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Sacrificial Luann

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SACRIFICIAL LUANN

By

Michelle Kimball

THESIS

Submitted to
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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Michelle Kimball is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies.

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Michelle Kimball September 21, 1966

ABSTRACT

SACRIFICIAL LUANN

By

Michelle Kimball

Sacrificial Luann is a collection of short fiction exploring sacrifice, some large and others seemingly insignificant. The stories also look at the ways such sacrifices impact individuals. The first and title story, “Sacrificial Luann,” follows the tale of one family’s large and ever-looming sacrifice. “The Day the Barking Stopped” focuses on how a young protagonist’s small sacrifice illustrates her large underlying character development. This story also touches on her parents’ sacrifices. “Going Up and Breaking Down” attempts to reveal one moment, in-depth, the moment in which the main character responds to a lifetime of insecurities as well as his fears of not warranting the sacrifices of his father. “Brief Lessons from Victoria’s Secret and Ricky Martin Or Why Ricky Martin and Victoria’s Secret Can Kiss My @*!#%*” reveals one mother’s sacrifice when she learns of her youngest child’s burgeoning sexuality. And the final story, “Lost Connections,” tells of a woman’s glimpse into another’s lifetime of sacrifices.

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2009

DEDICATION

To those who have offered me so much support:
My mom, Dawn, Winston, and Isabella.
Thank you for everything.

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I would like to thank my committee, Jennifer Howard and Dr. Raymond Ventre, without whom this would not have been possible. Your guidance was essential. I would also like to thank Dr. Ronald Johnson, who somehow made me believe I could write in the first place.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

Professor John Smolens once said, “Write what you know.” I took this as instruction to make my settings similar to those with which I was familiar and to create characters based, at least partially, on people I encountered. The underlying advice was to generally keep my eyes and ears open for characters and their stories. More recently, I’ve added write what you read. I select my reading for enjoyment, and I write stories intended for entertainment or emotional journeying or escapism. That’s what I read, and that’s what I want to write. My thesis, *Sacrificial Luann*, is a collection of short stories grown from glimpses into my surroundings and encounters.

Like most writers, I think, in addition to examining my world, I try to learn from everything I read. I learn what I want to emulate. I try to pick up techniques and form, as well as word usage and style. Take, for instance, Flannery O’Connor, who has a remarkable way of turning something innocent into something much more meaningful, to make, for example, a drink of milk a turning point or a climax, to create murder from a mere bus ride. My appreciation of this skill causes me to struggle with toning down my villainous plots, turning my twisted and convoluted storylines into a slice of believable life.

The stories included in *Sacrificial Luann* additionally connect through a unifying theme: sacrifice. The pieces focus on how the sacrifices people make actually create the person and develop their character. Small decisions can affect fate, in fiction as in life, and yet those decisions are sometimes given the least deliberation. How much to bid on a new home, which university to attend and what to study, how to invest our savings, these

decisions are given our full attention, and our best decision-making skills are applied. But whether to initiate a friendly exchange or to repeat a particularly juicy bit of gossip, those decisions are made in the instant without benefit of extensive thought, research or a pros and cons list. And still those decisions may turn out to be as significant or affect a person as deeply or as long term as the decision to divorce or marry. In my stories, those instances lead to moments, sometimes lifetimes, of sacrifice.

Another step in that believable slice of life equation is realistic characters. Here again, O'Connor provides a model. Who doesn't envy her quintessential skill for capturing a character's essence, making them both unlikable and compelling at the same time? A simple action, turn of phrase or piece of clothing renders an archetypal representation of entire eras or regions or both, creates a fine Southern matron or an overbearing mother-in-law or the pseudo aristocrat. Her penchant for moderation serviced her writing well by defining plausible characters. O'Connor's stories don't seem to fight with extremes the way I do. My villains would kick her villains' asses, sadly. But, from her example, I try. I work toward O'Connor's moderation, make no princess without fault, no bad guy completely deviant and unlovable. After all, Asbury of O'Connor's "The Enduring Chill" had his intelligence, and the uncompromising Mrs. May from "Greenleaf" tried to put her children first as she provided for her boys as best she could.

