

A BRIEF SEASON OF DESIRE

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A Project

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Abstract
of
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Autobiographical writing is a vehicle for self-discovery; not only self-explanation, but the remembering of specific incidents in our lives which, when examined after the fact, allow us to question what we believe to be true. This project explores how the ravages of time and distance color my personal history, the people included in the questions, and my personal evolution that has both enhanced and hampered the truth.

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Dr. Doug Rice

Date

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A BRIEF SEASON OF DESIRE

It is always easier for romantics to remember what might have been. Like Maud Miller in her orchard, romantics muse on the almost. We need the unreachable, the not quite attainable; we hunger after the inaccessible. We snicker over the old “Get Smart” line, “Missed it by *that* much,” but we’re fighting a flaw that creates a “might have been” and obscures what is. It’s like being in the care of a genteel but ignorant doctor who prescribes morphine for phantom pain. To the patient, the phantom cause is excruciatingly real, but the healing drugs only blind the senses to what they think they feel. The prescription is not the cure.

I am an incurable romantic. This addiction is as serious as heroin or buying expensive jewelry or Pepsi. Once you’re hooked, you don’t escape. To the best of my knowledge, incurable romance isn’t a mortal sin. It’s probably a venial one, ranking alongside white lies or the stealing-from-the-office variety of sins. The addiction can take several forms, the most common being the hypnotic drooling of adolescents over film stars or rock idols staring out from grocery store tabloids. Addicts afflicted with incurable romance don’t have affairs: we have crushes.

Unlike folks who paste photos into a book for posterity and absent-mindedly thumb through the dusty tomes on special occasions, we are closer akin to the little old man in the antique shop who, though he urgently needs the money, will not sell his only signed copy of Charlotte Bronte. We covet our memories without reason, those fine canvases slightly damaged by age and damp, colored with the murky burnish of an ancient and priceless masterpiece. In the time it takes a speck of dust to float across the eye, we blink and discover our viewpoint of the picture has entirely changed. The tiniest brushstrokes we’d forgotten about in past viewings take on new importance.

A better metaphor for my addiction might be a tapestry. I've seen those old wall hangings in museums and sometimes in the homes of friends who crave an atmosphere of opulence and seduction. Deep within the warp and woof of threads pulled and tweaked by the loom, the longings of another dreamer snagged and meshed, creating half-dressed hunters and huntresses chasing an elusive beast through an unnamed country. However dog-eared, the tapestry cheats more recent acquisitions for a place of honor, admired for its depiction of a past the admirer has never experienced. That's one problem with this romantic addiction. It's difficult to separate what is true and what might be a stray thread caught in the machinery of memory.

My addiction muddles sensory images in real time as well. I often visit a local Eastern religious community. I am sitting in the temple before worship, the complete silence interrupted only by December rain pattering like frantic birds across the wooden roof. Fractured green lights play off windows closed against the weather. I know outside the sun is not shining. But the warm smells of sandal and cedar permeating the immense tranquility convince me that if I open those windows, summer will explode into the room. My brain understands winter, but my heart convinces my eyes through my nose I will see orange twilight instead of the soggy shadows of December. For several moments, my addiction transforms December into August. Feeling the cool hardwood floor beneath my bare feet, I'm sure I won't need my coat when I leave the service.

It's a memory as well as sensory scrambler, just as bad as an e-mail virus. Case in point: I've rewritten this essay four times now, trying to distract myself from adding and subtracting and retracting pieces that scatter like frightened doves in a hurricane of emotions. The more I write, the harder it becomes to put the words in my brain on the paper, unencumbered by my heart. I'm caught in the bobbin and trying desperately to untangle that damned silk thread.

It started at the onslaught of eighth grade, fueled by hormone-hyped blood and the Devil's playground of emotions we called junior high school. Mired in the mundane and achingly dissatisfied with my peers, I tuned my heartstrings to the underdog characters in my favorite television shows, those bumbling but beloved actors who always needed rescue. A regular dose of televised science fiction eclipsed the meaningless boys at school. Between exceptional television characters who distracted me from homework, and unexceptional boys who only temporarily distracted me from television stars, I suffered like Saul with a bad spirit.

Since my sci-fi heroes couldn't materialize themselves into my life, I worshipped the attractive masters of academia who patrolled the school at recess. I orbited in their celestial wake like an asteroid on a collision course. I preferred not to think about these Gods clad in much-washed undershirts, wearily mowing the lawn on Saturdays, even though I witnessed this phenomenon during my college years. An Orientalist mind squelched in the puberty years of second-hand plaid skirts and serviceable tennis shoes, I painted portraits resembling characters reflected in the gilt walls and shadowy staircases of my adoration, rather than reality. Never mind the squalor and bedlam behind the gilt, where wives waited at home with "honey-do" lists accompanied by the kids, runny-nosed replicants thrusting broken bike parts at their harassed parent and plaintively mewling "Daddy!"

Crystallized portions of eighth grade linger in my memory transponders, but in the act of dusting off the crystals, I'm not sure whether I'm projecting my thirteen-year old emotions into blank space or whether the space is full of projectiles and dangerous objects spiraling into some twisted time warp. I start this story again and again searching for a way to sift the sensory and the sensational.

My eighth grade experience was a hectic combination of delight and disappointment with a few diamonds thrown out by the Gods, comet-tails splattering against the bleak backdrop of a

school coated in the usual barf-colored yellow and clay brown paint. One jeweled memory is of the whole eighth grade going off campus to a showing of the extravaganza, Gone With the Wind. After experiencing the passions and pitfalls of the O'Hara clan via the new wide screen movie theatre, all my friends wanted a part in our school musical. I'd seen my share of school plays and hadn't considered the comedic efforts worth my classical interest, but when all my friends signed up, peer pressure alone put my name on the list.

I memorized Lady Macbeth's mad scene and performed it with fervor at the audition, rubbing my hands stained with imaginary blood and wailing to one and all that I was doomed, *doomed*. My histrionic rendition got me a chorus part plus the understudy to one of the less popular lead roles. With an overblown sense of self-importance, I read my script behind a science book or my English binder during classes so I could put in every available moment learning my lines. The story, an insipid, moralistic tale bonded with a banal musical score, provided the allotted fifteen minutes of fame, and me with an all too brief appearance on stage as a secretary in Act II.

The score called for two pianos as opposed to the usual scraping, off-key and out-of-step student orchestra. One of the two accompanists turned out to be a classmate's mother, a jolly woman familiar with the clamor and inattention of junior high students. The other, a much younger and handsomer version of Cid Caesar, bounced into rehearsals each week with a smile that could light a whole orchestra pit. Admirers quickly surrounded the male of the two players at the piano. As rehearsals wore on, the boys huddled at the back of the room to talk sports and basketball scores, but the girls continued to stake out their territory closer to the piano. Courteous, yet quite cautious of his exploding popularity, Terry kept a polite distance from the females who offered to turn pages for him. A Brahms in blue jeans, Tchaikovsky in tennis shoes, he commanded center stage from behind the clunky, district issue piano every Tuesday afternoon.

Amid smells of day-old spaghetti and stale milk seeping from the corners of the cafeteria, we memorized our cues and stage directions. We muffed lines and tripped over each other, making our drama coach wish for an early retirement. Terry entertained us with a little ragtime between the often-chaotic scene changes. Sometimes the coach rehearsed the play without music, testing our lines and entrances minus musicians. Those rehearsals melted warm-lard slowly in the airless choir room. Waiting for my cues at my appointed station as secretary 2, I craved a test of my courage. Would I, or wouldn't I chicken out at the chance to turn pages?

Once we began dress rehearsals, backstage romances developed in the folds of the moldy green curtains. I remember this because I didn't get even a minor role in these questionable subplots. I'm sure the same theatrical gods who blessed the romantic antics of Bette Davis and Gloria Swanson looked down and laughed at my silent chagrin. The pendulous curtains provided a safe place to spy on the boys I did like, and those boys, of course, totally ignored me. Couples paired off, hiding in the voluptuous folds, making promises sure to be broken before the last curtain call. Out in front, the play unfolded even as lipstick and hickeys dried on juvenile jugulars.

Sheltered behind the flimsy scenery, I didn't approach my musical god. A shy supplicant, I lurked behind the altar, feeling unworthy of divine attention.

After three scheduled performances, the play closed on a reasonable profit and ended our revels. We took our last bows in greasepaint-smeared shirts and wilted blouses. As the applause faded, the director stepped out to thank our accompanists. Hidden, because of his low profile existence during rehearsals, was Terry's immense sense of humor. On the final night, he held up a sign at the end of the play, with some funny comments about giving the accompanists their due reward. Maybe it was Terry's true zaniness emerging or just relief at being released from the confines of junior high hysteria. The sign said, "Don't shoot the piano player! Give him a kiss!"

I didn't challenge the message or the messenger. Instead, I stood off to the sidelines, and unlike the popular television commercial, received neither handshake nor kiss.

The cast party took place at a house close to the school. Afterwards, I watched a blue MG transport my prince back into his castle of unreachable bachelorhood. Darkness engulfed my world under the hard April stars. I felt as bereft as Cinderella holding one glass slipper.

Years after eighth grade had become another yearbook on my bookshelf, I persuaded my mother to let me take lessons from Terry. For months, I bicycled past his house (the longest possible route home from school), each week pestering and sometimes just plain nagging my mother about music lessons. In the pockets of family calm after homework and "Hogan's Heroes," I lit cheap Cost Plus incense cones and fell into a bittersweet abyss of memories from eighth grade, wishing on the incense smoke for something much more tangible.

Finally after repeated complaints about the Victorian drawing room prattle forced on me from prior instructors, my mother gave in with the normal parental mandate, "We'll see." A week later, the first appointment with Terry appeared on the kitchen calendar. I treated this as a state occasion. I could not possibly meet him in blue jeans or shorts, although I remembered Terry's informality during the play rehearsals. The night before my lesson, I set my hair in huge pink curlers and ironed my eighth grade graduation dress until the ruffles crackled with anticipation and White Swan starch.

Terry's front room included a large couch, a grand piano and two Angora cats that sat in regal silence, haughtily scowling at their master and his paying minions. I perched on the piano bench, awaiting instructions from my musical god. While my mother watched from a chair unoccupied by cats for the agreed-upon forty-five minutes, I bungled through Bach and chafed over the convoluted fingering of Chopin.

Although my place next to Terry on the piano bench was never disputed after my first lesson, propriety demanded I behave as an official student and not some lovelorn character from a Jane Austin novel. Much to my pleasure, Terry was a hands-on teacher. He had no qualms about positioning my fingers on the keys or stopping me by taking my hands from the piano while explaining my mistakes. These gestures made him no more accessible than before, but they made the lessons more enjoyable. My mother found other chairs without cats, when available, during these sacred times, but she never flinched the way I did when I measured the measures of a Bach invention wrong or clipped the wings of a waltz.

My lessons took place the same afternoons that “Dark Shadows” reigned supreme on the local channel. That melodrama, complete with mysterious music and wickedly sensuous personalities, tantalized me every week at four o’clock, heavy competition for my practice time. As I tore myself away from the show, I spun my own version of the overblown soap to the hypnotic strains of Chopin. I cast myself into that nether region between sun and twilight, reality and fantasy, realizing that, of course, my piano lessons were a far cry from vampires and warlocks and infinitely more satisfying than mere daydreams. Being an incurable romantic allows you a certain proximity to the object of your desire. However, one step beyond that proximity casts you into the chasm of affirmative action, where decisions and consequences meet and I had no desire to step off into unfamiliar space, or worse yet, dead air.

At one point, the comforts of the car outweighed Terry’s living room for my mother. She still felt I required her attendance, although I’m not sure if it was more for Terry’s protection than mine. My mother survived my frequent bouts of unrequited love with saintly composure and was well aware of the danger of sending her romance-addled daughter unaccompanied into an unmarried man’s domain. Shy enough not to go where angels feared to tread, I kept my place on the piano bench. However, the minute my fingers and my feet left his living room, I cursed my

cowardice, in spite of the fact that physical relationships were as foreign to me as being bitten by Barnabas Collins.

