sons breathed a single breath of life. One after the other, the boys were stillborn. Claire and Tom named each of them. Victor, then Edward, and finally little David.

On a cold but defiantly sunny afternoon in January 1932, the day after David's arrival (and rapid departure; Claire couldn't bear to think of it), her

doctor walked into the Maternity ward at Denver General and examined her, then scribbled notes on the chart hooked to her bed's footboard. Chart in hand, he pulled up a wooden chair beside her bed and frowned as he reviewed the pages.

Claire's gaze traveled around the room. Sunlight streamed in through tall windows, highlighting the blues and pinks of perky hothouse flowers. Upright in their beds, mothers nursed or bottle-fed their babies. Others rested, banking the sleep they'd need in the coming weeks with a newborn in the house.

"Might I go home, Doctor Sawyer?" Claire asked. "I don't...belong here."

Eyes on her chart, Dr. Sawyer nodded. "You're correct," he said. "You don't belong here, Mrs. Miller."

Claire inhaled sharply, but the scent of roses and gardenias was overpowering, and she quickly breathed out. Had the doctor meant to be cruel? Perhaps not, but how could she take his words any other way?

She'd failed. Once again, she failed, earning no place among women who'd succeeded.

"Do you have any idea why this happened?" she asked. "Why it... continues to happen?"

Dr. Sawyer looked up. "It's a mystery. I've heard of such cases but you're the first patient of mine to experience it." He rubbed a hand along his smooth, Burma-Shaved chin. "Other than God's will, I can't determine why an otherwise healthy young woman would give birth to one hale and hearty infant, and then...and then..."

Even the doctor couldn't say it aloud. Claire cast her eyes toward the linoleum floor.

“Mrs. Miller,” he said. “Please look at me. I have something important to say.”

On the opposite side of the ward, a newborn mewled, then was quieted by its mother’s breast. Claire forced herself to meet the doctor’s eye.

Dr. Sawyer tapped a pen against her chart. “I think it would be best if you took steps to ensure this does not occur again.”

“Steps?” Claire shook her head. “I don’t know what you mean, doctor.”

“You must make sure you never again become pregnant.” Dr. Sawyer shifted in his chair. “Mrs. Miller, I cannot say why this happens to you. Even if it is God’s will, I can’t imagine it’s His will that it continues.” He looked heavenward, then back at her. “And God, in His infinite grace, has given us tools to prevent such circumstances.”

Claire sat up straighter, wincing at the stitches between her legs. “Do you mean an operation?”

He nodded. “In cases such as yours, the recommendation is tubal sterilization. You would remain here for the surgery. After the procedure, you would be required to stay a week for recovery.”

“A week?” Claire’s jaw dropped. “My husband is out of work. We can’t afford that.”

To her right, a radiator let out a hiss of vapor, a jeer directed toward Claire.

Dr. Sawyer wrapped his stethoscope around his neck. “In that case, Mrs. Miller, I suggest you keep your relations to a minimum,” he said. “Only when your husband desires them. And when he does, make sure to use protection.” He stood, giving her a stern look. “It’s *your* job to safeguard yourself, Claire.”



After the doctor left, Claire attempted reading the novel her sister-in-law had brought that morning—dear, practical May, who knew without asking that Claire would prefer the gift of an Agatha Christie murder mystery to nauseating, falsely celebratory flowers. But despite the spookiness of *The Murder at Hazelmoor*, Claire couldn't keep her mind on it.

To her left, a choking sob broke out. Claire swiveled her head. Hunched in the iron bedstead beside Claire's, the woman was a slip of a thing, knees up and thin legs tented under the wool blanket. She wore a carnation pink satin bed jacket. Beneath a waterfall of straight hair, her face was buried in her hands.

Claire leaned toward the woman. "Are you all right?" When her neighbor shook her head without raising it, Claire inquired, "Might I help?"

The woman didn't respond. Claire slid out of bed. She padded across the three feet separating their beds and sat beside the woman, who looked up as the mattress settled under Claire's weight.

"My baby..." The woman dropped her hands into her lap. "My daughter, Evelyn...she's..."

Oh, heavens. Was it possible that another woman in this ward, someone besides herself, had lost a child? A surge of blood roiled throughout Claire's veins. She considered retreating to her own bed, keeping her head turned away from the woman. Pretending, until one or the other of them was discharged, that the woman to her left did not exist.

Instead, she took the woman's thin hand in hers.

"She's in the Unwell Infants ward," the woman explained, and Claire's heart slackened. The child was alive, at any rate. "She was born too early.

She weighs less than three pounds, and they don't know..." She blinked. "The doctor says she might not make it." She paused. "Or she might. He said only time will tell."

Claire tried to hide her frown. It didn't seem so bad. This was a fine hospital, exemplary care. If the child could be helped, there was no better place in all of Denver for her to be. She said as much to the woman, then added, "I'm Claire. What's your name?"

"Stella." Pulling her hand from Claire's, Stella wiped her eyes. "Thank you, Claire. I hope you're right." She looked out the window between their beds. "It's just...I fear you might not be."

What a Gloomy Gus. Insensitive, too. Dr. Sawyer had been seated between them, and in all likelihood Stella overheard Claire's conversation with him. Didn't she understand that Claire's situation was markedly worse?

"I'm sure it will be all right," Claire said. "They'll do all they can for her."

"I'm not allowed to hold her." Stella spoke as if she hadn't heard Claire. "Can you believe that? My own daughter, and I can't even hold her because I might make her more ill." She wrapped her jacketed arms around herself.

Claire shivered, wishing she'd remembered to include a bed jacket on the cautiously optimistic morning three days ago when she packed for her trip to the hospital. She glanced toward her suitcase, stowed beneath her bed. It contained a spare nightgown, her day clothing, and three tiny outfits David would never wear.

After her sons' births, she'd been permitted to hold each of them. Fathers generally were not allowed in the recovery room, but each time, Tom was brought in. He and Claire took turns cradling each of the boys—*Victor*,

Edward, David; Claire chanted their names silently inside her head—until the nurse came in and told them it was time to say goodbye. Once, twice, three times, a son of Claire’s had been removed from her arms.

Claire looked heavenward. Then she repeated to Stella, “I’m sure it will be all right.”

Stella shook her head. “No, you don’t understand.” She swallowed. “I’m being punished.” Her full lips puckered.

Claire tilted her head. “Whatever for, Stella?”

Stella closed her eyes, then reopened them. “I’ve never told anyone this before,” she whispered. “No one knows.”

Claire waited. Finally, her voice low, she asked, “Do you want to tell me?”

In the corner, the radiator hissed again. Stella leaned toward Claire until their noses were almost touching. “A few years ago,” she said, “before I became pregnant with Evelyn, I had...I had...” Her voice dropped. “I had an abortion.” Leaning away from Claire, speaking quickly, she said, “I can’t know for sure, of course, but I’m certain the baby would have been a girl.” Stella’s whisper was so low, Claire barely heard her as she added, “Evelyn’s big sister.”

Claire sat back. She couldn’t fathom such a thing. Claire, who had grown up a lonely child, the much-younger sibling of a frosty, poker-faced brother, couldn’t imagine not wanting a child. Could not imagine—she shuddered as the phrase traversed her consciousness—aborting a child. How could she comprehend such a thing when she’d always longed to mother a large family? She recalled her wedding night, when she’d sent up a silent prayer for children, so many children. Especially daughters. Claire would be

Marmee March, raising a flock of lasses who sometimes squabbled but were also the dearest of friends.

Forcing herself to keep her eyes on Stella's, she asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I was in my final year of college," Stella said. "We were newly married but had agreed to wait to start a family. I wanted to graduate first." She blinked. "It was selfish. I was thinking only of myself." She looked out the window again. "I never told my husband. Even though we'd agreed to wait, he'd have been furious. He never would have understood how important it was for me to get my degree."

Claire thought of her daughter, Kitty. The girl was so bright—a bookworm, a future intellectual. Before she started kindergarten, Kitty had already been reading poem and verse—A.A. Milne's *Now We Are Six*, Rachel Fields's *Taxis and Toadstools*. Now in second grade, Kitty had never brought home a report card with less than an A on it. Claire hadn't gone to college and neither had Tom, but she wanted nothing more for Kitty than an education. A path to any future Kitty chose for herself.

"Did you do it?" she asked Stella. "Did you get your degree?"

Stella nodded. "I have a bachelor's degree in metallurgical engineering, if you can believe that. I work at a foundry, doing testing and quality control." She smiled. "I adore my job. My mother was going to care for Evelyn so I could keep working. Maybe she still will, if...if..." She trailed off. "But I wouldn't have my degree and my job, if I'd had my...other daughter." She shook her head. "I feel so guilty. My work seems meaningless in comparison."

In her heart, Claire concurred. If it were her, were Claire, she knew she'd find a college degree and a job meaningless in comparison to becoming a

mother. But those were *her* choices, not Stella's—and under the circumstances, agreeing with Stella would be more than unkind. So Claire simply said, "I've never met a woman engineer before."

"There are few of us. But it doesn't matter anymore." Stella frowned. "I don't believe in God but I do believe in karma."

Claire, who did believe in God but sometimes questioned His motives, said, "I don't know what that is."

"Karma," Stella repeated. "The idea that everything happens because of something we do." She met Claire's eyes. "The idea that our choices determine our fate." She lowered her long lashes. "I made a choice, and now Evelyn might not make it because of that choice."

Claire considered this. What was worse—Stella's choice or her own continual failures? And was this karma notion to blame for the loss of Claire's sons? Were the boys stillborn because Claire had secretly hoped they'd be girls?

She rose. "I believe Evelyn will become strong and healthy," she said, patting the other woman's hand. "I have a good feeling about it."

A crusty pink beach of tearstained skin bordered the dark pools of Stella's eyes. "Do you?"

"Absolutely." In truth, Claire wasn't at all sure about such a thing. But what else was there to say?

She stepped across the icy floor to her own bed and tucked herself in. "Get some rest, Stella. I'm going to do the same." She glanced around at babies, at mothers, at roses and gardenias. "Everything will be okay."



For the third time, Claire returned from the hospital empty-handed. While she was still in the Maternity ward, Tom had explained to Kitty that her baby brother went to heaven. It was the first time he'd had to speak of such matters to her; with Victor and Edward, Kitty had been too young to truly comprehend what was going on, thank goodness for small blessings. As it was, Claire's impulse was to hide away from her child in shame—but she rallied when Kitty handed her a handmade Welcome Home card and offered to read to her from a library book, *Little Anne of Canada* by Madeline Brandeis.

In the ensuing weeks and months, Tom continued searching in vain for work. His previous experience was in factories, and with industrialism diminished and unemployment in Denver over twenty percent, opportunities were lacking. Two months after losing David, the Millers moved from their spacious duplex into a tiny one-bedroom apartment on South Sherman Street. For privacy, Claire hung a curtain splitting the shoebox-sized bedroom into two, with Kitty's cot on one side and Tom and Claire's bed on the other. They had a modest savings account, accumulated during the period when Tom, steadily employed at a dairy plant, had taken the streetcar downtown each Saturday to deposit his paycheck at Colorado National Bank—two dollars in the savings account, the remainder in checking to cover household expenses. But now their savings, like the days and months and years, was draining away.

They celebrated Kitty's eighth birthday with a pound cake sorely lacking in sweetness; in an effort to economize, Claire halved the sugar the recipe called for. The little girls at Kitty's party each ate one piece, but none accepted Claire's invitation to take seconds.

Three days after Kitty's birthday, Tom turned thirty. Following dinner that evening, the Millers ate the crumbly leftovers of Kitty's cake. Then Tom abruptly excused himself, scraping his chair back and saying he was going for a walk. He didn't return until bedtime.

Claire washed up and put her daughter to bed. Her husband was an earnest man, a hard worker, and she wouldn't begrudge him a beer or two at the local tavern on his birthday. But his joblessness was an inescapable fact. She'd offered to look for employment herself, but Tom wouldn't hear of it, saying it was his job to provide for his family. Claire understood; it was the nature of diligent men like Tom to want to be breadwinners, even in desperate times. While they were hopeful for a new president when the election occurred in November, that was months away. And who knew whether this Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the governor of New York who looked like a shoo-in as the Democrat candidate, could deliver on his promises? Could this "New Deal" Roosevelt proposed truly improve circumstances for ordinary folks in a town as far-flung from Washington as Denver, Colorado?

Not long after Tom's birthday, Claire turned twenty-nine. Still young, she told herself. Still healthy.

Still the mother of only one child.

Still. Still. Still.



The first week of May, Claire missed a period. She tried not to panic. She'd religiously used the rubber diaphragm Dr. Sawyer fitted her with. The missed period resulted from excessive fretting, she told herself. But after

another month passed—the first heat wave of summer exacerbating Claire’s tender breasts, fatigue, and nausea—she had to face the truth.

She couldn’t bear the thought. Another growing child who would never use its lungs. Would it be a fourth boy? Or the little sister Kitty should have but never would?

For six sleepless nights, she deliberated. Then she walked to the Piggly Wiggly and asked to borrow the telephone, calling May to see if she might come over that evening.

Tom’s little sister May, at the age of twenty-six, enjoyed the remarkable trait of singlehood despite being exceptionally pretty and, over the years, receiving numerous proposals—at least four of which Claire was aware. May managed the school district’s maintenance office, coordinating repairs for every school in the city. A valuable position, a job May claimed she would not give up just to marry some man. “He’d have to be a helluva fella,” she’d said.

Smart, sensible May would know what to do.

“I know what you’re thinking,” May said when Claire confessed her condition and asked for May’s help. “But it’s illegal. And dangerous.”

Claire put a hand on her belly. “This is dangerous, too, May.” Her chin quivered. “I can’t do it again.”

May regarded her. “You know, Claire,” she said, “there’s a simple operation that can be performed on a man to prevent him from impregnating his wife. A doctor can do it in his office. The man can go home that very day. He can be up and about in two days’ time.”