And where O'Connor's settings depict a southern lifestyle, my intention with the stories in *Sacrificial Luann* is to depict any Midwest America small town, a community where one main economic source fuels most families. Long hours of work, typically

dirty and back-breaking, without much real hope of escaping poverty or attaining the American Dream unify the communities' residents.

By continuing to learn from fine craftspeople such as Flannery O'Conner will, I hope, guide my work beyond *Sacrificial Luann*, a stepping stone toward my own mastery of the craft.

Thank you,
Michelle Kimball

Sacrificial Luann

That day, it was one of them real windy, cold October days. A Tuesday, I remember that, in 1947. That day, I had to stay home from school. “Winter’s coming,” Daddy said, and I was to restring the barbed wire fence. A two-man job, by myself. And me only twelve years old at the time. Outside, the cold wind mingled with my tears, causing my cheeks to feel a chapping burn. Larger gusts would catch one or the other of my long braids, whip it against a reddened cheek, the sting making me want to cry some more. By late that morning, my soft hands were already bleeding from the barbs through the worn canvas gloves. And from just plain tugging so hard on the thin wire, pulling with all my might and weight, trying to get it good and tight like Daddy’d showed me at dawn that morning.

But that afternoon, I watched him walk the length of that fence. Checking it. Every so many feet, he’d stop and pulled at one of the three strings of wire. With each pluck, he’d look over to where I stood waiting and shake his head. Sometimes he spit his minty brown tobacco juice on the bare ground. I knew what he was doing. Building my agony, that’s what. Just one of the things Daddy was real good at.

It seemed an eternity before he reached me, and by that time my bladder was ready to bust from plain tension. Believe me, I had tried to keep working while he tested the fence, but in the end, when he reached me, I was leaning absolutely strength-less on a homemade come-along I’d been using. Already bawling. And I knew how much Daddy always hated bawling.

Without saying a word, he kicked the long tool out from under my weight. My hands, raw and bleeding, slid down the wooden handle, gloves picking up splinters as I

fell. I hit the ground hard, with that heavy come-along I'd been using landing hard right on top me. It took my wind and emptied my bladder. And Daddy, he just dug his heels into the ground and spun around. Marched back into the house, leaving me to watch him, crying, wondering what to do. I thought it best if I just kept working on the fence. But I wanted more than anything to change my pee pants. Instead I just kept working, working until dark when he came out to see why it was I needed a golden invitation to come to supper.

When I went in, I tried hard not to look at Ma. Even without any new bruises, I could tell he'd been after her. There was a tension and the smell of sweat and beer. Daddy believed a man ruled his home in any way he wished without fear of interference. My daddy took that rule as his right. He was always after her. Or me. He was always after someone.

I hoped to God nobody'd tell me to wash my hands. Just the thought of soap and water on my raw, blistered flesh nearly made me cry some more. Quick as I could, I ran to the room I shared with my older sister, Luann, to switch out of them pants.

At the table, I always sat across from the high chair where Little Bobby Junior sat, Luann next to little Bobby. Like most mentally retarded people, Luann had a real big heart. She'd always liked little kids. Little kids and old people.

So Luann always sat next to Bobby, fed him, played with him, whatnot. Loved him. Generally took care of him to free Ma up to try and keep peace. Probably the hardest job with my Daddy around. Plus, with Luann tending to him, when Little

Bobby'd get rambunctious or pesty, Daddy wouldn't go after Ma about it. And Daddy never went after Luann.

See, it was on account of Daddy that Luann's troubled in the head like she is. Ma had left Luann with Daddy when she went in the hospital in labor with me. Daddy always said Luann fell down, but I know Ma never believed that. And I know she didn't leave me and Luann with him when she went in with Little Bobby. She had us stay with Mrs. Maxwell from church instead.

So that day at dinner, I remember Little Bobby was acting up. He was always generally a real good kid but Daddy's mood had a way of working on us all. Finally, Ma told Luann to put Bobby out of his chair, said he wasn't going to eat anyway with all his fussing. And that boy wasn't on the floor but a couple of seconds when he went for Daisy, our old black lab that been around forever. Old Daisy had just been lying there watching for fallen food scraps like always. And Bobby, hardly able to walk, yet there he was, ramming Daisy's sides with unsteady kicks, waving his arms, hollering gibberish. And Luann, in that big-hearted way of hers, loved that old dog as much as she loved any of us. She rushed over to pull Bobby off Daisy before he did any real harm.