One incident stands out in sharp relief. I'm afraid to ask whether it is true but denying it seems a direct betrayal of all that I've felt is true. I slaved over a particular Chopin prelude for many weeks and always had problems when I played it at the lessons. Terry's solution included counting each measure out loud. I add this detail because I *despised* counting out loud. The embarrassment of this requirement lingered for days. Terry insisted, explaining that unless one understood the cadence of the piece, one's artistic interpretation would be useless. Chopin's runs and triplets always caught me off guard. My voice, competing with the thrum of Watt Avenue traffic, sounded youthful and flat.

Terry played with angelic grace. Taking my hands off the keyboard, he stunned me with the awesome beauty of such a simple song. Again, I attempted my own version, falling more than short of the prize. He interrupted my poor mimicry and played so well that each note rang separate, the somber final measures echoing like chimes from a distant clock in the moonlight fog.

I don't remember why he decided to act out the piece but in order to illustrate Chopin's interpretation, he swayed and crooned in time, grazing his shoulders against mine on each downbeat. As the prelude reached a feverish crescendo, he leaned into the notes, squeezing out every drop of emotion. I remember his shoulder bumping mine, my fingers struggling to ignore the cadence of my thumping heart. I see myself shrouded in diffused light from his yellowed shades, Terry and I on the piano bench, his body leaning into the piano, his cheek close enough for me to kiss.

I'm sitting with my friend, Alexandra, who is new to our friendship and hasn't been initiated into the malignancy behind my memories. We sip coffee at Weatherstone, remarking on

the cultivated bohemians at the next table. Watching a young man with a tiger cat who flops unceremoniously over his knees, I leap backwards into a crowded living room inhabited by two Angora cats guarding their master with stern expressions from atop a couch stacked with music and books.

Alex is trying to sip her coffee between laughing at me and thwarting my insistent attempts to change the subject. She wants the *whole* story, from the play in eighth grade right up to the present. “There is no present,” I tell her. “I haven’t seen this person for 23 years. This is all from memory.”

Alex is stunned. So many questions, so few people like her who might be genuinely entertained by a faulty facsimile.

Watching the man, (Mr. Matisse a la mid-town), I regale Alex with the menagerie of pieces dismembered in this mental hurricane. I strain to find common denominators in the man with the cat, in Alex’s classic profile, in my reflection in the tiny fountain reservoir behind us. My addiction fails me. I hear music and remember my heart beating to Chopin, but the actual object of my affections must be contrived. My heart convinces my brain that all the events happened, but Terry’s image hides underneath rubble and ruin. A dark, abandoned feeling encompasses me and for a second, I see red lights fading into the blackness of April, but I can’t see the driver.

What I know is that yellowed light filtered by old shades hung across the large picture window, warmed by the single bulb of a floor lamp. Piles of books, an antique hutch with china cups behind dusty glass, a dark hallway leading to the nether regions of the house. Me sitting, intently listening, my fingers resting on white keys and my mother’s blue car parked on the road that shields Terry’s house from afternoon commuter traffic.

In the sunlight splintering over the Weatherstone patron and his cat, I shut my eyes and I'm back in Terry's crowded living room. But Terry's face. I remember a mole, a moustache, curly brown hair, but it's like a child's wooden puzzle, unconnected and lying about on the floor.

We have spoken by telephone but an in-person meeting is months, if not years, in the future and telephones do not replace features or memories. During one conversation, Terry says he doesn't remember the signs he made for the musical play. In fact, he denies writing anything of the sort although my version has his brand of humor stamped all over it. These are both facts. That he does not remember and I do. Or conversely, he does remember and I do not. To Terry, my recollection is an incomplete canvas unsigned by an anonymous artist. The inscription of the memory even from my standpoint is questionable, infected with my addiction, but I'm sure on a stack of Bibles that he held up some sort of sign, just as he's sure he once had a female student who, in response to his hands-on methods, held his hand longer than propriety warranted.

I'm surrounded by fragments, pieces of memory as questionable as the student I don't remember or as solid as the hours I spent sitting in his living room. Yet, when my authenticity is examined, where do I run for confirmation? Does the fact I can't always place the exact image of Terry into these remembered scenes make them any less true? Or are the fragments just the flotsam and jetsam of years of suppressed emotions, bubbling up to infest my present with a past?

Here is the conundrum: do I ask Terry if he remembers these memories of mine, or do I maintain silence, eliminating the specters of doubt and deceit? As I interrogate myself with unanswerable questions about an unreliable past, I become less enamored of forcing facts and fantasy into separate categories. I don't ask; I won't ask. This is my story, isn't it? Even if the emotions color the events, I refuse to overdose in reality just to cure myself of an addiction that perhaps, has made my story more palatable and less pedantic.

I return to the present, to Alex and the cat-lapped man who has now moved inside the cafe. As the sunlight flickers through the canvas above us, I mull over the idea that while the facts may have changed to protect the not so innocent, the emotions remain the same. I decide I'm not ready to examine all of these fragments too closely for fear I might discover my painting to be a forgery, my tapestry to be just simple cotton threads, and my memories to be just a brief season of desire.

WHEELS

I'm ten years old, sitting in my father's van, absorbing the scenery, happy to be anyplace with my dad on a hot Saturday morning if it will keep me from practicing the piano, but mostly happy because I'm his sidekick, his wing girl, and when we go places together, the clerks treat me like an adult. Sometimes we go to H Street Hardware. Other times, we go across town to Orchard Supply where he spends time talking about crab and duck grass, things that I know about because he has taught me. He walks me through Fair Oaks nursery to pick out tomato plants. When the almonds are ready to pick, he takes me into Carmichael to see a man who has a nut sheller and I get to dump the bags of nuts onto the conveyor belt and watch the hulls shoot out of the loud machine. Going out with my Dad is always an adventure. While he warms up the van, I boost myself into the cab where I perch on the wooden casing he built over the motor. I'm his helper, riding along to get insect spray or fertilizer or just to look at the bright plants and baby fruit trees at the back of the nursery lot while he juggles the change from his pocket at the counter. His van parts the valley heat that shimmers in the intersections, playing games with my eyes.

"I'm gonna divorce that mother of yours. She's gaining weight." My father does not look in my direction when he makes this announcement. "I told her she was getting too heavy. She better cut down on that eating of hers."

The imp in my stomach that comes to life when I hear threats on the playground, or I've done something to my younger brother that will get me in trouble, gnaws at me, etching through the frantic thoughts spinning inside my head. What is he saying? My parents built the house we live in; my father and mother poured the concrete we skate on and put in the clotheslines that hold my soggy bathing suit and towel after swim team practices. How can he mean such a thing?

My father peers, oblivious, through the sunny windshield. I know my mother is at home, making out her shopping lists, maybe canning fruit while my father is thinking these thoughts. When we get back my mother will have soup and sandwiches on the table because she loves him. She pours his coffee at breakfast and makes meatloaf on Fridays, one of my Dad's favorite meals.

My dad has never let me down before this. Weekdays at 4:30pm I'll hear the tires on the van squeal up the sloped driveway and the engine will rumble into the garage and he will come in the house, his lunch pail banging against his knees and his overalls dusty with metal shavings from his job. He flirts with the neighbor ladies over coffee, but he comes home every night and every Saturday we do things together. How can he be serious about leaving her when she is, probably this minute, planning a nice Sunday dinner and waiting for him to help her pick out a roast at the store? My mother isn't fat; she's plump as are most of the mothers of my classmates and Blue Bird partners. When she falls asleep reading the funnies to my brother and me, her stomach looks like anybody's stomach, not pouchy, not skinny, just a stomach. She wears a white bathing suit to the neighbors' pool where my dad tries to teach me to dive, but I don't think she looks fat.

We finish our errands but the joy has disappeared. When we stop for gas, the old man who owns the station hands me an Abba Dabba bar. I can't taste the peanuts and the effort to chew makes my eyes water. My father's words, the overwhelming inferences of what unexpected things might take place, eats at what I thought was my life, corrosive acid on clear, clean, see-through glass. When we get home, I run into the house and hug my mom, not telling her.

He never mentions the one-sided conversation but instead washes his hands, sets his cup of cold coffee abandoned earlier on the breezeway gate in the sink and pinches Mom as he walks into the laundry room to change his shoes. I tip toe around my parents, afraid to ask, "Is it true?"

When they celebrate their wedding anniversary two months later, he kids her about fitting into her old wedding suit. I laugh, trying to imitate my Dad, secretly glad my mother has lost a few pounds. She never suspects his treachery and continues to bake cookies and a peach cobbler that lasts us a whole week.

* * *

A Delta 88 is parked in our breezeway, bought used from a friend of the family. My younger brother is impressed with the big blue and silver monster and he claims the shotgun seat in the front when we go places. On our family trips, the backseat becomes my private living room, complete with stuffed animals, activity books and pillows. During the school year, my mother takes us in our “new” car to the dentist, to buy shoes, to shop for food. Those wheels rush me to choir practices, youth group meetings and Camp Fire Girls. They never stop turning.

One Sunday, our pastor holds a congregational meeting after church to discuss a family in crisis. Two little girls and their handicapped brother are at risk, requiring intervention and a temporary foster home. When the meeting gets out, I’m the one who asks, “Can’t we take those little girls home with us, the ones they talked about today?” The man who coordinates this effort, a tarnished saint aka ex-con, needs to find the kids a safe place to live while the mother gets help. Who will give these little girls shelter, he asks. The rhythm of the tires repeats this question as we drive home. I badger my mother to let Connie and Liz move in with us. My brother sniggers and makes faces at me in the rear view mirror. He feels the imminent threat to his so-far-unchallenged place in the family.

“I’ll give them my room.” I clutch the padded headrest on my mother’s seat.

“ I can help them with school work and teach them the piano. Please can't they come home with us?”

My mother starts to explain the liabilities and responsibilities of foster care, how giving is more than sharing a bedroom and bathroom, and the alterations we'd have to make by adding two strangers to our household. This is more than I can understand and more than I want to hear. I beg, plead, conjure up reasons why this would be a good thing for our family and as the car brings us into the driveway, to the house my parents built and the tidy, green yard my brother and I play in, the timid faces of the sisters follow me. Our home is so different from the trailer park where the little girls live, surrounded by broken toys, broken people and broken lives.

Their mother, thin and shrill, smokes when she comes to our home to meet us, accompanied by Paul, the coordinator who is struggling with his own vices and understands the struggles of others. There is no mention of a father, no sign of a male presence other than the impatient foot tapping brother who cannot seem to stand still once he gets out of the car. After a short conversation among the adults, Paul and the mother shake our hands, a cautious moment that ends with their retarded brother spitting in the driveway just before they leave. A discontented feeling takes the place of my earlier excitement when I see the girls huddled together, lit by the lights of their mother's dented car. After they are gone, I'm convinced the sisters need us.

Connie and Liz arrive at our house with no extra clothing, no toys, no shoes. They have nothing. Connie is barefoot; Liz wears an old dress, wrinkled and smudged with lack of washing. They enter our home and our lives, needing to be driven to the doctor, the dentist, the school, the drugstore. Soon, bags and boxes of hand-me-downs, clean new panties and camisoles, and shoes for school are stacked and sorted in our laundry room. My mother feeds them and I try to teach them to play Chop Sticks. My brother fights with them, causing alarm and anger on both sides.

Connie chases my brother around the house with the result that she throws up her dinner while I'm babysitting, macaroni and cheese spewed orange and yellow over the green den rug. My brother hits Liz with his flute, bruising her forehead. It's sibling warfare, and my feelings of charity are challenged by the girls' tantrums and my brother's jealousy.

Our car turns into a wrestling arena. When my mother restores order by separation, my brother whispers threats about unlocking the doors, pushing the girls out, leaving them at the side of the road to rot. Our trips in the car end in tears.

A few short weeks and the girls are returned to their mother who lives in an apartment not too far from us. The night she comes for the little girls, I'm relieved but guilty. The memory of the time I teased them by telling them they were bad and wouldn't get any dinner recedes into the past, even though it will bother me years later when I meet a little boy who is neglected by his parents and clasps onto my hand each time I report to his afterschool program to work with him. When I was mean, Liz cried into the hem of her dress, afraid to show her fear, but now, her waif-like face almost smiling, she glances at me from the protective shelter of her mother's arms as if nothing could ever go wrong again. Connie lurks in the background, unsure of what to do but knowing she must leave us. My brother sticks his tongue out at them as the car drives off.

My life returns to normal, until the night the girls are found wandering a busy street, alone, searching for their mother who didn't come home to feed them. Again they have no shoes. They are cold and hungry and this time, there is no way to save them. The County takes over and my little sisters are gone.