Claire hadn’t known. Dr. Sawyer had made no mention of an operation that Tom might have. He only talked about the surgery he could perform on her.

She hung her head. May wrapped a slender arm around her. “My sweet sister-in-law,” she said. “It’s not your fault no one told you.”

Claire cast her eyes on the floor under the kitchen table. Kitty’s worn, too-tight school shoes were beneath her seat. Thank heavens the school year just ended. With summer’s arrival, the girl could run around barefoot for two months.

“Listen to me,” May said. “We’ll take care of this. And when it’s done, we’ll talk together to Tom.” She squeezed Claire’s shoulder. “My brother is an honorable man. He’ll see reason and do what’s right.”

Focusing her eyes on Kitty’s right shoe buckle, Claire nodded.

May said, “I can give you a telephone number. But you’ll have to go alone. I can’t risk my job by going with you. I can’t risk being seen there...”

She trailed off. When Claire glanced up at her, May looked toward the floor. The pair of them reminded Claire of a wind-up tin toy Kitty had loved when she was small. It was shaped like a railroad handcar and featured two brightly painted, smiling workers pushing and pulling a lever. When one went up, the other went down.

Had May, at some point, assisted a friend—or assisted herself? Claire didn’t ask. Best not to know.



Women gossiped; it was the nature of women. From the stories she’d heard, Claire expected a squalid apartment building, complete with unlit stairwells and quarrelling voices behind thin doors. Or a room in a disreputable hotel, a filthy boardinghouse, or some such dire location. Before setting out she

steeled herself, presuming the worst but knowing it couldn't be worse than nine months carrying a baby who would die upon birth.

But the address turned out to be a modest brick office building on North Broadway. Inside the door marked 304 was a waiting room with two vacant wooden chairs and a receptionist's desk. Behind the desk sat a middle-aged, bespectacled woman who greeted Claire and said her name was Ruth.

"Take a seat and fill out this form," Ruth said, handing Claire a wooden clipboard with a single sheet of paper.

Puzzled, Claire obeyed. She hadn't expected a place that looked and functioned like a regular doctor's office. The form, too, was ordinary: basic medical information, how far along Claire was, and so on.

Notably absent were questions about Tom. Since her wedding, Claire had never filled out a doctor's form that didn't require her husband's information.

Ruth scanned Claire's filled-out form, then ushered her into a small interior room. She took Claire's vitals, pressed her hands to her breasts and abdomen, and reached underneath Claire's dress to put a stethoscope against her belly. Silently, she nodded.

In the waiting room, Ruth opened an appointment book. "Let's get you scheduled." When she glanced up at Claire, her eyes were kind. "As soon as possible, dear."

When Claire returned several days later, she had the required sixty dollars in hand. May had given it to her. The amount represented two months' rent on the Millers' apartment. Thank heavens for May.

In the interior room, Ruth instructed Claire to put on a cotton hospital gown. From there, she was escorted to a larger room with an examination table. After Claire was settled on the table, Ruth wrapped a white towel

around the top of Claire's head and her eyes. "The doctor will be with you soon," Ruth said.

Footsteps crossed the floor. The door opened, then shut, leaving silence. Claire resisted the urge to tear off the towel. Was she blindfolded so she couldn't see what was happening, she wondered—or so she couldn't see the doctor's face? She balled her clammy hands together and pressed them against her abdomen.

The door opened and shut again. Claire heard the click-click of a woman's heels crossing the floor, and another female voice, not Ruth's, said, "Good morning, madam. We'll get started momentarily. Please lie back and try to relax."

There was rustling and gentle clanking—instruments, Claire thought. She considered asking for details but decided the woman likely wouldn't tell her. Besides, it was probably best not to know what the instruments were and precisely how they would be used.

"I'm going to put you to sleep," the woman said. "It won't take but ten seconds."

"Are you the doctor?" Claire asked. She'd never before been treated by a woman doctor and hadn't expected one today.

"I am," the woman confirmed. Claire felt her presence beside her. "And you should know that you're in good hands. I stay in business by running a safe setup, being discreet, and having friends in the police department."

"I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't have to," Claire blurted. "You see... you see...I've been pregnant four times before this, but only my eldest child lived. My other three babies...and...and..."

Under the wrap, she felt her eyes sting. She pressed her fingers against them.

Gloved hands alighted on Claire's and gently placed them at her sides. "I understand," the doctor said. After a beat, she added, "You don't need to explain your reasons to me, but you're not the first who has."

Claire nodded. "I just needed to say that. I...I'm ready now."

"All right," the doctor replied. "Take a deep breath and think good thoughts."

Something rubber was fitted over Claire's nose and mouth. Then everything went black.



Years later, on a chilly January morning in 1947—fifteen years to the day after David's birth—Claire sat in her kitchen drinking coffee and reading *The Rocky Mountain News*. The bright, sunny room was her favorite in the two-bedroom Tudor she and Tom bought after he finally got a steady job at Colorado Public Service Company in 1936. At the service company, Tom was on the assembly line, building electrical meters for homes. Union work, regular wages—enough to afford a house and save for Kitty's education. Last year, Claire's girl had graduated from the University of Denver. Watching Kitty accept her diploma, Claire put one hand to her heart before letting it meet her other, clapping louder than anyone else in the auditorium.

As for Claire herself, in addition to keeping house for Tom and Kitty, for nearly a dozen years she'd volunteered twice a week in the Unwell Infants ward at Denver General—the same ward where little Evelyn had fought for her life. Claire never needed to ask herself why she did it. Tom never asked, either.

Hands scrubbed, gloves on, mask secured over her nose and mouth—the opposite half of her face from that which had been covered when she'd lain

on a table behind the door marked 304—Claire fed infants, changed their tiny diapers, and whispered to them that they were loved, they were wanted, they needed to give life their all.

Claire checked her watch; she was due for her shift in an hour. She sipped coffee and turned the newspaper's page.

Then she gently set down her cup—as carefully as if it were one of the infants in the ward—and read the headline again.

“SMASHING DENVER’S ABORTION RACKET!”

The accompanying photo showed a woman and man from the back, walking up a staircase. The article ousted several abortionists in Denver, all of whom had performed abortions on women who suffered infections, sterility, or even death from the procedures.

Each of the named doctors was a man. Claire remembered the words spoken by the female doctor she'd gone to: *safe* and *discreet*—not to mention *friends in the police department*. She remembered the typed instruction card she'd been given, which explained how to care for herself after the procedure, not all that different from the aftercare instructions when her babies were born. She recalled the underlined words at the bottom of the card: *If you experience excessive pain, bleeding, fever, or any symptom that concerns you, call us immediately. Do not go to a hospital or another doctor.*

She'd experienced none of that. Was it Stella's karma—all these years later, whenever Claire thought of karma, she remembered Stella—that she'd been spared? Perhaps she'd already paid a sufficient price, or perhaps her unlived sons paid it for her. Perhaps, though, it was only random luck that Claire ended up where she did, instead of where the women in the newspaper article found themselves.

She recalled Tom's reaction when, a week after the abortion, she and May sat him down and explained what had occurred. She remembered her immense relief when he agreed to the in-office procedure that would prevent him from ever again impregnating her. "Of course, of course," he'd said, taking her in his arms. "Oh, Claire, I'm so sorry. If I'd lost you..." He shook his head. "I can't imagine life without you."

Claire turned back to the article. The chief investigator, it seemed, was hellbent on justice. Or would he call it karma?

When he questioned the women, some on their deathbeds—when he tried to pull an abortionist's name from them like a rabbit from a hat—did he ask for their stories? Did he inquire why they sought an abortion in the first place? Did he consider their lives, their families, their hopes and dreams? Or were they, for him, only a means to an end?

Claire stood, folding the newspaper in half and placing it in the rubbish bin. She washed her coffee cup and set it in the dish drain. Then she walked down the hall to her bedroom, putting her mind on the infants she'd still see, still soothe, still adore.

A Complaining Woman

Ed Penton's receding hairline and lightweight wool-blend suit were reflected in the high polish of his oak desk as he leaned forward, looking Kristina in the eye. "Surely you understand, Mrs. Hawke."

Kristina's toes, inside lace-up black oxfords and thick rayon stockings, curled into themselves. She'd retained the name and title—Mrs.—although Bill Hawke had been a drunk and a heel, and she was glad to be rid of him. After the divorce, she'd considered a triumphant return to her maiden name, but the fact remained that, even in the midst of war, *Miss O'Shea* would never have been offered the position of high school principal in an affluent bedroom community like Greenbrook, New York, the way *Mrs. Hawke* was.

Resisting the urge to fan herself with her hand, she glanced above Penton's office door toward the transom, which was open but let in little air. It was an August day a few weeks before the start of fall term, and Kristina had been summoned to Penton's law firm—he was Greenbrook's school superintendent as well as its most prominent attorney—for an early-

morning meeting. After thanking her for her “service to the community,” he’d instructed her to clear out her office at Greenbrook High.

“Surely you understand,” he repeated now.

“Mr. Penton, with all due respect, I do *not* understand,” Kristina said. “Why in heaven’s name am I losing my job?”

“Mrs. Hawke.” He regarded her as if she were a dimwitted child. “You signed a one-year contract, did you not?”

“An automatically renewing contract unless alternative notice is provided,” Kristina pointed out. “A contract which, until today, the board gave no indication would terminate prior to the upcoming academic year.”

Penton sat back in his leather chair and crossed his arms. “When you were hired, we explained that your predecessor, Mr. White, had volunteered for military service.” His pale blue eyes glistened. “Bob White is an exemplary public servant. Hometown boy, married, father of two sons. The youngest deacon in the history of Greenbrook Presbyterian. And not only our high school principal, but also coach of our division champion Greenbrook Grizzlies.” He beamed at a framed newspaper article on the wall showing a photograph of the football team and coach.

Kristina, who’d heard these accolades before—from everyone in town, it felt like, or at least every man in town—opened her mouth. But before she could speak, Penton continued. “Despite all he was contributing here, Bob volunteered to join our boys in Europe. What a patriot.” Penton turned his gaze to the American flag standing in the corner. “We all prayed for his return, and God has answered our prayers. As we speak, Bob is on a transport ship crossing the Atlantic.” Penton shrugged. “Naturally, we’re reinstating him. Who’d expect less?”

I would, Kristina thought.

She'd never met the man, but Greenbrook High teachers had confided to Kristina that White was an inexperienced, incompetent principal—not to mention a lech, according to the female teachers. “Bob White’s an imbecile,” one of them told Kristina. “Raises are based on how well you fill out the top of a dress, not how well you fill out a classroom report or lesson plan.” Her hands fluttered to her neckline. “Never mind if students and parents admire your teaching methods. Never mind if grades and college acceptances steadily rise under your tutelage, especially among female students. If you’re a woman, your merit in White’s eyes is based on how well you decorate this place, not how you teach.”

“Was his behavior ever reported?” Kristina queried. “Did anyone let the school board know?” But even as she asked the question, she understood its absurdity. No one on the all-male board would take such a complaint seriously.

Kristina, who'd never cared for the image of the principal's office as somewhere students only enter when summoned for discipline, made it clear from day one at Greenbrook High that she had an open-door policy, and students should see her not only as an administrator but also a sounding board. During the past academic year, more than one girl had sidled into her office, thanking her for being principal and confessing what a relief it was to no longer be under the thumb of Principal White.

“What do you mean by that?” Kristina asked.

“It’s just...he made me uncomfortable,” one girl replied. She glanced at her legs, bare above her bobby sox and saddle shoes. “He was always looking at my calves.”

“That’s uncalled for,” Kristina said. “If a thing like that occurs again—with anyone—you come here and tell me, okay?”

Another time, a girl spoke all in a rush, as if the words would run away from her if she didn't get them out. "He'd stare into the window of the first-floor girls' bathroom. He said it was to make sure we weren't smoking in there, but even after he could plainly see we weren't, he kept his face stuck in the window."

Kristina, observing the trembling hands in the girl's lap, saw in her mind's eye the words she'd write on a yellow notepad after the student vacated her office. "Thank you for telling me," she said. "I hope it helps to get it off your chest."

The girl smiled. "It does, Mrs. Hawke. Thank you."

If it was an isolated incident, a random report, that would be one thing. But Kristina began keeping a running list. Even the boys told her that White encouraged bullying and harassment, calling it "healthy competition among red-blooded American young men."

Now, in Penton's office, Kristina met the board president's watery eyes. His gaze darted away, and in that second, she questioned whether Penton knew this, too—knew all of it. Perhaps from his own daughters, a sophomore and a senior at the school. Both girls cheerleaders for the football team. *Go Grizzlies!*

Should she say something? In her mind's eye, she recalled the names on her yellow-notepad list. Penton's daughters were not among them. So maybe he *didn't* know.

Even so, Penton surely must realize Bob White was unqualified to lead the school. White, to Kristina's understanding, had been Greenbrook's football coach for several years before being offered the principal's job in the fall of '43. He held a bachelor's degree in business and had no formal

training as an educator. Prior to becoming principal, he'd managed his father's hardware store in town.

He served several months as principal before shipping out. A year ago June, he'd landed at Normandy. Last August, just after Kristina accepted the job as Greenbrook principal—relieving an interim who'd been hastily installed when White shipped out—the hometown hero rolled a tank into Paris, amid cheering crowds on the Champs Élysées. He then pressed onward into Germany. Stories of Bob White's valor filled the local paper; the high school hallways were plastered with copies.

He fought in Europe until Germany's surrender in May. Then he awaited a berth on a ship home. Over the summer, frustrated gossip around town centered on the clerical error that lowered White's priority points for demobilization, despite his length of service and the family awaiting his return.

But now he was on his way. Bob White had gone to war and was returning a hero—and that meant a lot. Especially in a town like this. Especially to the Greenbrook School Board and all the other the men in town.