And I saw the way Ma was looking at Daddy. Watching Daddy, not Bobby, staring at him really, looking for all the world like she'd been struck in the head herself. She knew Bobby wasn't really mean-spirited like that. And even when Daddy turned back to dinner, I could still see that horror in Ma's face.

During dinner, Daddy told me I'd have to miss school again the next day. Told me I'd be too busy restringing the fence. And doing it "good and tight this time, for Christ's sake."

I couldn't help it. I just couldn't. I started to cry. Maybe it was the thought of my raw hands working another day. Maybe it was the thought of all that wasted sweat today. But the tears just came and wouldn't stop.

My crying and carrying on was what probably pushed Daddy over the edge. But who knows with Daddy. Anyway, he threw his first punch, only grazing my cheek, but sending me sprawling anyway. He stood up, drawing back a leg to follow up on his punch. A smashing pain burst on my lower thigh, spinning me so my head was toward Daddy now. I saw Daddy haul up his boot again.

And as I raised my hands to protect my face I saw Ma go at Daddy.

Maybe she panicked at the meanness in Daddy's attack. Maybe she was just getting even for all her own beatings or for Luann's loss, her simpleness. Or she couldn't lose another child, see me end up like Luann, or worse.

Me? I think she couldn't stand to see Bobby grow up like that, like him.

But it was Ma who picked up the knife from the table, ran those last few feet to where Daddy stood over me, beating me. She threw herself at him and stuck that big knife deep in his back. He turned around, with this look like he'd just heard the preacher tell a dirty joke. And he went for Ma. He went for her, but he fell over before he reached her.

I know it wasn't right to blame Luann like that. I know. Ma knew it. Luann never did anything. She sure never killed anyone. I know it wasn't right, but what was Ma to do? Otherwise Luann, Bobby and me all would have ended up in some sort of orphanage or home or something. And being the way she was, Luann would have gone

to an asylum either way. Ma knew that. I don't know what was right. But I do know that Luann would have done anything for Little Bobby. For any of us. I know that. She would have done anything.

The Day the Barking Stopped

I was thirteen years old the first time I saw a man hold a woman. I'd read about men and women before that, certainly, and had even seen kissing and hugging at the movies. But growing up without a mother and no other women around had meant a world where one person simply didn't touch another. Not unless you counted my brother's punching and pushing or my father's lickins.

So when I saw the couple in each other's arms that day, it took a quick second for me to work out what I was seeing. And when I did, I might have thought of it as an act of condolence, like one person offering comfort to another at a time of loss. Or more likely, that's what I hoped it was. But the guilty manner in which they jumped apart when they heard me gave the embrace a different meaning altogether. I hadn't meant to disturb them. In fact, I hadn't really expected to find anyone still home so late on that Tuesday. A warm, early fall afternoon in 1959, it was the day after our neighbors, the Grodins, found their dog had been killed.

The poisoning of the large gray and brown shepherd hadn't really surprised anyone in that Pine Street neighborhood of Lake Burt, Ohio. Just about everyone thought the dog was actually better off dead than stuck on the six-foot chain day and night. Although all three Grodin children were large, football-playing boys, to my knowledge they never took the dog for a walk or played with it. But then I wouldn't have either, because the dog was so terribly mean and irritable, lunging and snapping at anyone who came even remotely close to the limits of its chains.

Most of us neighbors thought we were better off as well. Not just because the dog scared us all so much but because of its annoying, nonstop barking. Not a repeated bark, bark, bark in rapid succession, the kind that a person might eventually learn to tune out. No, the Grodins' German shepherd kept up a constant low woof every minute or two. A deep, low woof every minute and half all day long, from sunup to sundown, then crawling into its doghouse to, thankfully, sleep for the night. Just to wake up the next day to start all over, the same thing every day until that afternoon when the barking just stopped.