I'm told the girls only stayed with us three months. I thought it was at least one year but my mother, whose memory often outshines my own regarding these events, says no, it was three months. It seemed like much longer. The girls started to blossom in the tentative sunlight of our family, but reality thrust them back with their mother, with no hope of permanence or assurance

of success. I have photographs of the girls, sitting on my bed, hugging their adopted toys, their bare feet sticking out of the PJ's my mother bought them. The pictures are the only thing I have left from that time, the only thing between gain and loss that proves they existed.

* * *

In high school, my father drives me to Homecoming Dance. I regale my parents with details of all the work I put into the event. The invitations are *my* original design, the decorations were put together with *my* hands. I made arrangements for the refreshments and anchored gold and red leaves to the walls, turning Cafeteria A into an enchanted forest. I made up the work schedule and organized our crew.

Because I am the official hostess, I have to wear clothing that will weather spills, dropped cups of punch and or obstinate soda spigots. To compensate not being able to have a date for the dance, I curl my hair like Lara Parker on "Dark Shadows," the ringlets cascading onto my shoulders, a soft, dark waterfall of hair. I borrow a pair of flashy crystal earrings from my mother's jewel box. My father allows me to drive our family car. We get to the dance and I honk at my friends, proud to be behind the wheel. I am almost an adult. I say a curt good bye to my parents and flee into the lights and confusion.

The cafeteria is full of students, warm bodies, fancy dresses, velvet jackets and Sunday suits. I rush about, wearing my importance as "chairman of the dance" like a beacon. I have no time for fun, no time to chat up that boy who sits in front of me in French class, no time to chatter and gossip because I'm *in charge*, this is *my* night, my efforts made all of this. While I'm busy making change at the invitation table, I notice someone on my committee dancing with our club

sponsor. It's nine o'clock and I am relegated to the refreshment booth, refilling the soda machine, and packing ice into the frothy cups. I forego all revelry.

We make a lot of money for our club. Everyone is satisfied at the end of the evening. My teacher stands at the door, bidding goodnight to the chaperones and other volunteers, thanking students for coming and parents for their participation, never seeing the girl in the red dress with wilting curls and drooping eye lashes.

Where did this jealous monster that inhabits my body come from? My arms find their way into my coat, and then my fingers hand over the cash box to the school Principal for safekeeping. The spoiled decorations leave me sad as I walk out of the enchanted forest into the witching hour. I get into the car without speaking.

Something is wrong. I answer in one-syllable replies as we wheel towards home, my mother's questions sticking barbs into my skin. When I fail to hear her because I am crying, she demands to know why. What on earth do I have to cry about? She gives me no sympathy but reminds me that I volunteered for the job and I had a responsibility to my club. What brought this on, she asks, incredulous her child should be upset about nothing? Am I so selfish that I can't see beyond my own efforts? My father gives me "the look" and puts in his two cents worth about what to do with me. I don't pay attention to his offer to let me drive, once we leave the busy confines of Fair Oaks Boulevard, yet only a week earlier I had begged to be allowed to drive home in the dark.

I begin to understand that a learner's permit does not an adult make. What do I have to cry about, I say to myself. I feel understated, unappreciated, left out. My mother turns on the cold water facet of parental advice. Her "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" logic competes with the memory video of my teacher dancing with another girl. My mother does not understand. The car wheels make fun of me, taking me away from the scene of my success and leaving me stranded in

the abyss of self-pity. When we finally get home, I retreat to the privacy of my bedroom with the painful awareness that being a teenager, with or without wheels, is nothing to celebrate. It hurts. It stings as I take off my ornaments, my black pumps that I used to be proud of owning, my red dress that feels like sackcloth and ashes. It erases the happiness of knowing I did a good job. It leans over my bed as I toss back the spread and stick my feet under the covers to close my swollen eyes against the burning wounds.

* * *

I am on my honeymoon. The love of my high school years leaves his British sports car at home, the car that began our Emma Peel and John Steed relationship and culminated in a book of photos and a white wedding cake. He rents a glamorous black Le Baron with leather seats and full stereo. The wheels gobble the winding roads through the wine country with ease, my new husband proud behind the padded brown dashboard, fiddling the dials to find a rock station while I watch fog tendrils caress the vineyards. I'm cherishing my improved status as an honest woman. We evaluate the wedding, the reception, the buffet and favorite presents, opened the night before at the rehearsal party. My mouth waters, dry from the salty food and cloying cake icing. We gossip about the guests and our respective relatives. As we exchange memories, I'm aware of an additional passenger, an unwanted third party in the car.

A family friend on his side of the family oblivious to the ornate wedding ring on my hand that matches my husband's plainer one, insisted on a personal audience with my spouse before we left on our trip. Plied with champagne and soft dance music, she took my husband's arm and ushered him out the far door of the hall. To congratulate him? To say goodbye? I couldn't be sure. She had his undivided attention until she noticed me coming to claim my prize.

Relinquishing her hold, but not before giving him a “friendly” kiss, she bombarded me with too many compliments to be credible. I’m trying to remember what she said through the haze of warm afternoon sunlight. I remember the film of my wedding veil and flashbulbs from the photographer but all I think of is her alluring smile, the way she touched him, and how her actions defiled the solemnity of our vows. The smile on my mouth as I chat with my husband is as stiff as the icing on our cake.

“I love you,” he states as he guides the car through the soft green hillsides. The heat of the valley is gone and the coastal air tickles my throat. A quiet, obtrusive coldness seeps into the warmth of our love. I don’t answer him, not at first.

“If we ever split up, I wish you would marry someone,” I name the name of one of my trusty bridesmaids, “and not *her*.” My words interrupt the humming of the wheels.

It must seem absurd for me to make such a statement. Our marriage is five hours old. The cake top with the glass doves we picked out together is tucked carefully into the freezer at home, waiting for the happy couple when they get back. I no longer see grapes and flowers and cows speeding by my window. The betrayal takes me far beyond my husband and I watch our marriage, pieces falling and shattering, broken wings from the glass doves.

I blink into the present. He looks at me and says, “I married *you*, didn’t I? I’m not getting married to somebody else. I love you.”

It’s done. No problem. No reason to think about her anymore, she’s history, he tells me. My wedding dress is back at his house, where we will live and build a deck and take care of stray cats and entertain our friends and drink wine on summer evenings with his fraternity buddies. I start to regret not wearing my gown on the honeymoon, a shield against the doubts, the ones my father saw in the bathroom mirror reflected in my face weeks ago, the doubts I couldn’t hide, prompting him to ask if I was sure, absolutely sure. Those doubts flicker at me from the car

mirrors. My ring finger itches from the foreign object that surrounds it. I hide behind my sunglasses re-evaluating the words, re-evaluating the rest of my life.

* * *

I am riding with another man to another romantic place. I'm looking for substance, not sufficiency. Nothing in my life suggests I'm susceptible to being part of a statement turned question, "I married you, didn't I." My worth is counted in facts, not assumptions. I'm sitting in a truck alongside a man who reminds me of my father, but without the solid significance of clockwork timing and dependability. What this man has to offer is spontaneous and unexpected companionship without commitment so why am I still riding in his truck, viewing the world inside-out from the prison of our conversations?

We glide through Tahoe City, over back roads skirted by clumps of dirty snow, he in search of a rental where his boys can ski and sled and he can meditate and practice his religion, me in search of answers that cannot be found in any Good Book or manual that I know of. The windshield reflects a sad sun. Our dating history is not complicated but it is tentative; each week I feel the sand shift under my feet and I must be appeased by promises and reassurances. We reach no solid agreements and his ties to old habits, old disguises, old policies and procedures add to the chaos that separates us.

This man I care for says he loves me but he's not "in love" with me; the difference, that invisible line severing my arteries and cutting through the pith of my existence, constricts his words into phrases that resurrect the notorious little imp in my stomach. I try to wrap my mind around the idea: love without "love." The more I question, the more his answers recede into nothingness. The wheels crunch over the slush at a rest stop where we hash out the particulars

without the added distraction of traffic but when he pulls onto the highway to take us home, nothing is resolved. Tears water my words, our conversation stalled by the inevitability of the Sacramento sky line. Sentences, exclamations, reverberations, confrontations, turn like the wheels and no matter how I construct them, they go around and around, whirring into a mess of useless words that do not penetrate my lover. The day is spoiled by conversation. I dedicate what energy I have left to making a wordless exit from his truck. It's all play, he tells me. The Gods play with us and we play with each other. He tries to smile the phrases into something even I can understand. The sum and total of my reply is for him to go to Hell. I slam the door, a silent exit displaced by anger. From that afternoon until the demise of our desires, our words make swords from ploughshares.

* * *

At 86, my mother is denied wheels; the DMV pulls her license due to the many trips she had to make to the emergency room. She no longer slips out while I'm at work to buy milk or tour Walgreens. Even though friends and neighbors offer rides, she declines and prefers to wait until I get home so that I can drive her. In the car, her questions reflect the reversal of mother/daughter places, daughter now middle-aged, no longer dependent on a parent for transportation, the parent asking "Can we go to Save Mart, Rite Aide, the pharmacy for just a few things." Love is stretched by unplanned shopping requests and spontaneous errands that sometimes conflict with television shows and sewing projects. I take her because that's what daughters do for parents who can't drive. I pray as I drive my mother around not because I am afraid to drive her but because of the loss of her freedom, of no longer having the choice to decide her daily routines. The woman who sits, as I used to sit, in the passenger seat of the car, observes life from the

windshield outwards, commenting about the changes in our neighborhood and in her life, now and then asking me “What happened at work,” a repeat of the question I used to put to my father in order to make the appropriate sounds of an adult.

I wait for her as she slides, sometimes more slowly than others, from the passenger side waiting for her to shut the door or I help her over the curb, up the steps, onto the grass, taking care she does not trip on something left in the walkway, on the sidewalk, on the slick floors of the hospital. She thanks me every time we go out and I’m embarrassed for that. After all the years she drove me, picked me up from school, took me to piano lessons, to swim lessons, to Day Camp I’m indebted to her and should be thanking her. I take her to Kaiser, to the pharmacy, to the dentist. None of these errands is fun. However, these trips bring back memories of her early life living downtown with a roommate, her wedding at the big Presbyterian church, my dad’s first full time job with the Sacramento Bus Company and later with the school district, friends long since died that we visited when I was a baby and the Masonic alliances formed over the decades that allow my mother a modicum of social connections. We play guessing games, she the narrator and I the player, about who, what, when and why. She is better at this game than I am.

We pass the site of the old Hardware store, now a strip mall and Starbucks. Does she know about what my dad said? Did she suspect he betrayed his love, all the time praising her peach cobbles and waiting for her to make Saturday sandwiches? Did she know the loss I felt, the sudden lurch of stomach and the horrible burning of fear?

I read some old letters that she wrote to her mother shortly after I came along and expanded my parents from couple to family. Then my brother came and my mother had two-fold of children and a man who worked too hard, and did so much more for us that it is hard to sort out the details. One letter alludes to my father’s desire for a slim wife. But I never told her. I never told on my father, never let out those words that he once said. Does she understand my frown as

we pass Fair Oaks nursery? She brings up the flowers as we drive past, noting the brilliant colors and how the nursery looks very expensive, too expensive for our budget so that fact has not changed over time. I smile and ask what she wants for Mother's Day, afraid to expose my duplicity from the past.

Dead words recreate memories that waft through the air like cell-phone conversations. They cannot be seen but nonetheless exist.

There is a phone call from my cousins. My uncle, her older brother, has died and we make plans to drive to Redding. We drove this route before, many, many times, when a trip to Redding meant a searing afternoon on a two lane highway through the salty sands of Marysville, across the fields of rice and alfalfa surrounding the Buttes that jut like prehistoric monoliths up from the brown city and my brother and I squabbling in the back seat of a green and white Dodge, before the Delta 88 and before the little sisters.

I suggest taking the shortest route north but if weather permits, maybe we can drive home via the old Highway 99. It is a long drive, and there is nobody to take the wheel if I get tired; my mother is not allowed to drive and she worries about me. Confident I can make it, I take us north towards death, surfacing memories marred by this negative reunion. My mother is quiet until we go past Williams, past the exit onto the frontage road that winds next to the interstate.