"My understanding," Kristina pressed, "is that Mr. White does not hold a master's degree." She leaned forward, planting her feet on the floor and placing her hands on her knees. "In New York State, such a degree is required to be a principal at the secondary school level."

"Ah, yes," Penton agreed. "We're aware of that. With wartime personnel shortages at all levels in education, we bent the rules at the time of Bob's hiring. The school needed a leader—and Bob White was, and is, the man for the job." Penton folded his hands on his desk. "Now, with tuition waivers being offered to GIs, I'm happy to share that Bob will enter an

accelerated program to earn his master's in a year, while simultaneously assuming his prior position with us." His smile was beatific. "Isn't it wonderful, Mrs. Hawke, how the government is assisting our brave veterans?" His voice turned bubbly as a glass of Coca-Cola. "I'm sure your family, as well, will benefit. Your husband will soon return from overseas, will he not?"

Kristina tapped her foot. She'd never told anyone in Greenbrook she was divorced. Why bother, when they all assumed Bill was in Europe—which, for all she knew, he still was? "I could hold the position this school year as an interim," she offered. "To allow Mr. White to focus on his studies."

"Mrs. Hawke." Penton reached across the desk, taking her hand in his clammy one. "Again, we appreciate your service. I speak for the entire board in wishing you the best in your future endeavors, wherever they may take you." He dropped her hand. "And now, madam, I must bid you good day."



Kristina stepped outside Penton's redbrick office building into a morning muggy and hazy even before the clock on City Hall tower struck eight. She glanced around Main Street. Shrub roses, an uprising of late-bloomers in wooden planters neatly arranged along the street, overpowered in both scent and color. Fat bumblebees made their way from flower to flower, and only a slight breeze ruffled the foliage. The oak- and elm-lined street led three blocks up the hill to the high school and a half-mile down to the New York Central Railroad station and the glittering Hudson River. On the water, a sailboat glided northward and a steamer headed south toward the George Washington Bridge.

Veterans—Move to Greenbrook! Sunday advertisements in *The New York Times* and *New York Post* read. *Enjoy a spacious, brand-new home and a planned community a short commute from Manhattan and minutes from charming Downtown Greenbrook. Live the American Dream!*

Until this morning, Kristina had been considering buying a house in Greenbrook and living her own version of the American Dream. Not one of those massive Colonials they were putting up on the winding roads leading from the town center into the bucolic woods; such a house would be impractical for one person. But she'd recently spied a little place with a FOR SALE sign hammered into its yard, just outside downtown on a quiet, older street. Within walking distance to the high school, the blue clapboard cottage with its white picket fence was about as far from the penurious, alcohol-soaked digs Kristina grew up in—and, one might add, went on to share with Bill Hawke, different apartment but similar tableau—as a person could get. If she bought that cottage, she'd hang brightly patterned curtains in the windows and plant flowers in the yard. Maybe get a puppy; she was particularly fond of golden retrievers.

Damn, damn, damn. Kristina gripped the handle of her bronze-clasped, brown leather pocketbook. Despite the students' and teachers' claims, she wished Bob White no ill will. She appreciated what he and all the boys who served did for the nation. But couldn't he chase skirts around the aisles of his father's hardware store, instead of the high school hallways?

Did she have any recourse? Could she file a complaint with the state education department?

You can try, she heard her mother's voice in her head. *Don't give up, Kristina Eileen. You stay in there and fight.*

It was the voice she heard whenever she needed chinning-up. The resolute, take-no-prisoners voice of a woman who stood up for her beliefs. A woman who never quit.

It was the voice Kristina heard despite having little memory of what her mother's voice actually sounded like. The last time Kristina heard her mother speak was nearly thirty years ago, when she was three years old.



Mary O'Shea had been a Silent Sentinel. Over the years, Kristina had heard the tale from her Aunt Ellen so many times she could recite it in her head.

In November 1917, when Mary traveled by train with other members of the National Women's Party to Washington, standing outside Woodrow Wilson's White House holding a sign asking, "MR. PRESIDENT, HOW LONG MUST WOMEN WAIT FOR LIBERTY?" her daughter Kristina had just celebrated her third birthday. For months, while Mary had followed stories in the papers about the Silent Sentinels and other suffragists, she voiced her greatest desire—joining them—to anyone who'd listen. She scraped together train fare by taking in washing and pinching pennies at the market. Even so, Mary was only able to go because her sister, Ellen, agreed to add Kristina to her frenzied household of five children for a few days—the elder sister making it clear to the younger that she found Mary's trip frivolous and that Mary would owe her for the favor.

Regardless, Mary was grateful. Certainly, she could not ask her husband, Nolan, to watch Kristina. A bear of a man, vague in Kristina's memory as deficient not so much in congeniality as affection, Nolan was out of work—so many men were, during those times—but asking a man to mind his child

for three days was out of the question. Saints be praised that he permitted Mary to take the trip in the first place.

The Silent Sentinels had traveled to Washington throughout 1917 to engage in nonviolent protest. Housed by sympathetic Washingtonites, they held signs and stood silently on the sidewalk outside the White House—day after day, hour after hour, most remaining until they were arrested. By the time Mary arrived, dozens of women at previous protests had faced charges. Not unexpectedly, the same happened to Mary. She, along with a score of others, was accused of obstructing traffic.

“They could have paid a fine,” Aunt Ellen said. “They were given the option of payment or jail. I would have wired your mother the money—ten dollars, I believe it was.” She glanced heavenward. “Only the Good Lord knows where I’d have gotten it, with winter coming on. We’d have huddled under quilts and burned candles like peasants, what with no money for the electric meter. My children would have eaten nothing but gruel until the first crocus sprouted in March. But what’s a sister to do?” She tsk-tsked. “I can’t speak for the other ladies in Mary’s group, though my mind paints a picture of stalwart broads. Not your mother, though; her health was never good. For her, incarceration was a dreadful notion.” Aunt Ellen shook her head. “But Mary, along with her group, felt jail would make a stronger statement. So when a telegram arrived pleading for me to keep you until her release, what choice did I have?”

The group was taken to the Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia and tossed into a holding cell crowded with other women already detained. Prison rations were miniscule and repulsive; sleep was impossible. It was unclear how long their incarceration would last.

On the fourth night, guards stormed the cell. As would later be learned, in order to “show these ladies their place,” the guards were instructed by superiors to assault and abuse the suffragists. Women were beaten, choked, and kicked like dogs in the street.

Amid the ruckus, Mary was knocked unconscious. It was unclear what happened to her after that. “I don’t like to think on it,” Aunt Ellen said, crossing herself.

Already in ill health, Mary was taken to the infirmary. As soon as she recovered enough to travel, she was sent home. She and Kristina never returned to the apartment they’d once lived in with Nolan; upon hearing what happened, the man lit out. No one knew his whereabouts since.

As for Mary, she lay on Ellen’s settee for weeks, in and out of fever—little Kristina holding her mother’s hand for hours on end, asking Jesus to please make her well. He rejected Kristina’s prayers. Two days before Christmas 1917, Mary O’Shea succumbed to pneumonia.

Mary had named her daughter Kristina-with-a-K after the county from which her family hailed, Kerry. Over the years, as Kristina grew, the nuns at school questioned if Kristina was sure the spelling was correct. Other children taunted that with a name spelled such, she couldn’t truly be a child of Christ. Kristina bit back with words of her own—“Manky fekkers! Not worth the maggoty beds you sleep on.” But the taunting continued, a millstone Kristina wore around her neck in remembrance of the mother she could barely recall.



After Mary’s death and Nolan’s disappearance, there was no alternative but for Aunt Ellen and Uncle Conor to take Kristina in, jamming her into their

two-bedroom apartment with their five children in the factory town of Newark, New Jersey. On her cot in the children's room, bone-chilled under a threadbare quilt, Kristina hunched her knees to her chest. She pressed her ear to the mattress, turning away from Cousin Annie's onerous snoring, Cousin Bridget's incessant cough, and the grating tick-stop-tick of the wall clock down the hall in the kitchen. Nighttime curiosity about the moaning she heard from the bed of her only boy cousin, Finley, turned to disgust when, as a preteen, Kristina came to understand that such noises indicated Finley was jerking off.

"Shut up, eejits!" she whispered loudly toward the giggles of Maeve and Deirdre—sisters who shared a bed while Kristina, between them in age, slept alone.

"You shut up, *orphan*," Deirdre retorted. Maeve, bursting into a fresh round of titters, added, "Quit yer griping."

"Fekkers, one and all," Kristina muttered, covering her head with her quilt.

Over the years, whenever Aunt Ellen inspected Kristina—who didn't need to look in the mirror to know her aunt was assessing her sturdy build, her straight hair and beaklike nose, her small blue eyes and heavy brows—Ellen would pronounce, "Thank the Good Lord you're smart."

In response, Kristina held out her latest report card for her aunt's inspection. "All A's again," she said.

Aunt Ellen scanned the paper. "I'd expect no less."

Kristina waited for her aunt to remark on the *Conduct* section of the card, but Aunt Ellen said nothing. Kristina watched Ellen iron her daughters' Sunday best, their frilly dresses and satin sashes, passed from girl to girl as they grew. A blue sash stretched across the board brought to mind rippling

water on a clear-sky day—and Kristina, banned from the hand-me-down line for all but the most common work dresses, couldn't resist reaching toward its smoothness.

Aunt Ellen snatched the freshly ironed sash from Kristina's fingers, spreading it carefully across the shoulders of Cousin Maeve's white Sunday dress on its wire hanger. "Smart but overly curious," she said.

"But it's so pretty," Kristina protested. "I just wanted to touch it."

Aunt Ellen set down the iron.

"Listen to me, girl." She leaned across the ironing board, cupping Kristina's chin in her hand. "Smarts are one thing, and you're fortunate to have them. But you'd be wise to keep your mouth shut and your head down." Kristina wriggled out of her grasp, and Aunt Ellen pulled the next garment from the wicker ironing basket. "Your mother's beauty permitted her to get away with a great deal, but you take after...well." She waved a plump arm toward Kristina. "Go on, now. You're going to need those brains of yours, so get to your homework, lassie. We could use fewer 'Asks too many questions' remarks on your report card—" *there it is*, Kristina thought — "but keep bringing home those A's. Because the Good Lord above knows you won't be able to rely on your looks."



Kristina achieved top grades year after year and, in 1932, was named valedictorian of her high school class. Earning a partial scholarship to Barnard, she spent the next four years commuting into Manhattan and scrabbling her way through university while waitressing late-night shifts in a Newark diner. From her classes, she learned pedagogy and uncovered her desire to become an educator. From her well-heeled classmates, she learned

imitation, cultivating the ability to speak as if she'd been born in a mansion instead of a tenement.

One by one, her girl cousins married and moved out of the family apartment. But Kristina, having nowhere else to go, continued sharing a bedroom with her bachelor cousin Finley long past the age when communal quarters for the two of them were appropriate. Nightly, Finley staggered home from the taverns and crashed into their room well after midnight, falling into a scattered heap on his bed or sometimes Kristina's. She took to sleeping with her hands tucked between her legs, whacking Finley's arm whenever he attempted to invade the territory that belonged only to her.

"Effin' bitch," he'd say, stumbling across the room to his own bed.

After graduating from Barnard, she landed a job teaching history and civics in a private high school in Manhattan, a co-op "run by commies and socialists," as Uncle Conor scoffed. While Kristina enjoyed her position and pupils, she knew a teacher's salary would never allow her to truly get ahead, not to mention out of the Newark apartment. She began investigating what it would take to get into secondary school administration. In New York State, a master's degree was required, and this time around Barnard was out of the question—but City College had a program, and by taking a second job as a night clerk in a midtown hotel, she calculated that a master's degree in educational administration was an attainable goal.

In spring 1941, when Kristina was nearly halfway through the two-year program at City College, a tall, slick-haired young man began working as custodian at the school where she taught. *There goes the dreamboat*, some of the faster female students whispered to one another when he passed in the hallways.

One Friday evening after everyone else had left while she remained at her desk grading term papers on the history of American economics, he paused in her classroom doorway, mop in hand. “Would you care to join me for a cocktail after we’ve both finished our work?” he asked.

In his eye she detected a twinkle so exotic, so foreign to her—no one had ever looked at her this way before—there was no possible response besides yes.

His name was Bill Hawke. He was four years younger than Kristina, twenty-two to her twenty-six. His blue eyes were arresting. At the bar, she found herself only slightly disturbed watching him down bourbon after bourbon while she sipped a martini. Bill was attractive, funny, even courteous to the waitress—and he was the first man besides her cousin Finley ever to take a shine to her, if you could call Finley’s groping that. So when one date with Bill led to the next, who was she to say no?

She was smart enough not to marry him but did so anyway, both flattered by his attentiveness and desperate to get away from Finley. Settling into the South Bronx co-op Hawke had inherited when his parents passed, she felt grateful for the refuge if not for her fellow occupant, whose luster quickly wore off. There was the drinking, of course—could she never get away from it? Also, his obsession with personal hygiene; she’d never seen anyone brush their teeth so frequently. And his demands. Bill expected her to meet his needs in bed, tidy the co-op, iron his shirts and brush his suits to remove errant lint, and whip up dinner—all while attending to the necessities of her teaching job, taking classes at City College, and spending two nights a week at the hotel’s front desk. She’d have willingly attempted dinner—she’d always wanted to learn to cook, but Aunt Ellen never trusted her in the kitchen. But who had time?

When she mentioned that she could use his help around the house, Hawke came back with, “When you gonna stop bitchin’ about me and fix yerself up, ya old prune? Do you even own a pair of high heels, Kristina? Jesus Christ!”