The shooting of Oliver's large orange tabby cat a couple of hours later didn't really shake up most of the neighborhood people either. But not owing so much to their usual unflappable ways as to Mr. Grodin's hotheaded reputation. Actually, most people felt Oliver was lucky to get off losing just his pet and not his home, or a limb, or his life.

Our entire neighborhood knew right off Oliver had fed that dog rat poison. Many felt lack of sleep had pushed him over the edge. Oliver, who had moved into the house directly behind the Grodins one year earlier, worked as watchman for the night shift at the Lake Burt Paper Mill and, as such, slept during the day. Only he couldn't because just about every minute he was pulled back from the near release of sleep by a loud, solitary woof.

Even the two deeply Christian women three doors down Pine Street from the Grodins said they understood how Oliver felt and what caused him to react the way he did. But then maybe they were just relieved that the neighborhood's new silence would restore their afternoon nap, like Daddy said.

No one on Pine Street, not even me, believed Oliver's insistence that he hadn't poisoned the German shepherd. First off, most felt it was unnecessary. They certainly didn't really blame him, or think any poorer of him for it. In fact, some even respected him a bit because of it. Many, the men especially, had figured Oliver for something of a pansy because he wasn't married, didn't hunt or fish, never worked on cars, paid no attention to the football games, and had a house cat, Gulliver, not a mouser like the rest of us had. The way he talked with his fancy language and his courteous manner only seemed to secure that impression.

No, most of us didn't believe Oliver for even one second. Instead, we thought about the times he had approached Mr. Grodin about the incessant barking, pleading with him really, trying to reason with him. And, of course, we remembered Mr. Grodin's response: "Dogs bark. So what do you want me to do about it?"

A month before the poisoning, Oliver had pitched one last request. "At least bring the dog inside for a couple of hours during the day." Mr. Grodin removed the unfiltered Camel from his mouth and blew the smoke directly into Oliver's haggard face. "That's an outside dog there." He used the cigarette and his chin to point towards the shepherd. "We don't have any sissy pets here." He waited a bit for Oliver's reply but not even Oliver could think of anything to say, so Mr. Grodin let the door swing shut. In those days, a person didn't go to the police about such matters and, even if they did, Lake Burt's Constable Livingston wasn't likely to take on Mr. Grodin. There weren't many of us that were, and so we all figured Oliver would have to live with it until he moved somewhere else.

Or until the dog died.

But the day after Oliver's entreaty to Mr. Grodin, Mrs. Grodin brought the dog inside. Other than the weathered doghouse, I don't believe it had been inside a building since coming to the Grodins'. I still can't see how she managed to get the creature off its leash, much less into the house, but my brother Tommy told me he saw her do it.

"The dog wasn't barking as much the closer she got to it," he said, "and she kept her voice real firm, just kept repeating 'no' over and over." Tommy had been impressed by her control. He said once she got hold of the collar, she kept a real tight grip on it, didn't give the dog but a half-foot of leash, if that. "I was scared to death, Marie, that she was going get chewed right there and then but, sure enough, she got the dog in the house." Once indoors, though, the shepherd apparently felt threatened. Tommy told me of the growls and low menacing barks he'd heard. "I thought for sure that old dog was having Mrs. Grodin for lunch." The dog had managed to attack Mrs. Grodin. Somehow, she defended herself with a broom and locked it in the pantry. She must have been too afraid to put the dog back on its leash, though, and she turned down Tommy's timid offer of help, choosing to face Mr. Grodin when he got home instead. I noticed the fresh line of red bruises on Mrs. Grodin's cheek that evening as she struggled to their trash barrel. It looked to me like she lost both battles that day, and I wondered why she'd even bothered.

Over dinner the day the shepherd died, Tommy and I talked of nothing else. We were actually speculating how Mr. Grodin would retaliate when we heard the resounding explosion of the gunshot that killed Oliver's cat. My brother and I followed my father to the door where he ordered us back to the table. "Tommy, Marie," he said, "You two stay

here. You don't need to get involved in this." He let the screen door slam loudly behind him.

Tommy, the more daring of us, snuck to the door and stood watching. "Looks like Mr. Grodin just got even for his dog," he said. "He's coming back from Oliver's with his rifle, and he's looking plum pleased."