"Your dad ran out of gas back there," she starts the story. "I wasn't very good in those days about telling him to get gas so we went until the car stopped. He pulled over on the shoulder and made me sit in the car while he walked back five miles to get a can of gas so we could make it to a service station. That was such a long, long day for him." She remembers a prince in overalls, her husband who never let her feel unsafe or unloved. This is one of many tales about their married life, before I came along, that she relates on the way up. The wheels' rhythm might put me to sleep and I'm glad of the talk.

“Bless him, your dad drove us up to Redding when you were little. You were miserable and we just sat in the car and cried, it was so hot. When we got to Boyd and Agnes’ house, they took us to Hat Creek.” She wipes her forehead, the heat from the memory leaking through the years. “We were so glad to get above the valley. The trees were cool and the air made it easier on you, poor little kid.”

When the turnoff to the old Redding cemetery comes up, her voice fades in an almost sob. Her mother is buried there and her brother will be there soon. Words wither in the greening of hills and empty saw mills and housing tracts dotted along the freeway. There are no words to match where we are going, what we will do. Death settles in, a third companion that refuses to get out and walk away.

After two days, the events that brought us up from the valley are completed and as I stop to get gas before leaving the city, I’m reminded of the trips we took in my dad’s van, just him and my brother and me, to my uncle’s cabin in Lassen Park while mother stayed home at her job, unable to take time off work. Dad would call her every night to report on us and what we had seen and done and what we were having for dinner. We took 395 West one time and the van overheated. My father, the older prince in grease scarred coveralls, waited until the car cooled enough to add water from several gallon jugs stowed beneath the bench seats in back. Another time, we drove all night through Washington State to find an affordable hotel for two kids and two adults and never once did my father complain about the late hour and the lonely road. The stop for gas and my mother’s concise way of telling stories adds to my databank of family trips. We rumble out of the station from the unpaved parking lot and meet the rest of the world at the stoplight. Each street, each rest stop has significance as we join the migration towards Red Bluff.

The signs for 99 South come way too soon, almost unexpectedly, the split that will send us towards the small farm communities where schools have dirt playgrounds and shopping malls

have no space to expand, surrounded by orchards and fruit groves that pay with canned peaches and dried plums. We pass familiar landmarks: the burger stand where my father bought us root beer milkshakes, the train crossing where we knew a fat cop who loved to give out tickets waited around the blind side. Rows of prune trees make us laugh, reminding us of the foibles of being human and sparking comments my uncle would have enjoyed.

I pull off the highway in Chico because my mother wants ice cream. It is March but the memory of long hours in the car at forty-five miles per hour in July heat with two squalling youngsters in the back prods a sudden appetite for something cold. Baskin Robbins hasn't opened yet so we settle into hard plastic benches at McDonalds. She licks her softy cone while I slurp a vanilla milkshake.

“Are you tired,” she says. I clench and unclench my hands, shaking out my fingers.

“No, I'm fine.” I watch her, concerned that *she* is too tired, or that she might want to rest a while longer, if there is such a place comfortable enough that doesn't cost anything. She jokes about the cone being cold but it's only sixty degrees outside and what does she expect? I waffle, blending memories of my uncle with scenes from my childhood, former trips made when fart jokes and board games kept my brother and I amused, at least part of the time. I tell her we could drive through Chico over to Bidwell Park where once I sat eating tuna fish sandwiches and Fritos while my brother explored the river bank looking for gold and my father studied a roadmap spread out over the picnic table. She declines, refreshed by the break and reveling in fond memories of her family in Redding, now out of sync with the reality of what we have just witnessed twenty-four hours earlier.

We pass rice paddies full of geese and ducks, clouds of grey and black feathers rising and converging into a mass of honking and quacking. The levees are ripe with mustard flowers, a yellow band shrinking back into the horizon, competing with the sunshine for attention. My

mother dozes, trusting God and our car to get us safely back to Sacramento. I sort out the rumbling of trucks passing on the two lane highway, the smells of wet dirt and fresh water, the dead butt feeling invading my undercarriage and my legs stony from lack of use. Death recedes to the north and the promise of a good day winks at me from cumulus clouds bubbling up over the steppes. Mother wakes up and marvels at the endless view and sky. Memory merges with speed. I'm not driving a car, I'm flying west with the crows, yearning for our home, looking for the familiar landscape of neat lawn, camellia bushes, the neighbors' cat waiting for us from the top of our garbage can where he pretends to be a lion surveying the savannah.

The land shifts from unfinished Eden to urban. Conversation changes from memory to fact as we get closer to the convergence of two lane asphalt and the hard packed combination materials known as I-5. I decline the incessant roar of traffic and instead, prolong our adventure by driving overland, through Rio Linda and the western boundaries of North Highlands until we meet Watt Avenue, t-boning my way into the afternoon crush of RT busses, trucks, delivery vehicles and cars. Freeway driving is a cinch compared to city traffic. My mother warns me of bike riders, children, bus stops and other impact-making things. I look ahead, not backwards, to avoid anything that might take us off route, allow us entry into an ER data base or deter us from our destination. Death is wiped away by the bustle and frantic, distracting activity in front of me. We are almost home. We are safe. The place where death sat in the car while we were in Redding is now empty.

My mother recites the age-old poem about Mrs. Mouse and her children while I time the lights. There is a distinct foreign sound that makes me want to stop to see if there is something wrong with the car but the engine continues to pump gas and expel exhaust and as I turn the wheels left, savoring the last few blocks before we reach the house, the place where this journey began, I blink back tears, see a young girl in a white van with her father, feel the heat of a July

morning replacing the cool spring air inviting April and the wheels keep turning, asking me about names, places, things I did, who I am.

EVOLUTION BY THE FOOT

In fifth grade I had wedgies. No, not the Bart Simpson kind. Granny shoes, that's what those popular girls who thought they would be remembered forever called them. Fifth grade, for them, was just a stop on the way to fame. Would they be shocked to know that I cannot put faces to their names and that the only reason I do recall them is for the damage they caused? On the playground, they called me Granny Cool, pointing at the cloddy black brogues that were sensible substitutes for the petite French heels so popular that year. Even Pam, a classmate who trod the fine line between playing me - - an "unpopular" girl - - and giving credence to the clique who demanded her allegiance, Pam, who tolerated my incessant fascination with horses and horse stories and who galloped by my side over the grassy hummocks out by the bleachers, wore French heels to school and thus, she became a further reminder of my place, low as it was. Her shoes weren't heels so much as small pieces of fiber and wood glued together in a tiny wedge meant to look sophisticated. She'd cavort like a flirtatious filly across the asphalt while I followed, a plow horse encumbered by black footwear that made a 'slap smack" sound instead of the "click clack" of heels. I might as well have worn the kind of pogo stick prosthesis the kid in Special Ed wore, a shoe on stilts that moved up and down when he walked. The popular girls' comments behind their Social Studies books and between the stalls of the Girl's bathroom put a huge dent in my already vulnerable armor. I was at the top of the elementary school food chain, yet held behind by black shoes.

When I left Mariemont for the wasteland of junior high, being different resulted in far worse punishments: restroom hazings and unexpected confrontations, cruelties that even my favored teachers failed to save me from, remarks thinly disguised as “help,” the words, “retard,” “queer,” “lame-o,” thrown about like baseballs in P.E. If you were different, you were dead. With some creativity, I managed to stay alive through sixth grade and into seventh, betrayed not only by my shoes but the hairy legs above them. I wore knee socks, summer, spring and winter and hid my fuzzy appendages under a layer of cotton or polyester at all times, fearful that one false droopy knee sock would bring the whole class and the popular kids down my throat. Often, those same popular girls had their own problems, what with having to work their way past the sullen seventh-graders and the heavy-hitter eight grade thugs, but they had numbers on their side and I was only one. One kid out of a hundred relegated to hairy legs, knee socks and the common brands of tennis shoes. Other girls tucked their socks down into their Keds, and one of my classmates who matured earlier than the rest of us, wore Peds with her Keds and flaunted her bare, latte-colored legs during recess. Fashion made me the pariah of the playground. To make matters worse, I made the dangerous discovery that one of the dresses given to me from my cousin’s collection of outgrown clothing was the spitting image of a dress worn by one of the hallway clique. Suddenly the focus left my shoes and gathered dead center on my whole body. It wouldn’t have mattered if I’d worn expensive Nike’s. I was one dead duck; whether it was my feet or my body, I was still running from the bullies, still hiding behind the hallway teachers, my idols, who for a few precious minutes, made the hazing stop. But when the last bell rang and the busses left

the lot, I was on my own and my shoes had to be the kind I could run to the protective spaces where my mother and solid back doors kept my fears at bay.

It wasn't until eighth grade that I graduated from sturdy shoes to the beginnings of meaningful footwear. My mother bought me a pair of black pumps, the color counteracting the abhorrent golden green shifts we wore as members of the school choir. The shifts, matched with starched white shirts, singled us out. The color was meant to signify the school colors but it clashed with everything it came into contact with and the relative ostracizing we choir singers experienced was only diluted by the black pumps.

In their box in my closet, they shone with a dark, subtle light, but polished with the shoe polish my father recommended, the shoes *glowed*. They made me feel like an adult. Even without shaved legs, my nylons itching against the dark hair on my calves, I felt like I belonged. I took my place in line on the risers, confident that as my favorite science teacher watched our program, I would stand out, be accepted and shed my pariah persona. So much responsibility for one little pair of shoes. They took me through the holiday festivals and district choir events and even as I flirted with the resident composer who directed us, the shoes gave me courage.

By Easter, those shoes were joined by a pair of white Mary Jane pumps bought the same day as my Easter outfit, an orange and white gingham suit with ruffled collar and ruffles on the cuffs and a pleated skirt. Just to make sure the shoes fit well, I insisted on walking to the market to get something for my mother. Not to worry; the purchase could have waited for her usual weekly shopping, but I had to flaunt my new identity in the white pumps. No matter that I was fourteen and no match for the sophisticated PTA

moms who shopped at Holiday Market. When I strolled past a group of construction workers on a roof, they whistled. I waved back, grinning, proud they noticed me. I don't remember whether they were there on my return walk but a unique feeling of self-worth propelled me home faster than any bus stop bully. From then on, I wore the white pumps whenever possible. To church, to dinners with family and friends, birthday parties, and as I walked up to the podium to graduate in the hot June light on the asphalt on Arden School's volleyball courts. In my white graduation dress, with ruffles (I had a yen for ruffles that year) my parents and I retreated to the cooler hallways to meet the principal and say goodbye to my beloved educators. The white shoes carried me into the school dance where I asked another girl's boyfriend to squire me onto the dance floor. It was the shoes, I swear, not me. The shoes made me do it. She stared at me, not sure who this person was standing alongside her man, taking him away from her for the 3.5 minutes of canned music. The shoes also forced me to dance with a boy who was certainly not popular, who insisted upon taking my arm and then bowing to me when the set ended. I could not refuse him and again, the shoes forced my hand into his and placed my other hand on his shoulder. Rolly, unpopular but as close to a genius as I would ever get, couldn't Frug or Mashed Potato, but he could waltz and so that's what we did. The next day Rolly signed my yearbook, commenting on how much he relished our dance. The popular kids made fun of me but I remembered, instead, the power of the shoes and the look on Vicki's face when I stole her boyfriend. The yearbook went up on my shelf and the shoes into their box until our family went on a two week trip across country and the

white shoes stayed home while the black shoes got to fly Delta Airlines, see Atlanta, Kansas City and Dallas International. What those white pumps missed!

High School arrived and with it the natural obsession for all girls to become fashion plates. I included myself only to a point: I was not willing to risk my health or my reputation on a fleeting chance to be popular. I'd seen what popularity wrecked upon its victims in the fan magazines so I was cautious. I went back-to-school shopping with my mother in August and of courses, with new outfits, you must have the right shoes.

That summer, at the school district camp, I met a girl who didn't need to flaunt her style but quietly made herself noticeable. Trixie was Norwegian by birth and knew a few sentences in her native language but she also enjoyed the freedom of being an exotic who fell into the crack between popularity and individuality. I fell in love with her Euro-style, the head scarves, the heavy knit sweaters made from ancient patterns and dyed wools. I envied her disinterest in what everyone else wore and said and did. At the young age of fifteen, she seemed mature beyond the frivolities that my friends practiced. Trixie wore brown deerskin flats, tied with leather ties, her sweaters complimenting her fair complexion. She seemed content to have a separate identity and that's what I wanted, a break from the maddening crowd, from the teasing of my peers, from all burdens school thrust on me. When camp ended, I vowed to be her friend and even though she was a year ahead of me at school, I followed her around the halls when we returned in September and as before, admired her shoes. When it came time for me to get new shoes, I demanded a pair of brown lace ups with leather laces. It took several trips

with my mother to find shoes similar enough to make me happy, but we did and I came home one Saturday with brown lace ups that had to be polished with saddle soap.