In 1942, with her master’s secured but finding no available jobs at the secondary school level, she accepted the principal’s position at an elementary school in Queens, commuting from the Bronx each day and coping with a stunning lack of resources and dearth of teachers, due to men joining the armed forces and women taking higher-paying positions supporting the war effort. Then Bill was drafted, and in early 1943 they parted alongside other couples at the Brooklyn Army Terminal. When Bill whispered in her ear that he adored her and would think of her every moment, Kristina’s heart thawed. Their good-bye kiss was fervent.

She appreciated the quiet in the co-op resulting from his absence, which did indeed make the heart grow fonder. Recalling his passionate sendoff, she began to believe that she and Bill might patch things up when he returned. But six months later, a V-mail envelope arrived, in it a letter from Bill explaining that he’d “...fallen deeply in love with an Italian beauty, now expecting my child and with whom I plan to forge a future. Divorce papers will be served soon. Respectfully, please vacate my home at your earliest convenience. No hard feelings, I hope! Good luck, old gal. Cheers, Bill.”

She signed the divorce decree and rented an apartment in Queens, near her school. Daily, she checked the HELP WANTED ads. Being an elementary school principal paid little more than teaching, especially for a woman and especially in a New York City public school. The Greenbrook High principal’s job, materializing just before the one-year anniversary of her

divorce, was a godsend. Kristina well-nigh skipped out of the City and into her new community upstate.

Finally, it felt like things were on an upswing. Aunt Ellen was right—it wasn't about looks, and anyway, Kristina told herself, she didn't care what men thought of her. More than once she'd tossed around, like a brightly colored beach ball in her mind, the idea of dating women. Sadly, she felt zero attraction toward her own sex. More's the pity, because the pickings would have been better, at least in the City.

But her work in Greenbrook afforded neither the time nor the liberty for such shenanigans. Kristina kept her nose to the grindstone and concentrated on being the most competent, warm but authoritative high school principal the town had ever seen. She rented a modest apartment above a drugstore on Main Street. She bought a Waring Blendor Deluxe and a cast iron Dutch oven. In a small notebook she carried in her pocketbook, she jotted down the telephone number for the real estate agent listing the blue clapboard cottage. Last week, she'd tracked down a breeder near Mount Kisko who raised golden retrievers and told Kristina that a litter would be ready for new homes around Halloween.



Now she wasn't sure what to do. Could she persuade any of the female teachers to speak up about Bob White? After revisiting the running tally of offenses reported to her, Kristina contacted a few of them by telephone. They all declined, but each said they would recommend her for a principal's position elsewhere. "You're the absolute best," the freshman English teacher said. "I wish you were staying, Kristina."

The teachers' reluctance to speak up dissuaded her from even considering contacting students or parents. She did, however, write a letter to the New York State Education Department. Kristina drafted the letter four times before typing it on her Royal portable, another item purchased to celebrate her new life in Greenbrook. She said that while she fully understood the one-year contract, she felt that based on her qualifications compared to Bob White's, as well as the commendation of teachers and students at the school, she was the more suitable candidate to continue in the position of principal at Greenbrook High.

On the last Monday in August, her apartment above the Redi-Drug was humid and sizzling. She'd just returned from treating herself to an ice cream float at the lunch counter downstairs when the postal carrier joined her at the building's mailboxes and handed her a letter. "Looks official!" he said, before striding off.

Kristina sweated her way upstairs and sat at her kitchen table to read.

Dear Mrs. Hawke,

We are in receipt of your letter of complaint dated August the seventeenth. We invite you to the State Education Building for a meeting to discuss the matter on Tuesday, August the twenty-eighth at ten o'clock in the morning.

Sincerely,

Wm. R. Brown, Assistant Commissioner of Education

She reached over to turn on the portable radio on her kitchen counter. Dinah Shore was singing "I'll Walk Alone."

Kristina stepped into the living room. She set her elbows on the windowsill and stuck out her head, trying to catch the scent of Russian sage planted in the yard of a house across the street. But she was too far away. One would have to be in the yard, preferably with one's garden-gloved hands pulsing in the warm earth, to enjoy those sensations.

Turning from the window, she switched on her desk fan and stood in front of it, leaning into the hot air moving across her hawkish brow.



Two days later, she stood in a park in Albany, gazing across Washington Street at the New York State Education Building. The neoclassical structure stretched an entire city block. Framing its massive center doors were two bronze statues, each composed of several children—one group at study, one at play—encircling the bases of two enormous electric lanterns. Three dozen Corinthian columns lined the building's facade. Had the columns been included in the design to delight visitors, Kristina wondered—or was their objective to intimidate?

Squaring her shoulders, she walked to the corner, waited for a green light, and crossed the street.

She was directed to a room on the third floor. Four men and a woman were seated on one side of a long mahogany table. A solitary, hardbacked wooden chair faced theirs. The men, largely indistinguishable from one another, ranged from about forty to sixty years of age. The woman, who appeared to be around Kristina's age, had a neat cap of dark curls, over which she wore a pillbox hat styled in red and navy-blue stripes of lightweight felt.

The man in the center of the row introduced the group not by name but collectively as the Complaint Review Board. “Please have a seat, Mrs. Hawke,” he said. “We’re prepared to discuss your complaint.”

Kristina removed a manila folder from her pocketbook and handed over a stack of materials: her Barnard and City College diplomas, documentation pertaining to her teaching position at the co-op school in Manhattan and her first principal’s job in Queens, a letter of recommendation from the borough of Queens school superintendent, and the letter she’d received from Ed Penton, formally terminating her contract. The letter concluded, “The Greenbrook School Board collectively agrees that Mrs. Hawke did a fine job during her brief tenure in Greenbrook. We thank her for her patriotic service, filling in for our war-hero principal, Robert J. White.”

The five studied her documents, passing them down the line. When the last person to read—the woman—had finished, the center man cleared his throat.

“All seems to be in order, Mrs. Hawke,” he said.

“Thank you,” Kristina said. “Mr....um...”

“But I’m not sure I understand your complaint.” Turning to his colleagues, he asked, “Do any of you understand Mrs. Hawke’s complaint?”

One by one, they shook their heads. Kristina noted that the woman took the longest to perform the gesture. Had not the little felt hat slipped a half-inch toward her left ear, her head shake would have been indiscernible.

Kristina clamped her fingers together, the better to prevent herself from drumming them on the mahogany table. “Sirs and madam,” she said. “As you can see from the submitted documents, my experience and qualifications surpass those of Mr. White. He lacks the educational credentials to be a principal. He’d never been a teacher, nor a principal,

prior to being hired for the position by the Greenbrook board. Then he served as principal for only a few short months before leaving for Europe.” She pressed her hand to her collarbone. “I, on the other hand, have a master’s degree in secondary school administration and nine years of experience, six as a classroom teacher and three as a principal. I’ve received praise from teachers, parents, and students at Greenbrook High. Even the head of the Greenbrook School Board commends my work in his district.” Kristina held up her hands. “The gist of the complaint is that I was terminated despite being vastly more qualified than Mr. White.”

Zipped inside her pocketbook was the list of student and teacher grievances against Bob White. Kristina clutched the pocketbook’s handles, tightening her grip in an effort to quell her longing to add, *And I’ve never, nor will I ever, acted inappropriately toward a student or teacher.*

The men on the Complaint Review Board exchanged glances. The woman kept her eyes on Kristina, who attempted to read what she might be trying to say without words. Finally, the woman broke her gaze and glanced out the window, opened to catch any slight breeze off the Hudson River, half a mile away. Then she turned back toward the table and straightened her spine. “I think that—” she began.

“Excuse me, Miss Palmer.” The man in the middle held up his hand. “If I might address Mrs. Hawke.” Before Miss Palmer could reply, he said, “Surely, Mrs. Hawke, you understand that these facts do not create a legitimate complaint. You were offered a one-year contract. You fulfilled said contract. As Mr. Penton took pains to note in his letter, the work you did was patriotic. You deserve praise for it, and we join the local school board in commending you.” As Kristina opened her mouth to speak, he held up his hand again. “But that work is complete.” His flicked fingers brought

to mind Aunt Ellen's dismissive waves. "Mrs. Hawke, you are indeed well qualified. I've no doubt you'll find another position, in due time."

"The school year begins next week." Kristina pointed out. "No district is hiring now."

Nodding, he pushed her papers toward her across the table. "Likely not, but something will come along eventually." His smile displayed a matching pair of snagged canines. "Now that the men are returning from Europe, many of our young female teachers are tying the knot and leaving schools to assume their rightful roles as housewives. I'm sure you could find a teaching position just about anywhere in the state."

Kristina cast her eyes onto the top sheet of her stack of papers—her City College master's degree. Looking up, she asked, "There's no additional recourse? Nowhere else I can make my case?"

The man seated second from the right spoke up. "Nowhere other than this board, you mean? Mrs. Hawke, we are the Complaint Review Board for the New York State Education Department. So unless you want to take your complaint to the Office of Education in Washington..." He shrugged. "Naturally, you are free to do so. But you'd be going on a wild goose chase. You'd spend your money and time on something entirely fruitless."

Kristina thought of her mother, Mary, scraping together pennies for train fare to Washington. Standing on the sidewalk outside the White House, sleety November day after sleety November day. Making her own case, and that of every woman in America, to the men in charge. Losing her health, and then her life.

Kristina stood. "I might just do that."

The men exchanged glances. Then all four laughed aloud.

“You go right ahead, Mrs. Hawke,” one man said. His shoulders shook with mirth.

Kristina swallowed. In the swallow, she felt all of it. The loss of Mary. The snubbing from her family. The abuse at the hands of Finley, and the glimmer of possibility brought on by Bill Hawke’s brief attentiveness—followed by his coldhearted airmail rejection.

The blue clapboard house and the not-to-be colorful curtains and the flower garden. The golden, soft-furred puppy. The sense of peace that seemed, for a brief period, within her grasp.

Kristina stood, followed by all the men. Then the female member of the board rose.

“Mrs. Hawke,” one of the men said. “Please know that we admire your service. And even...” He glanced at his male colleagues, smiling all around. “Even your moxie.” He turned back to her. “We wish you the best.”

Kristina didn’t reply. She spun on her heel and left the room, resisting with all her might the urge to slam the door hard enough to shatter its glass windowpane.



She’d exited the building and was crossing the portico toward the Corinthian columns when she heard her name. “Mrs. Hawke!”

Kristina turned, the shadow of a nearby column falling over her face. The female member of the review board held out her hand. “We didn’t properly meet. I’m Ronnie Palmer.”

Kristina shook her hand. “Miss Palmer.”

“Please, call me Ronnie.” She smiled. “My mother always wished I would use my full name, Veronica. But I prefer Ronnie.”

“Kristina.” She said her own name softly. They released hands.

“I wanted you to know, Kristina,” Ronnie said, “that I heard you in there. I heard you...and I understand.”

“Thank you.” Kristina didn’t know what else to say.

“You’re an intelligent woman,” Ronnie went on. “I don’t need to tell you what’s happening here. But Frank Hoffman in there was right; you’ll land on your feet. Just not...”

“Just not at Greenbrook High?” Kristina replied. “Or as a secondary school administrator in some other well-paying, well-heeled district?”

She appreciated Ronnie’s truthful nod. “Just not that. But sometimes, what appears optimal at first glance doesn’t work out as such anyway.” She touched Kristina’s sleeve, her fingers light on the fabric. “I suspect there’s somewhere else you might make even more of a difference.”

Kristina closed her eyes. She was tired, so tired, of trying to make a difference. All she wanted was peace. She wanted what her male counterparts took for granted: a sense of security, her American dream realized. Not to mention the ability to claim that security as entirely due to her own hard work.

How, Kristina wondered, did her mother keep up the fight? How did she keep going until the price, eventually, was her life?

“Kristina,” Ronnie said, and Kristina opened her eyes. “Over time—I hope—things will be different.” Dropping her hand from Kristina’s sleeve, she patted her patriotic little hat.

Hope, Kristina thought. What a curious word. Was it *hope* that compelled Ronnie to serve on the Complaint Review Board—a token woman with little-to-no voice? Did Ronnie hope that someday her male colleagues

might finally hear her? Or, barring that, did she hope to mentor another woman, perhaps of a younger generation, whose voice might count?

Was *hope* the thing Mary believed in? Kristina's mother hadn't lived to see women gain the right to vote. She hadn't lived to see her daughter become educated, become a high school principal. Even so, had Mary kept going by summoning that most elusive of all elusive notions: *hope*?

Traffic whizzed by. Breezes from the Hudson ruffled the women's skirts as they faced each other on the lengthy portico.

Kristina could hope. Or she could act.

At the moment, she was unsure which notion would prevail. All she knew was that she had a train to catch. And tomorrow, another day to face.

"Good-bye, Ronnie," she said. "Good luck with your work on the board."

Oxfords echoing on the portico's tiles, Kristina marched across the space and down the building's steps. After passing between the statues of studying children and playing children, she turned southeast, toward the train station. She did not look back.

A Possibility Nonetheless

Caro stood in the doorway of the place she and Gene were subletting on Mission Beach. From the transistor radio on the kitchen table, she heard the folkish, twelve-string sound of “Mr. Tambourine Man” by some band called The Byrds who, until a few months ago, nobody’d heard of.

Her gaze traveled westward. The setting sun glittered on the waves, and the sea was a luminous, dark blue. “The Pacific,” she breathed. “My first-ever view of the Pacific Ocean.” She stepped outside, taking in the salty scent.

Gene came up behind her, nuzzling his face into her long curly hair. Pulling the tresses to one side, he kissed her neck. “Go on, mama. Check it out.”

She turned into his arms. “Don’t you want to come?”

He shook his head. “I’m in California now. I’m inspired to write. Just like Kerouac.”

Gene devoured everything by Jack Kerouac. Throughout the past week, as they’d driven across the country, he’d scored copies at tag sales, used

bookstores, the Salvation Army—and even, when they were passing through Denver, in a crate beside a garbage can in an alley. The beat-up paperback of *Big Sur* was a major find; when Gene returned to his parked VW Bug where Caro was resting, curled up in the back seat, his eyes shone and he held the novel aloft like a trophy.