I polished them every weekend, softening the leather until they were like slippers, never considering I'd sold my birthright to imitate someone who prided herself on being original. Not that Trixie cared; she was beyond fashion – her grades and all the activities she excelled in proved it. I wore my new shoes with a red knit dress to church and my plaid skirts to school, and they are the focal point of a photograph in my yearbook, me standing in front of the guy who would become my boyfriend and in front of the girl who was then his girlfriend but who would give him up without a fight during a trip with the Literary Club to buy paperbacks for a fundraiser. Regardless of these historical memories, my eyes travel to the shoes each time I look at that photo.

At least they were sensible shoes, distant cousins to the black brogues of my childhood. They carried me over the vacant lots while my new boyfriend trotted his bike alongside me and ran me over to meet him after his classes ended in the opposite wing of the school. Summer came and he called on me, inviting me for other dates and dinners with his family and my junior year began, appointing me his “official” steady. Junior Prom tickets sprouted from the hands of class officers. I had to have a formal. I had to have shoes.

My mother, a member of Eastern Star, had a closet full of formals, each for a different office or station. When I was a kid, I used to parade around in her formals and her silver evening shoes while she attended lodge meetings or went out with my father. I must have been old enough to fend for myself at home because my younger brother never

interrupted those proceedings. I would glide from my bedroom into the living room, put on a dance record or classical music and waltz until I got bored with one color or style and went back to change into another gown. I had evolved from the child who inhabited an alternative universe on the playground, a horse in brogues, to a teenager who could wear formals and gowns and not have to hide it. Now it was CRITICAL to have exactly the right pair of heels, well fit for dancing but elegant enough get me noticed.

My mother's lodge friend donated a starry yellow formal which we altered so that the shoulders wouldn't slip and expose my budding accouterments. It was a nice dress, but again, a hand-me-down. Still, impressed by the full skirt and wearing my mother's chiffon and net slip, I paraded around the living room imaging my arms around my beau's neck and his breath on my back. I decided on a pair of gold sling back heels that matched another dress that belonged to a distance relative's niece who lived in Georgia, again something to be worn on special occasions, the old flaunting the new (my attitude and my shoes).

The evening of the big dance, my gold cloth heels glimmered their dull sheen over the tiled flooring of the County Club Mall. The prom had to be changed to an indoor venue when sudden thunderstorms made an outdoor dance impossible. Since sites more romantic were not available so late in the year, we boogied with the canned music echoing past Lerner's Dress store and up against the JC Penney's entrance. When John brought me home that night, my feet were blistered by the straps, but I felt the thrill of being noticed, not because I was different, but because I fit into the overall picture.

By the time I graduated from high school, I was wearing the black pumps to class, as well as the old white ones, alternating the heels between casual Fridays and Mondays when sensible shoes ended the glamour of weekend movie dates and Sunday dinners. French heels were a thing of my past, remembered not with fondness but with contempt, for they stood for those years of barbs and stings I endured. That style had never come back to the expensive department stores where a few friends with pampered feet shopped and the retail outlets that my parents preferred.

My brown lace-ups became obsolete, their gentle leather scuffed and broken down at the heels. I hated to give them up. They stood for my decision not to run with the popular crowd in spite of the fact that since that pair, I'd caved into conformity of a kind. I saw Trixie's face in what was left of the shiny surface just between the heel and the sole, heard her funny laugh when the shoes creaked. As faithful servants they took me to book sales and introduced me to my boyfriend and comforted me, the continual rubbing motions I used to salve them with saddle soap quelling my tears or giving me a break from the drama of high school. They had outlived their usefulness and like horses who can no longer carry weight, they must be given a proper death. The shoes ended up in the Goodwill bag in the front closet where other mementos of my youth were slated for a reincarnation and fellowship in someone else's closet.

I left my graduation ceremony in white bell bottoms, a flowing pink tunic and again, white heels bought specifically for the Pops Concert where I soloed with the jazz band, my last public performance at high school. Me and the shoes went to dinner at the now defunct Tiki Hut with my date. During the ensuing graduation party at Cal Expo,

quite a few of the girls took off their shoes and danced barefoot in the cool grass. I was tired, from the ceremony but also tired of being the odd person out, so, I did the same. We all danced barefoot on the concrete and my shoes, a symbol of my leaving the old world for the unknown ahead of me, lay alone on the wet grass. Funny that at this juncture we reverted to our childhood, when going barefoot was as normal as wearing shoes. Fashion took a *long* backseat to comfort that night. So much for evolution.

In college, there was no dress code. Just as well, since by giving up by old black shoes for a new life of more formidable challenges, I was also met with new fashion ideals. I changed my personal style from one year to the next, my freshman year leaning towards the conservative preppy: woolens, starched blouses, neutral colors and maxi skirts. Then granny dresses exploded on the campus and with my talent for sewing, I created another wardrobe that turned me from serious lit student to sultry hippy. I bought a pair of clumpy boots (remember the wedgies?) in basic black to compliment my growing number of long, dust moving gowns. In the end, I had at least twelve granny dresses and my English professor at the time said I reminded him of a china figurine, perhaps because I looked the part in handkerchief linen and black boots. Encouraged by my experiment in adaptation, and egged on by windows full of wonderful, colorful dancing shoes, I added a pair of Pointer Sisters platforms to my collection.

I owned sturdy walking shoes for vacations, bike riding and boating, church shoes, school shoes – a small assortment of penny loafers, some bought with my own money – but I had nothing as glamorous, or dangerous as the platforms. The Pointer Sisters and disco raged through all the dance clubs and campus frat parties. My job at a

car dealership as the parts department secretary paid well enough that I could splurge and buy shoes that complimented my evolving persona, so I bought white platforms with rhinestone bows, sexy, club-worthy shoes that made me overly cautious as I trekked back and forth across campus. I fit in, but the price included adding minutes to walk to class, to my car, and to my job. The granny dresses were out of place in my auto parts office but the shoes were conversation starters, the guys in the shop hooting and grinning when I walked in from the parking lot. I had to compete with the other women, attractive icons wearing mini-skirts and short suits and always the heels. From the hallway drinking fountain in third grade to the showroom floor wasn't such a large leap for womankind: I'd yearned for admiration but didn't have or understand the tools needed to obtain that in grade school and now, I had both and wielded them with a vengeance. What comfort once gave me, style took away but there was nothing stopping me from pursuing the demon fashion. The shop receptionist was the darling of the mechanics and her clothing and feet gained more attention than the phone calls she took. Not to be outdistanced in the female race, I teetered up the stairs to the licensing office or across the greasy shop floor, sure to be noticed in my short plaid skirt and platforms. The granny dress craze died with the advent of my first raise and one year anniversary at the plant, but it was another two years before I quit wearing those platforms.

All my younger life I'd been victimized by my inability to conform, either because of the finances involved or perhaps a hidden inner stubbornness that refused to let me capitulate. College gave me the freedom I'd dreamed about in fifth grade as I polished my wedgies. I wanted to bathe in academic discovery but most of all, I knew

adults had a wider selection of styles even though, as I got older and my feet less forgiving, I had less reasons to conform. I knew I would someday evolve into a responsible tax payer, a woman who shunned the sirens of fashion and would have to look at the price tags before buying. In fifth grade, no matter what my feet wore, I was protected from want, from hunger, from lack of wearable clothing but soon, I would need to provide these items for myself. I lived at home and paid for my car and my gas and my entertainment but once I moved out, how much would be left over for shoes?

And shopping at the local consignment shops wasn't what I had in mind. This was years before Goodwill meant Saturdays trolling through racks of blue jeans and sweaters, picking out the unusual and the gently used that would supplement the expensive. When I gave away those old lace-ups, it was with the idea that someone without the wherewithal to shop would get them for free. They were a hand-out of sorts, purged from my domain and ready for a new owner to take them over, but that was before thrift stores enjoyed popularity and celebrities donated designer dresses and Gucci bags and people with a mind towards collecting one-of-a-kind hand-me downs came on the scene. I'd worn enough hand-me-downs not to patronize those places except to drop things in the pink bags once a month that ended up at the foot of our drive way for pick up. It never occurred to me that while I was evolving, my shoes might let someone else evolve. Besides, I had an image to uphold, a vision to perpetuate and what happened between my personal incarnation and the reincarnation of my shoes did not concern me at that time.

After I got my B.A. in a field that I no longer wanted to pursue as a career, I got a job, again at an auto parts firm which paid enough to delete the few expenses I did have, with change left over for luxuries. I found myself working in a man's world with two other women, both of whom were married and as before, one of whom was the object of adoration by the mechanics. She wore heels with her jeans, and was a petite vixen whose husband was a jealous fool and who dropped her off at work each morning with a scowl for her co-workers but I liked her bravery in the face of sexism from all sides and her ability to make sex perform for her. She and I would walk four blocks to the Italian market for pepperoni sticks and hot pepper cheese sandwiches, she mincing along in her stilettos, me in flats more suited to the backyard than the office. She and I existed together in a miniscule universe from eight-thirty to five each day but she never failed to amaze me with her ability to create disturbances. If her feet started any marital problems, her painted toes confirmed reasons why her husband might worry. She had a different pair of shoes for each day and none of them, to a lace, were appropriate for an auto shop. I liked her for that.

A year into that job I got engaged. My former stolen high school beau popped the question and I rose from uninteresting clerical worker to prospective wife. The boys below on the sales floor supported my transition and teased me about the wedding night and all other contrivances related to my next evolutionary event. I began thinking along the lines of what it meant to be married and decided I should tone down my attire (including the platforms) so I bought a pair of satin low heeled pumps to match my

wedding dress and passed up the sexy strapped, open sling backs that would have attracted admiration from my new husband's frat buddies.

After the wedding reception I changed into a quiet blue dress for the trip north to our honeymoon suite. As a married woman, I adopted the sensible footwear reminiscent of Jean Brodie or Miss Marple. I still had a few pairs of ankle breakers at home, excluded from my trousseau because I felt they carried lingering memories of my days as a single adventuress. I was an evolved woman, married, with job and husband and I shouldn't have such aggressive footwear. Penney loafers were fine since I was still required to climb those steep steps to my office above the shop when I returned from Napa, but platforms? Only single girls wore those!

Then one morning in June, feeling out of sync with my female companions, I donned a pair of Target brand, ribboned wedgies and put on a short, flirty skirt. Married or not I was still a woman and I wanted to look like one, not like a clone of the Sunday night mystery series on PBS. At mid-morning break, the guys wanted donuts and being the kind person I was, I volunteered to walk across the street to the coffee shop to get Jeff, the head counter guy, and the other employees a treat. The first leg of the trip was a success; I bought Jeff's cigarettes and got a bag of day old pastries without trouble but on the way out of the restaurant, I stumbled on the edge of the planter garden which lay a few inches lower than the sidewalk, and went down. My left ankle bore the weight of the fall and I couldn't stand up. A pedestrian offered to help me across the street but all I could think of was the donuts and Jeff's cigarettes so I asked him to please, PLEASE go the shop and get Jeff to come and help. Five minutes passed before the man returned

to say that Jeff was gone on an errand and there was nobody free to come to my aid. I hobbled across the street, more fearful of the pain than the passing cars, and into the shop where the company salesman got me a cold compress and helped me into a chair in the side office.

The salesman, a former fireman, supported me up the staircase so I could collect my purse and call the company medics. But going *down* those stairs? Forget it. I was in no condition to put weight on that foot. The salesman slung me onto his shoulders, my head hanging just above his butt, my injured ankle protected by his arm and we proceeded to the ground floor. I was afraid to tell my boss how I'd been hurt, getting donuts and smokes when I should have been typing. Jeff finally returned and the salesman drove my car while Jeff followed in the company truck, the first stop being the pay-per-visit medic. The doctor pronounced a sprained ankle and the salesman drove me home, dangerous shoes and all. Those shoes from that infamous day got tossed into the ever present Goodwill heap, this time with less regret than when I'd tossed my lace-ups. I'd denied the real woman in me, the lady independent of the demands of fashion. I'd been punished and punished but good. It took a week for the ankle to heal and longer for me to live down the transgression. Flats became my friends again.

Two years after that incident, I got divorced. Once again, I was part of the throngs of unmarried office workers who neglected nutrition in favor of fashion. I updated my clothing from solid matron to twenty- something single and went into the world of typing and filing and dreaming of romance over a tuna fish sandwich. I worked for law firms and insurance companies and I'm probably the only person in Sacramento

who has ever fallen UP the courthouse steps. I changed jobs, changed residences, changed my name back to the one that appears on this story. I evolved backwards, as it were, to the time before my marriage, the shoe collector, the champagne girl who desired to be desired. I read Vogue and envied my coworkers who had larger salaries, fancier cars, richer boyfriends, bigger closets. It was high school all over again.

To save gas and lose weight, I walked to work and wore shoes made for that purpose, stuffing the soggy or dusty ones into my bottom drawer as I brought out the big guns: patent heels, classical pumps, anything to pretend and invent another identity while stuck behind the computer and the ever-ringing phones. I exercised on my lunch hour, leaving the controlled chaos for the solidarity of the duck ponds around the office complex or the shade of the trees over by the adjacent buildings, always conscious that when I retreated back to my desk, I was in a foreign land, a serf, a servant and not the master, the casual shoes a no-no in the environs of law and order.

Surrounded by women who sipped Pink Cadillacs on their lunch hours and flirted with adultery, my need for immunity suffered the slings and arrows of their outrageous behaviors, both financial and emotional.

That being the case, I got swept up in the need to belong.

Our office staff lunched at a restaurant at Pavillions and afterwards, I slipped into the shoe store and ordered, since they didn't have them in my size, a pair of suede stilettos. They were green and more expensive than most coats I'd bought that had lasted me years. These were mole skin, soft, hunter green and I had to have them. They spoke

elegance, they spoke wealth and status. They called to me from their stand in the front store window and purred at me from the shelf.

A week later the store called to say my shoes were in. They cost a week's salary and like the Dorothy Parker heroine who tears up the bill and tries to forget the extreme financial excesses over cold tea and toast, I did the same in my head. Took the shoes home and petted their green skins, marveled at their height and wore them to work the next day and vowed this would be the last I caved. But I did not eat tuna that day sitting alone by the fountain at the next building. I had a proper lunch of salad and crackers and diet Coke and I shared the lunch room with those who had ignored me and I chatted up the attorneys and I acted like I belonged.

Thank God none of my choices involved another sprained ankle. My paycheck dimmed at the increased costs to keep my feet shod. I wore beat up slippers and canvas pull-ons, flip flops bought at PayLess and cheap flats around my cramped apartment and paid the bills and ate beans and rice for dinner. I changed jobs and found myself the delivery person for a one horse law firm which included duties such as driving to the Bay Area or the Placer County courthouse at least once a week, and multiple trips downtown to the Superior and U.S. courts. Footwear had to be easy to take on or take off to pass the stringent security measures so complex straps, ribbons, zippers, etc. were a deterrent to speed and thus became unnecessary. Neither rain nor sleet nor snow nor shoes could prevent me from fulfilling my errands. When I left that job, my feet and insoles were intact, probably due to changing from high heels back to shoes made for finding obscure law offices blocks away from where I could park my car for free.

Between employment engagements, I rediscovered a friend whose mother raised show horses. My dream in third grade was to own a horse, or have one around often enough to ride rather than patronize the old nags at the public stables. As a child, I longed for the companionship and power of a horse. As an adult, I knew the cost of dreams but when my friend invited me to see the pure bred ponies, I couldn't turn her down. Going to a working ranch required boots so I bought a pair of working ropers, black with small heels, perfect for Western riding and trouncing around the hay filled stalls and the pastures. I didn't see the back of a saddle that afternoon but I got to wash and groom the horses, nuzzle the new colt and feed the lovely beasts. By the end of my second encounter, I was ready, willing and able to be a rancher. My friend's mother put me on to Handley's in Folsom, the premium western wear store. I grabbed a male friend who'd been born and raised in Oklahoma and should know something about boots. I tried on high boots, low cut boots, ropers, riding boots (my legs wouldn't squeeze into the narrow things so that was a bust) and settled on a pair of black boots with dancing heels and fake spurs that jingle jangled. Authentic down to my clover leaf earrings and rodeo shirt, also bought at Handley's, I left the store a changed woman. I'd gone to Folsom a city girl; two hours later, I came down Riley Street a cow poke.

I learned about the touchiness of Arabians and about the touchiness of show horses and show people. Instead of taking riding lessons, I did the ground work, taking Western dancing lessons at a cowboy bar in Woodland. I mastered the two step but not the Boot Scoot and I cannot tell you which was harder. I met a man who worked at Teichert on a loader and owned a ranch at the northern end of the county, who took me to

buy peacocks at Denio's and to a Crystal Gayle concert in Reno. We spun and dipped at the VFW dances. He owned two horses who refused to come to me unless I had carrots. I learned to drive his giant Ford truck and we went to the snow and for drives in the country to see his niece who lived further out where cattle outnumbered houses. For ten enjoyable months I played at being a rancher's girlfriend, adapting to the slower life of the county and shuttling back and forth from his home on weekends, buying another pair of boots at Denio's open market and yet a fifth pair from a feed store in West Sac where he went to get oats for his horses. But the boots, even though they reinforced my alternate ego Friday night through Monday, couldn't quell my jealousy of his ex-wife. Those boots were made for walkin'. I went back to the haunts I'd traded for the wilderness south of Roseville and returned to my city-bred existence. Regardless, I had my boots and when I went to Idaho for the first time I was glad I hadn't chucked out them out with the baby and the proverbial bath water.

Sometimes I put on the first pair of boots I bought in Virginia City for that Crystal Gayle concert, stroking the Indian beading along the sides. For the past year, those boots have not seen the soles of my feet nor the light of day but I won't consign them to a consignment boutique nor will they see the inside of a Goodwill store. They rest on their sides like tired horses, next to my dress shoes and embroidered pumps. Dust and a strange stain, something akin to a watermark but I don't remember where it came from, graces one boot while the other, stainless except for the tiny footprints of a wandering moth, gathers dust next to its mate. They don't speak to me as they did in past years, of past activities, of almost forgotten evolutions.

I've disbanded the western skirt/shirt/boot look for one more cosmopolitan. In spite of the ingrained need to "become," I'm finding my pocketbook and psyche improved by reducing the stresses inherent in change. To that end I've reverted to the neutral combinations of fifth grade, of browns and greens and the black/whites that matched those black granny shoes and later, the black pumps of junior high school. I pick up Vogue while waiting in line at Bel Air and read about the latest fashion trends and reserve judgment for the styles that only twenties-something boobs and butts would fit into. However, a page full of leopard prints and boots with tiger stripes catches my eye and once more, I dive into the questionable soup of who I will be the next day.

I love animal prints, especially the soft faux furs in leopard and ocelot and the lesser jungle creatures and I admit it: I have a small collection of stuffed Big Cats sharing my bed at night. I have almost as many pairs of shoes to match the stuffed animals. I own leopard flats and tiger pumps. One day while shopping I came across giraffe print French heels. They carried the faint reminder of the dark days of my childhood but they also inspired me to buy linen pants and gauzy shirts like the ladies in the old Ralph Lauren perfume ads. Those ladies and their style flattered my sense of textiles and color. They were what I wanted to look like, the part of me that loves academically correct blazers with leather elbows and sharp creased pants in solid colors, accented by the less endangered species. Those glossy ads conjure memories of whiskey sours and long evenings gazing into shades of pottery and fire that melt down from the skies after seven o'clock.

When I used to walk to work on a daily basis, I envisioned myself on a safari, tracking ferocious beasts in my leather loafers but back then, animal prints were too expensive and rare to find them in Macy's or Target. Now, I can revisit my animal instincts affordably through the world of shoes. This launches me into yet another evolution that allows both creativity and currency. It's possible to emulate a style without eating beans and rice five nights a week. However, the scions of fashion design still infiltrate the practical side of footwear and make it difficult to find sense in the nonsense their buyers prescribe.

A pair of tiger print sandals quickly persuaded me they were not the shoes for me after trying them on and taking a short walk across the carpeted floor of Nordstrom's. Years ago, I would have bought them and struggled in private with the zippers and many closures that made my bones ache with the effort to secure the shoes on my feet. This year, at this age, I cannot bend backwards and sideways to reach the zippers. Besides, these shoes triggered the memory of another incident which could have derailed my shoe train on a permanent basis. Oh vanity of vanities, thy name is woman in heels.

A pair of red strapped sandals bought at a discount shoe store walked me over the campus, to lunch and to a dinner date on Good Friday four years ago. Unknowing, my feet were being crucified with every step. By seven that night, I had to change into flats just to walk through Target. By Sunday morning, I could not straighten my right leg. By Monday, I had to crawl to the bathroom, the muscles so knotted I couldn't walk without help. The doctor said it was soft tissue injury with no apparent cause. NO APPARANT CAUSE? Question those unreasonable shoes that hounded me through dinner three

nights before. And I in my vanity, supposed I would wear them to church and had only worn them to work to break them in. Instead, the shoes broke me. The doc prescribed Advil and mild exercise such as walking to the bathroom. For the next two weeks I limped to the bus, to the store, to everywhere, until I was too tired to limp. I missed classes, couldn't climb stairs, panted and puffed to on-campus meetings and to choir practice when I could stand on both feet evenly and without pain.

The zip up leopards stayed on the shelf in Nordstrom's. I bought a nice pair of wedgies in calfskin, painted to look like one of the Big Cats.

Today I'm wearing Life Stride shoes, with wider heels and padded insoles in a print familiar to 1940's pin up girls and aging silent movie queens. My Indian beaded boots rest unworn at the back of my closet, above my animal print summer dresses and spotted chiffon blouses. My new cats carry me to lunch, to my classroom where I can climb stairs without pain, and to church where they purr under the pew. They slink down the aisles of Bel Air, a source of conversation and admiration from my favorite store clerks. I'm the lady in the Ralph Lauren perfume advertisement, asking myself, "who do I want to be today?" Wearing my safari dress, my stuffed cats waiting for me at home on my bed, I prowl the aisles looking for batmasti rice mixes and exotic sauces from Asia and Africa. The next day at school, I hunch over a textbook during lunch, my invisible fangs gnawing the tandoori chicken from Mother India, my thoughts unwinding towards ancient ruins in far off lands ruled by wild beasts yet to be photographed by ladies in soft cashmere scarves and low heeled leather boots. My leopard shoes rest comfortably on my feet beneath table as I consider what will be my next evolution.

SEDUCTIVE CAPTIVITY

I can't read another one of these God-ridden, God-awful scripts concocted straight from the dregs of Deuteronomy. That's what I have to study this semester, captivity narratives, or form of formulaic literature that seldom vary and most often end like an episode of "Bonanza" or "Gilligan's Island." The stories, clones of each other, influenced by Biblical hoo-doo, go thusly: Godly, upright Puritan female (unblemished in spite of having children) is captured during the absence of spouse, children killed or enslaved with her. "Savages" force the wanderers to march through the wilderness, leaving civilization and safety behind. A bedraggled female hostage entreats the Lord for assistance (ad nauseam). Redemption by surviving family members is the standard method of rescue. Her Puritan values intact, the heroine is publicly absolved, and so returns to her routine offices of housework and prayer meetings, accompanied by her now present hubby. Each story contains the same repetitive ingredients, just like Tollhouse chocolate chip cookies. I sit in my office, trying to make sense of my half-written term paper, unable to face another Bible babbling Mary Rowlandson or murderous Hannah Dustin. I rail against my captivity to sentences, phrases, conjunctions, and for the present, literature.

It's almost time to go home. The wall clock is at least ten minutes fast, but I'm not arguing the point. I shut down my computer and hell-bent for wild times in this over-civilized wilderness called Sacra-tomato, make my way down the communal path to the front of the administration building, better known as the bus stop.

My mother warned me never to fall in love with a bus driver or a hairdresser. Actually, she told me to guard my passions carefully: same message, different words. I have not done the latter and by the end of this day, will have done the former.