Now, Caro took off her shoes and stepped across the concrete patio outside their new pad. It was a late October evening and she wrapped her arms around herself, glancing back at the weathered frame apartment building—six units on two squat floors. Other four-, six-, and eight-unit complexes, a couple of cheap-looking motels, and an array of tiny, salt-beaten houses dotted this stretch of beach. She crossed the boardwalk, climbed over the cement seawall, and cantered over the sand to the water's edge.

Rolling her blue jeans to her kneecaps, she dipped in her feet. The late-October Pacific was icebox cold, but warmer than the New England Atlantic she'd grown up beside, back in Rhode Island. Swaths of kelp littered the beach and floated on the waves. She waded into the water until her jeans were soaked at the cuff, then stood with hands on hips, staring across the horizon. "The Water is Wide" came into her head, Pete Seeger's rendition. It was a song about new love growing old, sometimes losing its permanence—but that, Caro was certain, would never happen to her and Gene.

There were no swimmers in the water, but Caro spied two surfers, both covered neck to toe in dark, skintight suits, something she'd never seen before. Facing the beach, straddling their boards, they seemed to belong to some large, amphibious species—creatures of the Pacific, unlikely to thrive out east. They looked over their shoulders, and when a high wave crested,

they rose onto their boards. Mesmerized, Caro watched them skim side to side, toes balanced on the front of the wooden boards, until the wave broke near the beach and they fell into the foam. They came up whooping with delight, then splashed back out, eager for their next ride.

Caro recalled a magazine article she'd seen some years ago, not long after she moved to New York. Waiting for a downtown Number Six train, she'd picked up a discarded copy of *Life* from a subway station bench. The cover photo showed the Washington Monument in the distance, and in the foreground, a dark-haired woman in a modest, white two-piece dress—the wife of the newly inaugurated president, Jack Kennedy. The center spread was a story about Jackie's decorating choices for the White House.

Her train delayed, Caro thumbed through the Kennedy story with disinterest. Then she came across an article titled “The Mad Happy Surfers,” about the new California craze: surfing. Caro had studied the photos of “hot doggers”—expert surfers, the article explained. Like the surfers she saw tonight, they looked as if they belonged more to the water than the land.

Surfing, California, the Pacific—it felt like a million miles from the overheated subway station, reeking of piss and cigarettes. Hearing the rumble of the train's arrival, Caro rose from the bench. She left the magazine lying there, but she never forgot that article.

Now, she had an impulse to strip down to her panties and dash into the water. Swim out and ask the surfers if she could give it a try.

Well, why not? She untied the red scarf around her neck and removed her shirt, tossing both on the sand.

As she began unzipping her jeans, a burst of laughter made her turn her head. Nearby, a dozen or so people—men, women, and children—were

settling in with a bonfire and blankets. Someone had a guitar; another cat tuned a banjo, and a third began lightly beating drumsticks on a guitar case—a makeshift, one-man percussion section. The candied scent of grass drifted toward Caro. The guitarist strummed the chords to “Puff, the Magic Dragon,” and voices rose on the wind.

Heart pounding and surfing forgotten, Caro stared at the group. She could run back to the apartment, grab her Martin guitar. See if they’d let her jam.

Caro watched a woman dance with a small girl. The golden hue of the child’s hair caught the firelight, glittering as she was led across the sand. The woman—resplendent in a gauzy, low-cut white dress—pulled the child toward her. The little girl nuzzled her face into the woman’s belly.

Bare-chested—she never wore a bra—Caro approached the group. But before she reached them, Gene’s voice broke across the sand.

“What the hell are you doing?” He grabbed her arm. “Where’s your shirt?”

Caro glanced down at her tits. “I took it off.” She waved toward the water’s edge. “It’s over there.”

“Why’d you take it off?”

“I was going to go for a swim.”

“A swim?” Gene said. “Are you crazy? That water is freezing.” He stepped closer, examining her eyeballs. “Jesus, Caro—tell me you’re not high.”

Vigorously, she shook her head. “I just wanted to swim.”

“That’s idiocy, mama.” His grasp was so tight, it made her thin arm appear ghostly. “You know what happens when people do dumb shit like that? You get caught in a riptide or get hypothermia, and nobody’d ever find you.” He looked toward the water. “It’s goddamn black as night out there.”

Caro turned her gaze to the inky sky. “It wasn’t this dark when I had the idea to...” She glanced toward the area where she’d seen the surfers, but they’d either come back to shore or were no longer visible on the water. “To swim.”

“It’s dark as hell now!” Gene yelled. “I could barely find you out here. What the *fuck*?”

She flinched, stepping away from him. Then she touched his hand, the one gripping her arm. “Baby, I was fine. I was just checking out the surf.” She pointed. “Right over there—you can see my shirt on the sand. That’s where I was.”

Gene glanced where she pointed. “I come out here,” he raged. “I come out here and you’re walking across the sand—topless—to crash some party!”

“Gene, stop. You’re shouting.”

“Damn right I am! I’ll shout all I goddamn want to! *I—don’t—give—a—fuck!*”

The music stopped and every man, woman, and child turned to stare.

“Gene, please. Don’t freak out, baby.” Caro leaned into him. “It’s okay. Let’s go back to the pad.”

She took his hand and led him across the beach. Beside her discarded shirt, she stopped, facing Gene.

“I only want to be with you,” she said. “Nobody but you.” Pulling Gene’s t-shirt over his head, she pressed her body against his. Gene’s warm skin heated hers.

“Jesus, Caro,” he breathed.

Caro released him, picking up her shirt and scarf. “Let’s go, baby.”

She turned away from the water—knowing that, like a besotted character from a Colette novel, Gene would follow her anywhere. As long as the path

led to her bed.



They spent the next few days sleeping in, strolling the beach, and walking up and down Mission Boulevard searching for HELP WANTED signs. Buses made their way along the boulevard, and there were a few restaurants and bars, a couple of filling stations, one or two small markets, and multiple souvenir shops, most of them closed.

Gene and Caro peered into a dusty bar where old men hovered around a radio while the bartender poured pint glasses of draft beer. “There’s no scene in this town,” Gene said. “Those fellows look like they’ve been sitting there since FDR was in office.”

Caro recalled the group on the beach. Three days had passed, and she hadn’t seen them again. She squeezed Gene’s hand. “There might not be a scene, but you gotta admit it’s pretty. And it smells much better than New York.” She lifted her chin, sniffing the salty breeze. Then she angled herself toward Gene. “It *is* much better than New York,” she added.

His smile warmed her. “You’re right, mama. It’ll be okay.”

It didn’t take long to comprehend how ill-timed their cross-country move had been. Before arriving in California, they’d agreed that when it came to work, there was no need to be picky; they were open to anything that would bring in some dough. But it was low season in the beach town, and most businesses had let staff go. SEE YOU NEXT SPRING! read cheerfully lettered signs in the windows of darkened, closed-up shops.

Gene had paid rent through November on the sublet pad, and they had a few groceries. There was half a tank of gas in the Bug, and in Gene’s

wallet, a sum Caro was unsure specifically about but knew wasn't sizable. She, personally, was down to her last few dollars.

Well, they'd figure it out. The important thing was that she was clean now. She'd detoxed her way across the country, curled into a sweating, jittery ball in the back seat of the Bug—cold turkey, feeling like shit the entire time. But it worked.

It all happened so quickly, the transition from her old life to this life. One night less than two months ago, she'd been half passed out at three a.m. in the hallway of an apartment building in Hell's Kitchen. It was a building she couldn't identify but knew she didn't live in. It was a building far from the life she'd tried to create when she ran away to Manhattan at age seventeen, renaming herself from Carolyn into the snappier Caro, the first step toward realizing her dream of becoming a musician and songwriter—all too soon discovering how many others were chasing the same dream. Caro still had that dream, would always have that dream, but as Manhattan swiftly taught her, a pretty face took an assiduous girl further than any amount of talent or creative dedication. A pretty face introduced a girl to people—mostly men—who could help her. The smile on her lips and the clothes on her body got a determined girl the occasional gig. They bequeathed her an introduction here or there that might, someday, lead to her big break.

A pretty face opened a girl's doors. Provided she didn't do anything stupid, that is.

But in New York, where so much felt possible—until it didn't—stupid turned out to be the easiest thing to come by. In the dim, putrid hallway, she could smell someone's shit, but exactly how far the shitting had occurred from where she lay, Caro couldn't tell. The Martin's case served as her

pillow. Her dress was half torn off by who knows who, and her last shower was a distant memory. When a skinny dude with a tattered paperback copy of *On the Road* hanging out of his denim jacket pocket bent low, pushed her hair back from her forehead, and asked if she needed help, Caro knew, through the vapor fogging her brain, that she'd just met the most unlikely of all unlikely saviors.

Gene was a partier—who wasn't?—but he'd never been hooked on the junk like she was. When he suggested, after they'd been together a few weeks, that they cut out and head for California—he had a line on a used car and knew a guy who would sublet them his beach place in San Diego—she'd have been a fool to refuse.

Out here, they were both living clean. Grass most nights, sure; they had a decent supply they'd brought from New York, and beer for Gene—but that was nothing. If there was junk in this town, Caro didn't know how to find it. Nor did she want to know.

In the evenings while Gene wrote, Caro perched atop the picnic table outside the pad, playing music. She was working on a new chord style, similar to something she'd heard on the radio by a new-on-the-scene Canadian folk singer named Joni Mitchell. Caro found Joni's open chord work acoustically appealing. She spent hours each evening with her Martin, determined to teach herself. She played until midnight, while Gene scribbled page after page in his notebooks. When he called to her—*come inside, mama, I need you*—she went to him, slipping out of her clothing and into his arms.

It would be okay, she thought as they held each other, nude bodies pressed together on the mattress on the floor, wrapped in a cotton blanket. Just like

Gene said that day outside the bar on Mission Boulevard, it would be okay. They had each other, and everything would work out.

But Gene's mood vacillated. "Yet another existential crisis," he said one morning, tossing *The San Diego Union-Tribune* and its limited Want Ads to the floor. "What will the young man—the man in his prime—do with his life? How shall he become gainfully employed? What does a guy need to do, Caro, to earn an honest day's living in this town?"

He didn't mention what neither of them wanted to discuss: the draft. In July, President Johnson had more than doubled the number of drafted men, raising the total from 17,000 to 35,000 a month. If—no, *when*—the draft board caught up with him, they would consider Gene, an unemployed college dropout, a fine candidate for shipping to 'Nam.



On Sunday, Caro walked north along the water a good two miles—past Pacific Beach, all the way to Law Street Beach, where she gazed at the harmonious, rolling surf. Her sense of peace was broken only by an enormous ship she spied on the horizon, the vessel's dark gray hull defying the brightness of the day. Was it a navy boat, Caro wondered—she knew the navy had a strong presence in San Diego. Was it a transport ship? Was that looming contrivance on the otherwise serene sea intended to carry soldiers toward obliteration in Vietnam?

Before turning back south, she fell to rapping with an older dude playing fetch with his Labrador retriever. Hurling a red rubber ball across the sand, watching the dog tear after it, the dude told Caro that Law Street was a popular area for beginner surfers. "Great waves for learning," he said.

“Measured and steady, not a lot of surprises. It’s like God ordered up this spot just so’s everyone could try surfing.”

Caro nodded. Walking back, she thought—maybe next spring when the weather warmed, or maybe clad in one of those suits she’d seen surfers wear—she might rent a board and attempt surfing at Law Street Beach. Who knows? Perhaps it would become her new addiction.

Stepping barefoot through the shallow water below Crystal Pier, soothed by the steady pull of waves lapping against the pilings, she considered how far San Diego was from New York—and the junk. Thinking about the way Gene had brought her here, had saved her from herself, Caro felt her heart swell with gratitude.

But when she got back to the pad, she discovered Gene tossing his beat-up plaid suitcase—the same one he’d toted from Atlanta to New York, a Southern boy on a quest to find himself in the big city, as he’d explained when he and Caro met; the same weathered suitcase he’d used for their cross-country trip to Mission Beach—into the front-hood trunk of the Bug.

Caro tilted her head. “What are you doing, baby?” she asked.

He glanced at her. “Hey, there, mama. I didn’t expect you back this soon.” Closing the Bug’s trunk, he cast his eyes toward the pavement. “I wanted to tell you, but I thought it would be better this way.” He ran both hands along his thighs, palms pressed into brown corduroy pant legs. “I left a note on the kitchen table. And some bread—a twenty.”

She shook her head. “What the hell is going on?”

Taking her arm, he propelled her toward the pad. “Let’s go inside.”

Seated beside her on the cracked fake-leather couch, Gene said, “I have something to tell you.”

Gene, it turned out, planned to head to San Francisco. “For a couple of weeks,” he explained. “Maybe more.”

Caro pushed curls back from her forehead. “I don’t understand.”

“I heard from Frog,” Gene said. “He’s moved to Frisco. He says it’s where it’s at. The new scene. He says I gotta get up there, check it out.” Gene’s eyes were shining. “Frog said he saw Ginsberg and Orlovsky walking down the street hand in hand. And it’s cool, mama, cool for them.” Gene laughed. “Don’t get me wrong, baby—you wouldn’t catch me holding hands with a dude. But I think it’s cool two dudes can do that there, and nobody bats an eye.”

“Yeah. Cool.” She half-rose from the couch. “So we cut out and head north. Let me pack my things.”

“No.” He grabbed her arm, pulling her back down. “I’m going by myself. A solitary searcher on a solitary road, dig?” He looked toward the screen door.

Loosening herself from his grip, Caro stood and looked down at him. “No. I don’t dig. I don’t understand.”

“Caro, don’t play dumb. This will be good for us.”

Caro was silent. Then she asked, “Are you unhappy, Gene?”

He got to his feet, facing her. “This place—it’s not for me.”