My journey begins with the mistake every second grader makes at least once. I hop on the wrong bus. You would think that riding the same bus, over and over again, every evening, would eliminate this mistake if only by sheer imprinting with other passengers. However, in the aftermath of an unnecessary discussion with my superiors, adding angry molecules to the air and an unpleasant feeling in my stomach, my planets teetered off their assigned courses causing my brain to malfunction. The Bible instructs never to let the sun set on anger. What it should say is one should never go out a door angry because you could take the wrong bus.

I refuse to admit my mistake. Most obtuse passengers get on the bus and then ask, several miles later, if the bus number is the one they should have taken. I sit in my usual row on the bus, across the aisle from the driver, facing the front windows, and notice the unfamiliar streets where places that I have memorized no longer appear. "It's okay," I keep repeating, "I like to walk. I like to see new scenery. I like a little adventure."

"Grand Avenue, next stop."

The neighborhood reflected in the side mirrors is not what I expect to see at 5:30 p.m. No dogs bound from green front yards, no children bicycle down the street or tired workers bend to pick up the newspapers from cool, cement driveways. Instead, we scoot by auto repair shops with dead cars like rusting sentinels guarding forgotten properties, store front churches with interesting names, and an assortment of closed or "For Sale" businesses. This is not the correct world. I tread the fine line between panic and enjoyment.

Asking the driver where he is headed only proves that such signs as are made of ten inch tall, lighted letters on the bus front must truly be invisible. I assess my options: I can get off at the next stop and hope for a bus going back, or take a cab from the end of this line except that I don't carry that much money and only have enough change to buy a soda.

"Marysville Boulevard."

It's at least ten miles backwards to familiar landmarks and I don't have cab fare. Do Not Pass Go. Exit, Stage Left?

"When does the next bus come along here?" The voice coming from my clammy mouth sounds unconcerned, nonchalant; however, I can taste a metallic taste I've been told is fear. The darkness tries to climb the steps at each stop and threatens to waddle down the center aisle like a mother with small children clinging to her sides.

"In about an hour." The boredom leaks through the driver's voice, verbal jam through a small-grated mouth covered with a silky grey moustache.

A stranger in a dangerous land, this neighborhood full of nightmarish trees and dim lights, I try to peer past his face as if scanning for someone. The glare from streetlights on the tops of the slate and pebble roofed houses along the boulevard reminds me of that movie where a winding road takes the forsaken writer up to a house he thinks is abandoned. At which stop will the fiery haired crazy actress get on? Where is the cunning butler who confesses his involvement in the charade with a cold eye? We've passed the DMV office, the Police Station, another Church of God in Something Somewhere, scrawled in bold and unreadable at this speed. The sides of the stucco buildings start to blend together, a badly made movie spun at the wrong timing. This bus is taking me to Mars, Venus, or Roseville, whichever comes first. Do Not Pass Go. Dented shopping carts and broken bottles wait on the corners, victims for garbage day. Do Not Collect \$200.

"What time do you get back to the light rail?"

"I don't. This is it. I go back to the barn after this route."

Saints preserve us. Here I am, a Mary Rowlandson in the wilderness, with no husband to rescue me, no cab fare and not a single friendly Indian around.

But, the driver is kind of cute. Actually, he is quite attractive by RT standards, and becoming more so as I watch the unfamiliar scenery flowing across his window.

I think fast, faster than normal, faster than my conservative Mother who allows for doubts so that eventually, common sense will take charge.

“So you get off work at the end of the route?” It looks like there’s only me and a couple other people here. Without attracting too much attention I glance back at the empty seats, swinging overhead handles and a student brow-deep in a textbook. Another girl sits close but not next to him, primping in a mirror and applying heavy eye-liner. She must be meeting someone at her stop. She yanks the cord and stands up, revealing a checked mini-skirt and thigh high boots. I watch her tattoos go by as she saunters to the front of the bus. When her stop comes up, she jumps off the last step, into the arms of a clone, a male counterpart who wears black and has purple hair. They are out of place in the urban landscape, two brilliant fish swimming upstream of the cars and neon lights and foreign food places. I notice an Indian restaurant, another unusual business on the block, squished between Taco Bell and McDonald’s. But when the driver brakes for an errant vehicle pulling out of the strip mall, my head snaps back in his direction, his answer muffled over the rumbling bus engine.

“I’m going back to the barn and then home.” He flicks on a smile. I imagine him imagining a nice chicken dinner or maybe Mac and Cheese, followed by the baseball game on cable. A no-brainer evening, the perfect ending to a day full of addled passengers who get on his bus by mistake.

The stop signal chimes and he skids the bus into the curb at a thrift shop where the student, still thumbing his textbook, stumbles out the back door. I feel the freeway from behind a horizon of vacant lots, the perfect place for Charlie Brown to wait for the Great Pumpkin.

The driver peers around the safety partition. He seems a bit nearsighted. "I have one more stop and then I head downtown. Where were you going to get off?"

"Can you drop me someplace close to light rail?"

"I passed the nearest light rail stop about five miles back. I can't turn around. You can take a bus from the end of the line to downtown and catch the train out to I-80 from there."

I'm flustered, lost and my memory ignites visions from my childhood when I lost my parents at the State Fair. I was seven. Standing on the steps of the old pavilion outside the flower display, I felt alone in the universe until my mother yelled at me and I fled, teary and happy, back to their side. That moment haunts me as I try to read the bus book and keep upright. The bus seems to go faster.

"I'm sorry to be such trouble, but it's a long ways home. I don't have cab fare. I live about twelve miles from the K Street Mall."

"You can catch another bus that'll take you to Arden Fair Mall from the last stop before I hit the yard. Is that any closer to where you need to go?" His determination to make my life Hell on a Wednesday evening throws my tenacity into high gear.

"Can I talk you into a cup of coffee in exchange for a ride home?" Imagine that, I think. Asking a stranger, a man who drives a bus and deals with crazies all day to go out with me just because I got lost. All those annoying Puritan women from my English text would rather be scalped than accost an unrelated male for help. In fact, I brag to an imaginary reader of my redemption story, they would be agog with amazement. According to them, I should simmer with the unwashed heathens for eternity for stepping out of my ordained place, I say to my invisible audience.

I reconsider my options. He probably lives in Elk Grove, or someplace further away from stupid passengers like me. He might be thinking what sort of woman would offer him a cup of

coffee for a gallon of gas, depending on whether he drives an SUV or a compact. He might up the ante.

He could refuse.

I convince myself to get off the bus in spite of the loneliness of downtown at seven at night. Even those captives must have had days like this, left behind with the dead fires and dead horses, fending for themselves against the evils of the world, and/or wary transit employees. A red light halts our progress, and gives him the chance to gaze into the mirror above his seat. And laugh. I am the best joke of his day.

“Well, like I say, I can’t take you back to I-80,” he admits. After a few seconds of thought, he adds, “But I could drop you at a corner across from the bus yard. We can’t take passengers inside the yard. I’ll come out and get you in my car.”

Now it’s my turn to be wary. What did my mother say? Never accept a ride from a stranger. But this man is not strange: he’s a bus driver and more coherent and responsible than 98% of his passengers.

“You’re probably married. Your wife will kill me.” I fiddle with the overhead strap, almost strangling my hand as he dodges the behemoth around a stalled car.

“No.” His brown eyes twinkle under obscenely long eye lashes. No. One little two-letter word that holds my life captive for a few seconds. No. I roll the letters around in my mouth like candy.

He stands at the next light and changes the signs to read “OUT OF SERVICE,” then cruises the bus down the freeway in the diamond lane. Poised as a sailor on rough waters, I match my body rhythm to the rhythm of the bus. We chat about normal things, how he likes driving at night, the colors of the sunset we witnessed an hour earlier. I imagine him drowsing over the Chronicle, surveying the stock pages or reading the comics. Does he have a house, an

apartment, a girlfriend or do I even ask about those things? I button up my jacket and prepare myself.

He doesn't have a name. RT employees do not wear name plates. They are numbers; the dispatcher calls them "Employee number such-and-so." I've heard the calls over the two way radio system that barks detours, accidents and passenger announcements. His shirt is blue, the light blue of the sky when I left my office but there is no "Herb," or "Rick," or "Javiar" to tell me what to call him. As I step off the bus, Mr. Driver assures me he will be at the corner within ten minutes. He has to check the bus, make sure there aren't any articles left on board and lock up.

I wait under the lights of Jimboy's Tacos, the grease and corn meal fragrances filling my nostrils, making my stomach growl. Visions of ground meat, hot sauce, wilted lettuce and flaky open caskets holding beans and rice start my saliva running. Traffic whizzes by, those lucky bastards already finished with work and maybe going to a restaurant, a friend's house for drinks, a lodge dinner, or the local steak joint. I pant with hunger, waiting for "Harry" or "Horace" to pick me up.

A MISALIGNED EDEN

Jana Montgomery killed the spider on the first try. She'd noticed the black blob hanging from the edge of the picture frame when she went into the kitchen for a cup of coffee.

Looking at Jana, you'd never take her for a killer. Her espresso colored hair peppered with gray gave the impression of a maiden aunt, someone you'd say hello to in Walgreen's and then forget. Housed in a willowy frame that was met by a heart-shaped face set above her thin shoulders, Jana didn't fit the image of a professional assassin.

"Damn bugs!" Jana swung at the spider with her broom. Before he could regain his six remaining legs and scuttle under the couch, she stepped on him. She swept the tiny squashed knot of broken legs and body parts out the back door.

"Serves him right." Her soft, Southern drawl became more pronounced when she was flustered. She fled to the kitchen and poured a liberal portion of bourbon in her coffee. The hot toddy started a feeling of calm that drifted up from her stomach and settled in her brain. "There now," she assured herself, but just to be positive there weren't any lingering cousins of her victim, she peered behind the other pictures on that wall.

Ever since she'd been caught in a spider's web hidden between the branches of her father's peach trees, she'd been terrified of spiders. She'd only been four years old, but the horrific impression of sticky strands and little crawly things struggling to free themselves had frightened her for life. Nowadays, if anything came in through her door that didn't bark or meow, that thing was exorcised with the broom or the economy-sized can of Raid. Jana always bought the big cans with the bright red tops in case of an invasion.

Velvet moths fluttering against the window screens at night, or even funny-legged caterpillars didn't scare her quite as much. She forced herself to trap and gently release them to

the wilds of her backyard. But spiders! She swept her ceilings and ferreted out potential spider havens under the heavy furniture and in shadowed corners, never letting dust or dirt settle for long.

Spring was a bad time for her: everything in the insect world awoke and went berserk. Jana would come home from errands with several non-essential personnel either hiding in her hat or someplace else too difficult to reach with any modesty. One night, a spider had the nerve to rappel down from her hair as she performed her evening rituals. Jana gave an unworldly shriek and held it hostage in the corner by the bathtub where it was easiest to see: black spider against white ceramic. Without benefit of prayer, she executed it, adding to her memories of a terrified girl trapped between two peach trees.

Her back fence neighbor, Merle Pernod, wasn't bothered by bugs. An avid gardener, Merle shared the fence line and on her side, raised peaches, table fruit, zucchini and tomatoes. She made a point of distributing the wealth of her garden from blistering July through the Indian summer of October, and since both ladies were retired, the free produce helped in times of limited budgets. The two of them weren't close, but in the manner of country neighbors who shared a fence, they exchanged recipes, fertilizer tips, and warnings about pests and plant infections. Merle accepted armfuls of Jana's brilliant roses and moon-faced zinnias. Jana boiled Merle's tomatoes down into a sensuous paste accented with fresh basil and sage that she called, "Tomato Basque," claiming it originated from her French ancestors.

Merle was as squatty and as highly spiced as Jana was thin and reflective. She had gypsy black hair, cut in a tight bob, brown eyes that caught and held you like a butterfly on a pin, and a laugh that echoed in contrast to Jana's reserved chuckle. However, Merle's sense of humor, never well disguised, caused frequent consternation. Theirs was a friendship spiked with a touch

of malice, sprinkled with envy on Jana's part for Merle's casual acceptance of life's little bothers and her bravery around bugs, but that didn't stop the ladies from sharing produce.

"Merle, I swear you've got the best tomatoes this side of Fresno," Jana would say when Merle delivered baskets of Early Girls, Big Boys and the little Italian oblongs to Jana's back porch. Merle might linger over iced tea, spiked with rum, a "genteel" habit that helped pass the long valley summer. A definite spark would light up Merle's eyes as they chatted, missed by Jana but a sure sign of trouble.