Caro thought about the gentle waves at Law Street Beach. The brilliant display of sunset colors that marked each day’s end while she sat outside and worked on her songs. How the stars, appearing one by one, made Caro want to play her Martin throughout the night.

But Gene was her man. That was more important than some nowhere, out-of-season beach town, no matter how satisfying it was to her senses.

“So we go.” Caro put a hand on Gene’s shoulder. His nerves were a buzzing factory of tension under her touch, and she flinched.

“We cut out—together,” she proposed, her voice speeding up as if it were a just-departed train that she could still catch. “We head north and give San Francisco a try.”

He shook his head and stepped away, jerking her hand off his shoulder. “It’s not going down like that.”

She looked at him for a long moment.

“You’re scared, aren’t you?” she asked. “You’re scared of the damned draft.” She took a single step toward him. “You can’t run away from it, you know. They’ll find you no matter where you go. You know that, don’t you?”

He grimaced. “Did you hear what Johnson did now? Lowered the intelligence standards. Used to be that you had to pass some sort of intelligence test or the draft board would reject you. Not anymore. Now any dumbass who can hold a rifle is eligible.” He shook his head. “Not that I was worried about being too dumb, but the thing is, Caro—what’s next?”

He was right. This stupid war and the damned draft. But unless he went all the way up to Canada—or maybe tried for Mexico; he was a lot closer now that they were in San Diego—continuing to run wouldn’t make it disappear.

“I understand why you’re scared, baby,” Caro said. “But we can get through this together.” Her chin quivered. “Right?”

He was silent. When he spoke again, his voice was tender. “Listen, mama. We were magic for a while, and that’s how it goes, dig? You go for the magic because who’d let that pass by? You chase that magic and you don’t let go until it lets go of you.” His eyes were kind. “It’s like a season. It’s a beautiful season while it’s going on. And then it ends and you can’t do

anything but let it go. *C'est la vie.*" He took her hand. "You're better now. You're going to be okay—with or without me."

Caro didn't know what to say. No man had ever left her before. Not one boyfriend in high school, not one lover since.

"So this is it?" she asked him hoarsely. "We're splitsville? Forever?"

"Seasons can come around again, right? This could be temporary." He dropped her hand. "All I know is, I need to go up there. I feel a driving desire to check it out."

Caro pressed her body against his. "Don't go without me." She wrapped her arms around his neck. "Anything that convinces you to take me along, I'll do it."

She pushed her hips into Gene's thighs and ran her hands the length of his spine. Ordinarily, she could make him respond with a single touch, a solitary gesture. But not today. His body felt stiff against hers—like she was holding a dead thing. She released him and stepped back.

"Don't make this harder than it already is," Gene said. "I'm going, and nothing you say or do will change my mind." He kissed her lightly on the lips. "Goodbye, mama."

He went outside. She heard his footsteps cross the patio, then the sound of the Bug's engine firing up.

And he was gone.



Weed would dull the jagged borders of Gene's departure, but he'd taken all they had. Caro considered going to the liquor store for a bottle of wine, but she wasn't much of a drinker; she'd never cared for the taste of alcohol.

Her heartache giving way to anger, she went outside to the patio, sitting on the picnic table and pounding out some hard songs, though they really weren't her style. The Kinks, the Stones. And that new song by the Beatles, who had moved away from their teeny-bop style and were now crashing it out on their guitars, Ringo pummeling the drums, all of them singing about how hard a day's night could be, how they were working all the time.

Why, Caro wondered, weren't there any hard-hitting songs by women? The question was purely rhetorical. Women were supposed to be docile. Women were supposed to accept their lot in life. Even women musicians. Even women whose lovers had ditched them.

Playing these songs wasn't helping. Caro adjusted the Martin's strings and changed her style to the soothing, familiar folk sounds she loved—"This Land is Your Land," followed by "Goodnight, Irene," and then "There But for Fortune."

She went on with some of her own compositions. One she'd written for Gene called "Warm My Heart"—it hurt to play it now, and she stopped after the first few chords. Instead, she played the opening chords to a composition she'd been working on, something about the life she'd once had in New York. She called it "For the Lost."

Caro re-tuned her low E string to D. The dropped D tuning was something she'd been playing around with; it gave the guitar a more open sound, made the riffs more folksy. She picked up her notebook and wrote a finger sequence so she wouldn't forget it, then practiced it again.

She scribbled potential lyrics:

*Who I was, what I was,
Where my circles took me.
Who knew me then,
Who knew my heart.
Who knows me now?*

It had grown dark. In the light from the single, low-wattage lamppost on the patio, Caro could barely see her notebook. Across the seawall, the ocean roared.

She rose, Martin in hand, and stepped inside the pad. Even after only a few days here, the small space felt like it was bursting with Gene. She couldn't look at the mattress on the bedroom floor, the tangle of sheets, without imagining herself lying beside him. The clothes he'd left—making more space in his suitcase for notebooks and Kerouac novels, no doubt. The beat-up couch where they'd wrapped their limbs around one another, caressing every inch of skin. The couch where he'd sat beside her and told her he was leaving.

Maybe she should go for a walk. Perhaps that's all she needed.

Mission Boulevard was lifeless and quiet, only the occasional car or near-empty city bus rolling by. Gene was right: this town had no scene. What was she doing here? She was a girl who used to live in Manhattan. She was a girl who'd gone to expensive clubs with wealthy men. She'd used everything she had, hustled her way into being the toast of the town.

And now who was she? Nobody, that's who.

She stepped into a bar—one of those little joints she and Gene had ridiculed. Hank Williams on the juke box and scruffy old men getting sloshed while grumbling about the Chargers losing yet another game. Who cares, Caro thought, ordering a beer. She sipped it slowly, enjoying neither the drink's bland taste nor the bar's lack of ambiance.

"You look like you could use some fun," the bartender said.

Caro regarded him. Middle-aged, crew-cut, arrow-straight. What would *he* know? Still, it couldn't hurt to ask.

She tipped her beer toward him. "You know anywhere around here to get something stronger?"

He held up a whiskey bottle. "There's this, but..." He eyed her bare arm. "I get the feeling that's not what you're talking about."

Caro's eyes followed his glance. Over the past few weeks, the tracks on her arm had faded to minute scars. Scars that could be from bug bites—if they weren't so tidily placed. Someone who didn't know what to look for would miss them.

Clearly, the bartender knew.

"I know a guy," he said. "But it's going to cost you."

Gene's twenty was tucked into her purse. "How much?" she asked.

His eyes traveled to her cleavage. "I'm not talking about dough, sweetheart."

She thought about that for no more than three seconds. "Fine," she said, rising from her barstool.

He exchanged a glance with the other bartender, then followed her to the ladies'.

He was quick; she'd give him that. Her skirt raised around her hips, her ass against the sink. He didn't waste time, and she appreciated it.

Afterward, he nodded. “Meet me at the bar,” he said, slipping out of the cramped room.

She straightened her skirt, splashed water on her face, and stepped back into the bar. He was waiting for her with a slip of paper.

“Give this guy a call,” he said. “He’ll hook you up with whatever you want.” With one hand, he stroked her arm as he held the paper toward her in his other. “And if you run out of cash for it, come back. Anytime, sweetheart.”



She fingered the paper as she stood on the sidewalk. Looking left, she spied a phone booth. It would be so easy. It was what she needed, right?

Then she thought about what went down in New York. How she’d had to leave, had to get as far away as she could before she tumbled off a cliff she could never climb back up.

Index finger shaking, Caro traced the name on the paper: *Danny*. No last name provided.

That could be anybody. Or it could be a cop. Or—hell—the bartender himself could be a narc, just waiting for her to call the number. It was unlikely, given the ladies’ room business he’d initiated—but with cops, you couldn’t know for sure.

If she threw away the slip of paper, she’d be unable to contact “Danny,” whoever he was. She wouldn’t remember his phone number. The only way she’d be able to find him would be to visit the bartender again—hoping that all he wanted was a piece of ass, that he had no interest in landing *her* ass in jail.

Well, there was insurance in that—and maybe, Caro thought, insurance was all she needed. Maybe she didn't need the junk itself—not tonight, anyway. She just needed reassurance that if she did want it someday, it was a possibility. A dicey one, sure, but a possibility nonetheless.

A trash can loomed on the sidewalk, seeming larger than a trash can should be. Caro shook her head. What the hell? She was clean and sober tonight, and still she was seeing crap like larger-than-life trash cans.

Caro turned into one of the narrow streets leading from Mission Boulevard to Mission Beach. Courts, these little streets were called, and before he left, Gene told her he'd read somewhere that they were named after famous beaches. This one was Manhattan Court. Caro didn't know where Manhattan Beach was, but she felt certain it wasn't anywhere near Manhattan, New York.

Two hundred steps west on Manhattan Court to the boardwalk, and beyond that perhaps another three hundred before she reached the shoreline. After that, she could walk no farther west.

Leaning against the seawall, she took off her shoes and stepped onto the beach. She crossed the cold sand, her footprints unswerving as the tracks on her arm. When she reached the water's edge, she pulled the slip of paper from her pocket and threw it toward the surf. It fluttered, light as a seagull feather on the nighttime Pacific breeze, before settling onto the foamy surface. When the waves pushed the soggy paper toward her again, she kicked it away, relishing the feel of the freezing, dissipated wave on her foot. Soon, in the darkness, she could no longer make out the paper's form.

Panic struck her, and she splashed into the frigid water. If she acted quickly, she might be able to find the paper. Goosebumps formed on her bare calves, then her thighs, as she waded through the opaque sea.

She remembered what Gene said their first night on Mission Beach—that a person could become caught in a rip tide, could get hypothermia. Out here alone, a person could disappear.

Caro backstepped onto the shore. Despite Gene's abandonment, despite what she'd permitted to happen tonight, despite everything she'd fucked up in New York—she did not want to disappear.

She collapsed onto the sand. Shivering, arms wrapped around her knees, she watched the waves. Would the little piece of paper make its way back onto the beach tomorrow morning? If she came out here at daybreak tomorrow, walking the beach at low tide among the clammers and shell collectors, would she find that piece of paper, sodden but still readable?

Or would she tomorrow—instead—clean up the pad, make the bed? And then stroll up to Law Street Beach, where she could watch the gentle waves? Later, back at the pad, would she grab her Martin, take a seat atop the picnic table, and spend the rest of the day refining that dropped D tuning and adding more lyrics? Building her song and her sound.

Caro rose. Walking along the darkened surf toward home, she pushed each foot into the sand as if her footprints could crush who she'd once been, who she was now, and who she—still, nonetheless—might once again become.

One Among Four

I'm one among four, one with the three of you—or no, not really with you but rather fading back into the shadows, receding into darkness, away from the candlelight and dimmed chandelier, the low light making your auburn hair glimmer like that polished tiger eye, Josie, the stone of the pendant you're wearing. You're radiant tonight, Jo, looking satisfied to have reached that milestone, looking like it's okay to be thirty—thirty years old, imagine that. I never thought much about the day when one of us would turn thirty but now it's happened, you are the first of the four of us, and it strikes me, it strikes me.

You dish yourself a piece of chicken, the necklace swinging forward, and brush back a strand of hair before picking up your fork and knife. Your hair, Josie, so beautiful, and I've never told you how beautiful I think it is, have I? Has anyone else, anyone besides Gracie and Nell? Certainly not Mom and Dad. How about other people? Has anyone ever spoken of the way it curls around your forehead, the way it sweeps back in long waves down your back? Has anyone ever noticed? Has any *man* ever noticed, Josie?

Cody never did, that's for sure. You remember the first Christmas after he and I married? You had it piled up on your head, and I couldn't take my eyes off you all day long. Four years ago. I was twenty. Seems like a long time ago now. In bed that night, I said to Cody, "Didn't Josie look beautiful?" and he snorted, and I said, "No, but her hair, the way she had it all swept back like that, it was so lovely. I can't do stuff like that with my hair," I said to him. "It's way too thin." Cody ran his hands over my legs and plunged one finger up inside me and looked at me with those potent blue eyes of his and said, "Well, Josie can't do stuff like *this*, can she, Lanie?" And I asked why, what did he mean, and he said, "Because to do stuff like this, thick or thin hair don't make no difference, baby girl. All you need is one hot little body, at least if you wanna do it with me." He withdrew his finger and put his hands around my waist, his thumbs in the front and middle fingers in the back almost touching. "And that's what only you got, sexy baby girl, and your big sister Josie, none of them tubby sisters of yours, ain't never gonna have." He climbed on top of me and I turned my face up to his but for a minute I was still thinking about you, Jo, about your hair. About drops of Christmastime snow melting into it as you stepped inside Mom and Dad's house that afternoon, smiling as you pulled off your coat, patting your head to make sure your updo had held. And then Cody pushed inside me and everything else went away, Jo, there was only him, only Cody, nothing else but Cody telling me how beautiful I was, how special I was.

"A toast!" Nell calls out, standing up and raising her glass in your direction. "A toast to our big sister Josie, our inspiration, our role model." She's grinning, doing things in a big way, the way she likes to do them. Speeches, always speeches with Nell. The debate team in high school—

remember, Jo? She was undefeated junior year. And all those musicals—she never had the lead; no ingenue, our sister Nell, but there was always some big, gregarious role for her. When she spoke, when she sang, people listened. I used to think of Nell as Mama Cass, her bearing and voice reminding me of the lead singer of The Mamas and The Papas. But when Mama Cass died a couple years ago, I deliberately removed that image from my mind.

The three of us gaze up at Nell as, “To you, darling,” she says, beaming at you, drawing out the words like Zsa Zsa Gabor. She’s in her element, surrounded by food and secure in her own apartment, with her own things—and you and Grace are comfortable, too, semi-roommates for all the time you both spend here. But it’s strange territory for me, only the second time Nell’s had me over. I place my fingers around my wineglass stem, careful not to grip too tightly, not to risk a splash onto Nell’s white tablecloth.

“You make my world go round,” Nell says to you. “Make me want to get up every morning and smile and laugh and go on with the day. You, Josephine, are quite simply the best. Cheers!” And then she seats herself and drains her glass, and so do you and so does Grace, and I sip my wine, one among four, one in the shadows.

“Well, thanks for the vote of confidence,” you say, tipping your glass in Nell’s direction. “It’s my sisters who make all the difference.” You squeeze her hand. “It’s having each other that makes our lives so good.”

You’re echoing that old familiar sentiment, years of hearing those same words when we were kids, Jo. Like they happened last week, I remember this kind of talk by and about you three. “Well, they’ve got each other,” Dad would say, sighing as he gazed out the window at the three of you packing yourselves into the car, on your way to dinner and then the theater, a special

evening out on the night of Nell's senior prom, a consolation prize because she didn't have a date for that occasion when everyone—*everyone*—could get one. "I've always said we should be glad they at least have each other. It's better than nothing." Dad let the curtain drop back into place and turned around. "Not like you, little Lanie," he said, throwing his arms around me. "Not like our tiny little Lanie. Our very own Twiggy." And as he gave me a just-a-bit-too-hard squeeze on the ass, his back to Mom so she couldn't see, I thought about *his* size, his mass that rivals all of yours but is never mentioned.

When he let me go, Mom, nearly as thin as me, nodded and smiled. "Better scoot on upstairs and start getting ready," she said. "Greg will be here in an hour." And within that hour I was dressed in a pink tulle shift, the latest fashion, and I had a corsage of roses pinned to my breast, on my way to the prom even if Nell wasn't going—remember, Jo?—only a sophomore that year, but I had my pick of boys pining to escort me to the senior prom. Remember, Jo?

"So how does it feel to be thirty?" Grace asks, turning her apple-cheeked face your way. It's Grace who asks the questions, Grace who needs to know what, how, when, why. Grace who was always learning, who aspires to a doctorate in history—still learning, always learning. Grace who, when we were kids, needed to know how white mommy cats could have black and brown baby kitties come out of them, Grace who later required an explanation for summer solstice, for the theory of relativity, for anything somebody stated as fact. Explanations she asked for cheerfully and openly, explanations that teachers were happy to give her, answering her endless follow-up questions until she felt satisfied the reason was clear.

But Grace has never had to ask questions without answers. She's never had to ask a husband why he's hardly ever home anymore, why last week he slept next to her only two nights out of seven, why he doesn't care if his children aren't sure who he is. Why his only answer is, "I don't know, I just need to think about things for a while, is all. I don't know, Lanie." Grace has never had to ask questions like that, has never had to receive responses like these. Lucky Grace.

I feel that out of the three of you, Jo, you'd be the most likely to understand. You have an answer for everything, don't you? You grin at Grace and tell her, "Well, right now being thirty feels like I won the lottery." All three of you burst into laughter—there must be an inside joke of some sort—and Gracie gets up from her chair and throws her arms around you, arms plumper than my legs—as your arms, reaching up to her, also are.

"No, but really," you say. "I took stock last night as I was getting ready for bed—who wouldn't?—and I feel pretty good about myself. I just bought the house. I have a great job, and I have you..." And you look around the table, smiling warmly, but when you get to me the smile becomes a little nervous. "All three of you," you insist, and it's nice of you, Jo, I know you're trying to be nice.

Do you think you could help me here, Jo? Last night he goes into the kids' room and stares at one sleeping toddler, one child crafted of his genes mixed with mine, looking at that child in wonderment, as if he can't figure out how this freckle-skinned three-year-old can be walking around the world with a face just like his own. I stand in the doorway and watch them, father and son, and I keep my mouth shut because I can think of nothing to say. Do you think you could help me here, Jo?

“Is there anything you wish you had?” Grace asks you. “Anything?”

You tilt your head, considering the question. “Honestly, sweetheart?” you say. “No. Nothing, really.”

And that’s true, isn’t it, Gracie? Jo rarely lies, and she’s not lying to you now. She *does* want for nothing.

How can that be? Look at me, Grace. I put my fork down and stare at you, willing you to stare back, but your eyes are on your plate, scooping the last of your rice with a piece of garlic bread. *Look* at me. See me! I have a husband and babies, two of them, count them, one-two, Aaron and Anna, one-two. I have hips so narrow both those babies were born by C-section because there was no room for them to come out of me the regular way. I have a face like yours, like Josie’s and Nell’s, except mine has something yours will never have—sharp lines, defined cheekbones that have been lovingly touched and stroked by more males than have ever glanced your way. *Look* at this, Gracie! Doesn’t it count for *anything*?

Do you remember, Grace, how it was when Josie had started college but still lived at home—remember?—and you, Nell, and I were in high school. I was the only one of us who dated, the only one boys wanted to be with—remember? And there were nights, Gracie, countless nights when I’d creep into the house late, tiptoeing down the hall so Mom and Dad wouldn’t catch me coming in after curfew. I’d see the light from under the doorway of the bedroom Josie shared with Nell, I’d hear the low laughter, and I knew all three of you were in there. And there was nothing I could do except brush my teeth and crawl into my cold bed and stare across at your empty one, Grace, knowing you’d sleep in their room, in the arms of one or the other of them, not in your own room where you belonged. Not with me. You’re the baby, after all, the youngest of us, you belonged with me, your closest-in-

age sister, isn't that the natural order of things? Perhaps you assumed I enjoyed having our bedroom all to myself but it was lonely, Grace, so lonely, and to keep myself from thinking about that I'd lie there and remember the boy I'd been out with that night, his hot, demanding kisses and the hardness that rose between us, there because of *me*, because I was beautiful, I was desirable. I'd think about that and I'd listen to the muffled laughter from the room next door and I'd tell myself, well, they don't have that, they'll never have that.

"Time for cake!" Nell announces, her blue and purple caftan flapping, shimmery behind her as she rises. She goes into the kitchen and you follow. Josie looks at me.

"You having fun?" she asks.

"Sure," I say. "It's nice of Nell to have asked me."

You lay long fingers on the tablecloth, Jo, your perfectly polished nails a soft, pearly pink. Do you still give yourself a manicure once a week, like you did when we all lived at home? Probably. "Well, of course she'd ask you," you reply. "Nell knows there's nobody I'd rather spend my birthday with than my sisters." Ever the pleasant one, Jo, the gracious one.

I nod. There's a short silence, and then you say, "How are the kids?"

"They're good," I reply. "I had them up at Mom and Dad's last weekend, and Anna said 'Grandpa' for the first time."

You smile at that and ask, "And how's Cody?"

I look into my wine glass. "He's okay."

What can I say to you about Cody? He's simply Cody, and to me that's always meant an element of trust. Because for a long time he did all the things I expected him to do, all the things he promised to do. He gave me a diamond ring and a honeymoon in Puerto Rico and a house and babies, and

when I was pregnant with the first one he told me I better just quit college right then and there, just forget about that associate's degree I almost had, stop thinking about any kind of career because it might be the 1970s but for him it was still the 1950s, and no wife of his was going to work and abandon his kids in no daycare center, not when he made enough money to pay the bills. And so I did it, I quit, because it pleased me knowing he loved me so much that he wanted to take care of me and our children. And for a few years he did that, Jo, took care of us, and now, well, those eyes that were once so intent upon me look cloudy when they turn my way and I wish I could tell you, Jo. I wish I could tell you.

Nell returns, bearing a triple-layer chocolate cake, with Gracie trouncing behind her, flushed and childlike. Thirty candles ring the edges and a pink frosted rose rests next to the words "Happy 30th Josie." Nell sets the platter in front of you, and you and I both rise. As all four of us gather around the cake, Nell blows out the tall dinner tapers and switches off the chandelier, leaving the birthday candles as our only light source, and then she starts in, "Happy birthday to you..." Her voice is clear and strong, so beautiful she could bring the house down. Gracie joins her, and I mumble along. "Happy birthday, dear Jooo-sie, happy birthday to you..."

"Make a wish," Nell says, and you grin.

"I already told you," you say. "All my wishes have been granted."

Jo, Jo, don't you get lonely in that big house at night? That modern, glass-walled house you share only with your cats, no other people. I know that you're in no hurry to have a family—none of you, not Nell or Grace, either; you've all made that clear by your enthusiasm about your careers, not to mention your cursory-at-best interest in my kids. But still—don't you get

lonely? Don't you wish for a man's arms around you all night? I get so lonely without my man now. How do you rest easy without one?

Not to mention sex. Don't you wonder about it, Jo? Aren't you curious? It was such a big part of my life. The way he used to touch me, oh, Jo, there's nothing like it. Have you ever even come close to having it? Truth now, big sister, have you?

Your eyes shine in the candlelight, and I recall, suddenly, the gleam in your eyes and flippancy in your smile—and Nell's, too—that night last summer when Mom and Dad had a cookout and we were all there. And I know, I know, how both you and Nell rest easy at night.

Do you remember that cookout, Nell? Do you remember how Grace let it slip that you'd gone out with some stockbroker guy, and there was Mom pouncing all over that. "Well, *tell* me about him, Nell. Is he handsome? Did he like you? Do you think he might ask you out again?" You chuckled, exchanged a telling glance with Josie, and replied, "Oh, Mom. My dear, hopeful little mother...I have absolutely no idea."

Later, I was in the upstairs hall when you and Josie went up to your old bedroom to change into jeans because the night had turned suddenly cooler, and I heard you say, "Total asshole he was, Jo. He tells me he's just bought this brand-new condominium, and what he's looking for is a woman to live there with him. I said, 'Why? So you can have someone cook and clean for you?' And he looks at me like I've just asked the most preposterous question he's ever heard, and he says, 'Well, yeah, but she'd get a free place to live, so that's a good deal, isn't it?'" You both laughed, Nell, and then you went on, "I tell you, if Lanie wasn't married, this would be the man for her..." And then the laughter dissolved into giggles and I heard you zipping your jeans and tromping toward the doorway and I ducked into Mom and

Dad's bedroom until you passed. And then when you'd both gone downstairs I fled to the bathroom and sat on the edge of the bathtub with my head between my hands for ten minutes, until I heard Aaron calling for me.

"Well," you say to Jo as the candles melt onto the frosting. "If you don't have a wish for yourself, how about one for each of us?"

"Fair enough," Jo says. "You start, Nell."

"I wish...I had enough money left to pay the rent, after paying for this dinner!"

You all three laugh, then Jo says, "Gracie?"

Her eyes are dreamy—wishful Grace—and she says, "That I'll get that fellowship at Stanford next year."

"You'll get it," Jo assures her. Then she turns to me. "Lanie?"

I pull out of the shadows to stand beside you, Jo, and illuminated by the swaying birthday lights, our eyes meet—our amber eyes identical in color and a perfect match for the tiger eye pendant nestled between your breasts.

"I'm like you," I whisper, so quietly I'm sure our sisters barely hear me. "It's true, Josie. I'm like you." I gaze at the thirty tiny, trembling flames. "No wishes. I want for nothing."

You're silent, staring at me. Then you draw in a breath and blow hard. Every candle goes out, and for a moment, until Nell switches on the chandelier, we are together in the shadows, four among four.

Send in the Liar

Boza was hungover. Partying with her fellow clown school graduates last night after their final class had been a mistake. At the bar, Boza had felt damned smart—first gig lined up for the day after graduation—but in the piercing light of an April morning, it was clear that her fellow clowns wore the smarty-pants. Shot after shot of Jägermeister had been tossed back, and now everyone else was sleeping it off while Boza was ringing her first doorbell as a full-fledged clown.

She'd had a hell of a time finding parking on the narrow street, finally wedging her banged-up Chevy Vega between a Cutlass Supreme and a yellow Ford Pinto. Her gear—plastic bowling pins for juggling, balloons to twist into wiener dogs, the ubiquitous rubber chicken, everything except the piñata, which didn't fit—was stuffed into an army-green duffel that once belonged to Boza's dad. Not exactly festive baggage, but it was the only thing she owned that was roomy enough for her clown paraphernalia. She set down the bag and piñata, then rang the bell again.

The porch she stood on clung to the large, ramshackle Victorian like a ripped sleeve on a threadbare jacket. A few years ago, before Boza had to move back in with her mother because she got fired from the grocery store after one too many times missing her shift, she'd had a studio apartment in this neighborhood. The building she'd lived in was an ancient house like this one, except it had been converted into six units and featured two open-mouthed, roaring concrete lions on opposite sides of the wrought-iron front gate. Boza had loved those lions.

This house had no gate and no lions. Boza regarded her reflection in the front door's leaded glass. Did the black-and-white makeup diminish her bloodshot eyes? Jesus, she hoped so.

The young teen girl who answered didn't seem to notice. When Boza swept into a bow and said, "Boza the Clown, at your service," the girl only nodded, swinging open the door.

Boza studied her. She looked as wiped out as Boza felt. Too young to be partying last night—Boza hoped—but something was up with this chick. Greyish circles shadowed her eyes. She wore a faded flannel shirt and frayed bellbottom jeans. Her tread on the hardwood floor was heavy.

She led Boza through the hallway and a creaky kitchen, then into the backyard, where a card table and folding chairs were set up. Red streamers, taped to the table, fluttered in the spring breeze. A transistor radio was tuned to AM-950 KIMN. From its tiny speaker, Gloria Gaynor sang "I Will Survive," which hit number one on the Billboard chart this week. Boza was more into rock than disco, but she liked the message in this song.

Besides the streamers, there were no other decorations and no kids in sight. Boza rubbed her chin, then remembered it was plastered with white

pancake makeup. Wiping her hand on her pants, she tilted her head at the girl.

“I made my brother take a bath,” the girl explained. “I told him no bath, no party.” She crossed her arms over her thin little chest. “I should check on him.”

As she turned to go inside, Boza said, “Hey, um...what’s your name?”