"Thanks, kiddo. I've been trying out some new varieties but they don't seem to do as well in this soil as the Early Girls. You can't beat a fresh tomato." Merle would hand Jana one of the sun warmed globes, a smirk replacing the wrinkles under her nose. "Watch out for those worms, though."

She'd wait for Jana's nose to wrinkle with disgust, then bray out a laugh. "Oh hell, they won't hurtcha. Just more protein in the sauce." That was a standing joke with Merle. Jana always checked each basket carefully after Merle left, taking care to pick all the stems and leaves off the fruits. She'd turn the basket over to dislodge any bugs before taking it into her kitchen.

One time, Merle brought her some fresh peaches, so fragrant Jana could smell them before Merle set foot on her doorstep.

"How about these for a pie," Merle called from the screen door. "Or peaches and ice cream? Look at these babies, eh?" She held out the tempting basket like the witch in Snow White. A blushing peach rolled out towards Jana's foot.

"Better eat that one now. It won't keep after rolling around like that."

Jana bent over to pick up the peach, ready to take a bite.

Merle blinked, a tiny, sadistic spark flickering in her brown eyes. "You know, yesterday I found a nest of wasps around the side of the garage, and I bet they were attracted by those

peaches. Don't bite down if you find one with a hole in it." Merle busted a laugh at Jana's horrified stare.

"Merle Pernod, where did you get that mean streak?" Jana huffed and set the basket just inside her door. The other woman, still laughing, tried to apologize, but Jana's feelings were hurt. As Merle walked down the street, Jana heard a signature giggle. Annoyed about the insinuations of bugs, Jana couldn't be sure that Merle was only joking and went to get her Raid can. She doused the peaches with the greasy spray and left them on the windowsill until the next afternoon when she peeled and turned them into eight pints of jam.

However, Jana wasn't satisfied with letting things go. She wasn't in the habit of allowing an acquaintance, let alone the neighbor who shared her fence and preyed on her tender sensibilities to be exempt from retaliation. She could stomach Merle's occasional teasing but when it got under her skin, her imagination took over and the results tore rifts in the surface of their friendship. One day as Jana dead-headed her roses and picked verbena to make a summer bouquet, Merle's face appeared over the fence.

"Better watch for bees, love," Merle said. "I've seen quite a few around today." There was no question she was trying to get a rise out of her timid neighbor.

Even if bees had wings and were essential to a garden, they were not on Jana's list of favorite insects. In fact, Jana had noticed several large bees hovering close to her screen door, buzzing and hunting for a way inside. The bees gathered around her porch so that she had a hard time getting out the door.

Jana put on a haughty smile. "You're absolutely right. I zapped a few of them this morning; pesty things wouldn't let me out of the house to water. Amazing how Raid works on flying insects as well as the creepy-crawlies."

It was her turn to smirk but Merle looked unhappy. “So that’s what’s been killing my bees. I wondered why the blossoms on my pole beans looked sickly. Now I’ll be lucky if I have enough beans for canning.”

Watching Merle, Jana realized this was not a joke but she wasn’t finished. To make up for all the prior scares, she fired another salvo. “I’m sure the bees got to your beans before they died.” Jana stretched and took up the bunch of flowers. “If the bees are as prolific as the worms in those peaches you gave me, I’m sure the beans will produce enough to feed the whole neighborhood.”

Merle’s faced dipped behind the edge of the fence. She didn’t bother to say goodbye. Jana heard a door slam.

“Oh well,” she hummed as she walked into her bug-free home, “I can always go to Safeway if I need more fruit.”

Another Saturday morning came. Since the incident with the bees, Merle hadn’t called or come by and Jana started to wonder if she should be the first to apologize, but the afternoon got away from her and it was evening before she felt guilty.

“I was so stupid to tell her about the Raid,” Jana thought over a tall glass of tea and rum. She grabbed her purse and went to her front door, intending to walk around the block and visit Merle, maybe to invite her to dinner and fresh peach pie for dessert. When she opened the door, Merle stood there holding a full box of produce with another box of peaches balanced on the doorstep. Both ladies looked surprised.

Merle spoke first. “Sorry I didn’t knock but I’m in a hurry.” Her cheeks glowed more than usual, which put Jana on her guard. “I have an engagement for dinner tonight but here’s something to say I’m sorry about our little disagreement. I didn’t have time to can the apricots

but maybe you'd take them off my hands. You probably have more time than I do to fiddle with them."

The implication was clear. Merle had a date and had marked the evening for social fun, but Jana, dateless, with a whole night ahead of her, would have time to sterilize jars and stir jam. The heat coming up from the sidewalk reminded her of the heat at seven o'clock when her kitchen would be full of steam and boiling fruit.

"How lovely." Jana didn't want to refuse the gift but she felt a searing anger at the other woman's good fortune. "Of course I've got time to put up the fruit." A cold smile crossed her lips. "I'd hate for you to have to take on that hot work, especially when you have other plans. Good thing I just bought some new spices and can't wait to try them."

The sarcasm didn't dampen Merle's spirits. "Well, I've got to get ready. Dinner's at six and I don't want to keep my escort waiting."

When Jana could calm her anger, she began to question Merle's announcement. The only men in town were too frail and foggy for either of them. Neither lady wanted to babysit an old geezer who coughed like a shot crow and dribbled soup on his tie, or hobbled through the tea dances at the retirement homes, or had to take so many pills they carried a pharmacy in their jacket pockets. Both ladies shunned these men but there wasn't much else going on and dates weren't a dime a dozen any longer, now that they were over sixty. More to the point, how could Merle get a date when she spent most of the daylight hours in her yard, cultivating her vegetables instead of male companionship? Her composure slipping, Jana refilled her glass.

"How dare she flaunt that in my face. A date." Jana flung the freezer door open to get ice and mumbled through the kitchen to the dining room, where the box sat on the dining table.

"She's so much of a so-and-so."

Something moved. Something small and insidious. Something crawled out from under an apricot.

“I don’t believe it!” Jana jumped backwards. Twenty or thirty pinprick-sized baby spiders formed a conga line from the box to the table and started falling to the floor. The thought of having twenty adult spiders in a matter of days infiltrating her dining room, lurking under furniture and waiting to frighten her, sent Jana streaking for the vacuum.

“She couldn’t have,” Jana choked as she turned on the machine. By that time, the babies had vacated their temporary transportation and were exploring the thick carpeting. Jana piloted the droning vacuum with frantic intent, all the time trying not to scream.

“And now I’ll be accused of being silly for being afraid of spiders, I expect. ‘Silly, silly Jana,’ Merle will say. ‘Afraid of a little bug.’” Sobbing, she ran to the kitchen, knocking a container of sugar off the counter top on her way to grab the red-topped can. She paused at the sink, gasping. When she could find her breath again, she noticed a dead wasp on the floor. Still crying, she let loose with the Raid, sweeping her hands back and forth to clear the air when the can sputtered and ran out. She felt giddy, light-headed, unstrung. The fumes foamed into the air, forcing her to leave the room. She retreated to her bedroom, imagining Merle and her date, lingering over a glass of wine and an overpriced entrée at the local café, Merle spinning a little tale about her timid neighbor and her reaction to the bugs. Jana felt suspended in a web of meanness. She knew the bourbon wouldn’t stifle the rapid beating of her heart. She headed for the bathtub, walking on the bathroom carpet as if it were fragile, ready to collapse under her at any moment. The long bath in scented bubbles comforted her but the evening had been too much and forgetting the fruit on the table, she went to bed.

The next morning, Jana got up and made her usual rounds, still avoiding the dining room until she’d had a second cup of coffee. She swept the floor looking for broken glass from the

sugar jar and vacuumed the whole kitchen so as not to miss anything. Grateful that ants hadn't taken advantage of her scare to attack the mess, Jana let out a relieved sigh and thought about changing into her gardening clothes and embracing the welcome sunlight outside. The trauma of the evening before reflected in her pinched face, but she stumbled on, wafting a dish towel to clear the air as she went to the bedroom to turn on the air conditioner and bask in the cold rush coming from the vents.

She decided, standing in her bathrobe and mulling over what to wear, that baking might be a more productive and safer activity than tackling the weeds peeking out from the front border on the driveway since she had no desire to be accosted if Merle's car happened to come down the street headed for the hardware store or nursery. A little solitude wouldn't hurt and besides, the fruit might spoil if she waited.

Her hands cramped from holding the paring knife, but she labored on until the produce was peeled and chopped. The tomatoes simmered on the stove, ready for the addition of spices and basil. The apricots lay in even lines on the counter. She'd chucked the empty box out the back door, intending to burn it later on to make sure there were no survivors. She took a sip of doctored coffee and pondered whether to make a pie or jam. Her imagination wandered, trying to guess the name of the man who had taken Merle to dinner.

She decided on pies and got out two rounded glass baking dishes, dusting them with flour. After a few moments, she had the butter cut up into the flour, blending the two primary ingredients with a little lard and a sprinkling of almond extract. As she kneaded the dough, she glanced out the window, across to Merle's tidy home. The paint was peeling on Merle's rain gutters. For all her garden skills, Merle had never been one for appearances and the house showed signs of age here and there. Jana mused as her hands broke up the last lump of dough.

What if Merle got married and a man moved in. He'd paint the gutters, keep the shutters nice, maybe even recoat the entire house with a brighter color.

"A man," Jana found herself thinking, "would do more than just plant tomatoes and exchange insults." Her fingers made the motions automatic while the sunlight focused on the slight tilt of Merle's back gate where the post had come undone from its concrete mooring.

A couple with children? "No, that wouldn't do," Jana thought. "Now if the man was single, well, that would be nice. Maybe improve the neighborhood." The dough felt right and she patted it into the round pans and set them in the oven to brown.

She began slicing the lush orange orbs, releasing their heavy fragrance. Calm radiated from her and the thought of warm pie after lunch made the work satisfying. She took the shells from the oven and set them on the cooling racks and finished slicing the fruit.

A hideous beetle crabbed sideways, brought in with the produce the night before but having escaped the initial onslaught of poison, it used stealth, emerging from under the counter edge and foundering in the slippery juice left by Jana's labors. She screeched and grabbed for a new can of Raid, shoving the pie shells to the back of the counter. The red top, secured by some giant at the packing plant, refused to come loose but after she twisted it with her remaining strength, it popped into space and she attacked the countertops with a single thought: total annihilation of the unwanted invaders. A slight stinging made her dab a hand towel under the water to clear her vision.

After putting the finished pies in the oven, she fell, drained, into the recliner in her living room.

"I'll have to go back to the store and get bug spray again." She glanced at the clock and mentally checked the time needed for baking. She felt her shoulders droop. Jana pulled the lever that raised the footrest and closed her eyes.

What awakened her from a confusing dream about tomatoes and roses was a ringing sound that became a doorbell. Jana ran to the oven to check the pies, a first thinking it was the oven timer. The doorbell rang again. Irritated, she yanked open the oven door, took out the pies and set them up to cool, her smile replaced by a grimace showing she was in no mood for visitors, and then addressed the problem of the irritating sound.

“Must be the postman,” but no mail clattered into the metal container under the wall slot.

When Jana opened the door, Merle seemed disappointed that she’d actually been home and her familiar laugh made her disappointment more evident. But when her nose picked up the fragrance of home-made pastry and baked fruit, her smile brightened.

“Just thought I’d drop over and tell you about my date.” Her left foot nudged the door open a little further. Her nose wrinkled, registering nutmeg and sugar. “Smells like you did a pack of work on that fruit.”

There was no getting around her.

“I was just about to make a fresh pot of coffee,” Jana lied, reluctant to press the point and demand Merle either leave or apologize. “Come on in.” Her invitation sounded flat and unconvincing.

Merle followed her into the kitchen where apricots and cinnamon blended with another smell, one Merle felt she knew but couldn’t remember where to place it. She watched Jana measure a shot of bourbon into coffee mugs and waited for her to get sugar from the china hutch in the dining room before taking a seat in the living room.

“You must have been working all morning,” Merle hinted.

Jana pointed to the kitchen and nodded. She got up and took two fragile plates from a stack of dishes in the hutch. On her way to the stove, she kicked a red lid out of the way, into a corner where she would have to bend down to reach it and place it in the garbage pail after Merle left.