The girl pivoted. Her expression was slack. “Suzanne.”

Boza nodded. “Could I ask, Suzanne...where are your parents?”

Suzanne’s indigo eyes flickered at her. “My dad’s at work. My mom...” She blinked. “Mom died six weeks ago.” She put a hand on her collarbone.

Boza sank onto a folding chair. “Oh, honey. I’m so sorry.”

She didn’t ask, but Suzanne went on, “She owned a record store on East Colfax. An armed robber shot her to death.”

Jesus. Boza remembered reading about that in *The Rocky Mountain News*, but she hadn’t connected it with her gig today. When she’d called on Wednesday to confirm, the guy who answered—must have been Suzanne’s dad—just said in a tired voice that yes, it sounded fine, they’d see her on Saturday.

“I’m so sorry,” Boza repeated.

Suzanne nodded. Wordlessly, she went inside.



Waiting for Suzanne’s return, Boza thought about the woman who’d called to reserve the gig. Alex, her name was. Bubbly voice. Gushing about her son Chris’s upcoming party for his sixth birthday. Talking about how excited she’d been to receive Boza’s number when she contacted the clown school to inquire if they had any women students.

“In less than a year, it will be the 1980s,” Alex had said. “Women’s lib is in full force. We can vote and take out mortgages and make decisions about our own bodies.” Alex paused, and over the telephone line, Boza imagined her raising her fist in the air like Dorothy Pittman Hughes and Gloria Steinem. “Don’t you think it’s high time we began supporting each other professionally, too?”

Boza thought about her own mother, Diane, who had never worked outside the home. Throughout Boza’s childhood, Diane’s three-pronged life mission was getting on Boza’s case for every perceived infraction, buying expensive furniture and newfangled electronics on credit, and trying to appease Boza’s dad with platitudes, massages, and homecooked meals. She reminded Boza of an aging version of Barbara Eden from *I Dream of Jeannie*, minus the pink smoke and glass bottle.

Any moron could have predicted what happened next. The minute Boza turned eighteen, her dad traded in her mom for a younger model. Absent a child-support requirement, he hightailed it out of Denver, while evading only alimony payments.

Cash-strapped and in debt, Diane did what any over-the-hill genie who still had halfway decent legs might do. Each night, she put on a miniskirt and barhopped, her ultimate goal being to marry a guy with money. In no time at all, she’d snagged Boza’s now-stepfather, Gary. By then, the furniture, TVs, and hi-fis had been repossessed—but no matter; Gary had plenty of both.

“He’s a mama’s boy,” Diane informed Boza. “Talks all the time about the woman.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s okay, though. I have ways to win him over.”

Now Diane was all about pleasing not just Gary but also his parents. “They’re a good family, Mary Ann,” her mother told her. “But they’re traditional. If I don’t toe the line, they’ll convince him that marrying me was a mistake.” She took in Boza’s lack of makeup, holey tennis shoes more gray than white, and hair that Boza kept short by cutting it herself, because beauty parlors smelled weird and the one time she’d tried going to a barber shop, the barber shooed her out, pointing to a sign reading WE RESERVE THE RIGHT TO REFUSE SERVICE TO ANYONE and telling her she didn’t belong in a man’s world. Fuck him.

“They judge me based on you, too,” Diane went on. “So word to the wise: clean up your act.” She stepped closer, tapping a manicured index finger on Boza’s nose. “Don’t mess this up for me, Mary Ann.”

Fuck that, too. Boza, who’d tried on a million names over the years, refusing to call herself something as dumb-assed as Mary Ann, ducked away. She was nobody’s lapdog. If her mother wanted to be one, that was on her. Boza had bigger fish to fry, even if she did have to live in Gary’s house until she finished clown school, got some gigs, and could maybe afford her own place again.

On the phone when Alex had asked about Boza’s routine, Boza explained the show she was designing, with a piñata included in the fee and saved for the grand finale. That was two months ago. Since then, she’d hung up fliers and had business cards made but hadn’t booked anything else. Well, the gigs would come. Hopefully.

Now, as Suzanne returned to the yard with her little brother in tow, opened the back gate, and ushered in guests, Boza clamped a hand to her spinning head. She felt like a clown, and not in the literal sense. What the

hell was wrong with her? She was twenty-three years old, for chrissake. Maybe her mother was right when she said Boza fucked up everything.

But Alex had believed in her. And now Alex was dead. Boza adjusted her rubber nose and practiced her red-mouthed grin. She would do that woman proud.



Fifty minutes later, with her stand-up routine in the taillights—she'd remembered all her lines and gestures, received laughs at the right moments; it went better than she'd anticipated and she was sure that even her instructors would be pleased—Boza hung the piñata from an ash tree. The piñata was shaped like a genuine Bozo the Clown, and she was as proud of the research she'd done to unearth it in a mail order catalog as she was of her clever idea to transform herself into the first-ever (she was pretty sure) female Bozo.

She pulled a baseball bat from the duffel and handed it to Chris. “Birthday boy first.”

Chris didn't have much of a swing. Boza allotted six attempts—one for each birthday year—and only once did Chris come close to the target. “It's okay,” she said. “Let's give someone else a try.”

“Gimme that!” A burly kid grabbed the bat from Chris. Jesus, Boza hated brats like this. There was one in every crowd, goddamn them.

The brat swung wildly, looking like an all-star hitter with a bad case of the yips. Whirling, carried by momentum, he stumbled full-throttle toward Chris.

Holy fuck. This was gonna be bad.

Boza stepped in front of Chris, accepting the blow across her gut. The hit brought up last night's Jägermeister, dispersing bile all over the brat. His mother screamed, rushing forward to dab the brat with red napkins while Boza writhed on the grass.

Suzanne knelt beside her. "I'm so sorry," she said, helping Boza rise.

Arms wrapped around her stomach, Boza stared down at her huge, silly shoes. "No...biggie," she huffed.

Then she looked up, meeting Suzanne's dark blue eyes with her own stupid bloodshot ones. She opened her mouth, closed it, and opened it again.

"Listen, Suzanne," Boza said. "I, uh...I understand. When I was young, I, um...I lost my mother, too."

Nodding, the girl again pressed her hand to her collarbone.

Boza's mother was, she knew, at that moment likely vacuuming the green shag carpet in the immense, fancy bedroom she shared with Gary, running the Oreck around the white wood, gold-accented king-sized bed and the TV stand with the brand-new color TV. The every-girl-dreams-of-this bedroom in the suburban house where Boza slept in the basement and her mother asked her every freakin' day when she was going to meet a decent guy like Gary, vacate the basement, and pump out some grandkids.

Boza grabbed the piñata, set it on the ground, and handed the bat to Suzanne.

"Whack that sucker 'til it breaks," she said. "Give it all you've got, girl."

Red Food

I just wanted to let you know, it's funny, when I thought of it I half-smiled—do you remember the day we moved into the place on Gilman Street? Remember how we had that tiny kitchen with the bar stools at the table, those bar stools that were too high for the tabletop so we had to stoop over to eat and our knees knocked against it?

But that's not what I wanted to talk about. What I wanted to talk about, what I was thinking about is this: remember that the kitchen was red? I mean, remember how we put that red checkered contact paper on the shelves and we had that piece of red cotton I made into a curtain for the kitchen window? Remember how we decided that in keeping with the spirit of the thing, we would store all the red food on top of the refrigerator, not in the cabinets with everything else? So it was snowing real bad and on the radio they advised people not to drive if they didn't have to, but we didn't have anything to eat in the apartment, so we drove all the way out to the west side, to that warehouse foods place, remember, you could buy grapefruits the size of basketballs in there, and we bought a cart full of

food. You always used to take so long in the supermarket, you had to look at everything, I always thought that was so weird. You had such unexpected habits, which in those days I found charming.

So we bought a huge cart full of food and by then about six inches of snow had fallen and it was getting dark and on the way home I almost hit a stop sign but I didn't, and we got the food home and put everything away in the cabinets except the red food: the Campbell's soups, the Wheat Chex and Special K, the Coke cans, the Minute Rice, the General Foods International Coffees, the Carnation evaporated milk, the Quaker Oats, the Lipton's tea bags, and all those McCormick spices. And then we arranged only the red fresh produce in wire baskets, apples and some California strawberries and a few tomatoes and radishes, and we set the baskets on top of the refrigerator with all the red packaged goods but the rest of the produce went in the fridge. Remember that?

And then we made spaghetti and when we ate it we had to hunch over our places with our knees hitting against the table, and we drank some red wine and when I accidentally knocked my wineglass onto your plate and red flowed everywhere, marinara mixing with merlot, we just laughed and cleaned it up. By then the snow was coming down even harder and we decided to take a walk and on the way out I fell going down the driveway. Fell on my butt and you reached out to help me get up and then you fell, too, and we lay there in the driveway and let the snowflakes land on our faces and we couldn't stop laughing, we just couldn't stop laughing.



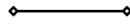
But that was the Before. In the Before, we hadn't left Gilman because they hadn't yet raised the rent. We hadn't yet had to find another place, not

nearly as cute. In the Before, you hadn't yet rotted from the inside, suspicion and fury decaying your core like an apple gone bad. Things I didn't think about until the After happened in the Before, but I didn't give them much thought. Like you saying you didn't want me to take a waitressing job because male customers would call me baby and try to grab my ass, and you wouldn't be there to protect my honor. And even things that didn't really involve us, not day-to-day anyway, like you saying when Sandra Day O'Connor retired from the Supreme Court that it was a good thing President Bush replaced her with a man because men, not women, should be the ones making big decisions that affect the entire country. And I didn't argue the point with you, I let it go and said nothing.

In the Before was another snowy night but nowhere near as soft and nice, a night when sleet pelted the windows of the restaurant where I waitressed and you came in during my shift and saw me goofing around with one of the busboys, I don't even remember what we were joking about, something stupid I guess but you charged at him and he dropped a tray of dirty glasses and I can still hear the earsplitting sound as they crashed onto the tile floor, drowning out Gwen Stefani singing "Hollaback Girl" on the restaurant's stereo system, and it felt like everything in the world had shattered, not just a trayful of glasses. I bent down to help the busboy pick up the pieces and at the same time I twisted my neck to look up at you and I told you in the coldest voice I could muster to get out and thank God you did. Everyone was staring and I got extra tips that night but they were pity tips.

That was also around the time of the New Year's Eve party at Joel and Megan's, where you caught Joel and me in the hallway and all he was doing was asking if I was all right, telling me that lately I looked like I wasn't

sleeping well and he was worried and wanted to know, was there anything he and Megan could do? But you never believed that's all Joel asked of me.



The After was when you bought the gun. You said it was for protection but the only person you ever aimed it at was me. You said you were teasing and I tried to believe you but every day I thought about the gun, tucked into your waistband so I couldn't hide it or take out the bullets. All day and all night I wondered if I'd ever have the guts to leave, knowing that if I did it wouldn't matter because you'd find me anyway.

Then by a stroke of extraordinary luck you came home one day and told me flat out that there was someone else and because you were paying most of the rent I'd need to move out immediately. I pretended to be devastated because I knew that's what you expected but I felt my heart melt with relief like a candle gone soft. I called my parents and they sent me money for the security deposit on a new apartment, and do you know I even called the landlord at Gilman to see if that little place was vacant and maybe, I thought, maybe my luck was turning and if I could get that place, maybe the landlord might give me a break on the rent. But it wasn't available anyway so I found another apartment with two roommates and I didn't tell you where I was going and you said you didn't care where I went because I looked terrible, I was getting fat and turning ugly and who'd want to be with me when they could have somebody hot instead?

Two months after I moved into my new place, I was on my way home from work at one a.m. on a humid and mostly deserted midsummer night and I saw you across State Street walking with your new girlfriend and I couldn't help myself, I had to follow you. We all stopped for the red light at

Johnson Street and I kept to the shadows while checking her out. I had to agree she was hot, with her long hair billowing down her back and her flawless skin and her yellow miniskirt. As the light changed I watched the two of you walk toward Capitol Square, and I kept following, all the way to a first-floor apartment on the corner of Pinckney and Johnson and it kind of reminded me of the Gilman place, old house with a row of sunporch windows at the front and you two went inside and turned on the light and I saw her take off her jacket and pull her hair off her neck and she wore a backless top, bright blue. I stood outside under a leafed-out maple tree and watched, and I didn't feel jealous, all I felt was a sense of liberation and it was a joyous sensation but it only lasted a few minutes because then, through the open window, I heard you and her arguing.

You raised your voice and you were yelling, and I saw you reach into your waistband and then prod her from behind and I could tell it wasn't your hand but the nose of your gun pressed against her back. I almost screamed but I didn't, instead I flipped open my phone and fast as I could called 911.

I thought there would be more time, time enough, but like watching a dream or maybe a nightmare I observed what happened next. It was over within seconds and when the red flowed it wasn't food and nobody was laughing, least of all me.

Content Warnings

Below is a list of potentially traumatizing subjects and the stories within this collection which mention these subjects:

- Abortion: “The Unlived”
- Body Shaming: “One Among Four”
- Drug Addiction: “A Possibility Nonetheless”
- Gun Violence: “Red Food”
- Miscarriage: “Baby Doll”
- Rape: “Pieces of Everyone, Everywhere”
- Spanking: “Baby Doll”
- Stillbirth: “The Unlived”

Acknowledgements

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About the Author

Cynthia Swanson is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of the psychological suspense novels *The Bookseller*, *The Glass Forest*, and *Anyone But Her*. Cynthia's work has been selected by Indie Next, won the WILLA Literary Award, the Colorado Book Award, and the Indie Author Project Contest, and has been translated into up to eighteen languages. In 2025, Cynthia was named Indie Author of the Year by the Indie Author Project. She is also the editor of the award winning anthology *Denver Noir*, part of Akashic Books' celebrated *Noir* series. Cynthia lives with her family in Denver.

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