I felt a literal dropping in my chest as I pictured Oliver lying face down on his kitchen's brown and tan linoleum, a bullet hole between his broad shoulders, even though I knew he should be at work by now.

From the table I could hear Mr. Grodin. "Bastard killed my damn dog," he told my father, who had walked to the edge of our yard. Daddy didn't tell him everybody knew that already. "The wife found its dead body this afternoon while hanging out her laundry," he said, exhaling smoke out his nose. "And that jackass," he flipped his arm towards Oliver's back yard, "was always talking about how someone needed to do something about the barking. What, does he think I'm not going to figure who did it?"

Daddy ignored the question and looked over to Oliver's house. "He's not home, is he?"

"Didn't see him. Shot that damn cat of his." I relaxed a bit then tensed right back up. I knew how much Oliver loved Gulliver.

"Sounds fair enough," Daddy replied, walking back to our porch. "I'm just glad to hear there's no trouble. Thought there might be when I heard the gunshot."

Tommy scrambled back to his chair but he didn't need to because Mr. Grodin slowed Daddy's return, telling him there was nothing to worry about. "We're even," he said before going into his own home.

When Daddy did sit back down to dinner, he wouldn't answer our questions, telling us it wasn't any of our concern. "Now eat."

In bed that night, I wondered why Mrs. Grodin had lied. I knew she had not found the dog while doing her laundry because I'd watched her haul her laundry past the living German shepherd. As one of the only women in my life, and one who would be roughly my mother's age, Mrs. Grodin fascinated me. Although she didn't often interact with us like neighbors sometimes do, hadn't hardly ever talked to me or smiled or waved, I didn't consider her to be rude or unfriendly. Instead I found myself thinking about her a lot, wondering what she had been like when she was younger, what she had wanted to do, wondering why she had married Mr. Grodin, why she didn't leave him. Even though it didn't happen very often, divorce occurred even at that time. My mother had left my father after all. "Up and took off without a look back at me or you kids," Daddy had said. I could see that Mrs. Grodin's life was not filled with happiness, that she worked hard and got beat up for her troubles. With all three of her boys grown now, surely she could find a better life for herself.

That day after school, as I rounded the corner of our house, I had caught sight of Mrs. Grodin in the back corner of her yard tending to her laundry. Her faded housedress hung from her shoulders as she reached up to the clothesline and the low autumn sun highlighted her figure through the cotton material of the dress. At thirteen, I had still not started to show on top and her silhouette stopped me. She bent over to place a neatly folded item in the basket at her feet, and catching a glimpse of the curves under her neckline, I moved behind our porch to hide myself from her view.

Her skin was still smooth, wrinkle-free and without any bruises that day, and I thought again how it was impossible to tell her age. Her oldest son was older than Tommy's age, sixteen, but she didn't look like she was a whole lot older than that herself. Like most women around here, she wore her long dark brown hair in a braided bun at the back of her head. Even so she didn't look anything like the other Lake Burt women. Her dark coloring made her look more exotic to me, maybe Greek or Caribbean. Even when her lips weren't swollen and cracked, they were full, almost a dark brown against her nearly olive skin. I knew from my father and brother that most men considered Mr. Grodin a lucky man.

That day as I watched her stretch up to remove clothes from the line and bend over to place them in the basket, I imagined myself with her curves. The stretching pulled her housedress material over her chest and the bend revealed the crack of flesh between her breasts. I hadn't intended to watch her but, in the end, I saw her remove each piece of her fresh laundry. Then I watched her carry her basket past the barking dog.

I wondered if she had lied because she had poisoned the dog on account of the troubles that time she brought the dog indoors. But that had been well over a month before. In all my thinking I couldn't figure out what would cause Mrs. Grodin to lie about the dog and decided she must have merely been mistaken about the timeline.

After school the next day, Tuesday, I put some potatoes, carrots and a roast beef into the heated oven and started making oatmeal cookies. I hadn't been thinking of Oliver at the time. In fact, as I gathered the ingredients, I was actually thinking about myself, trying to make things easier. Tuesdays Daddy always worked late, putting him in

an awful mood, and maybe the cookies would help. It didn't always work though because sometimes his foulness ran so deep he just complained about the extra eggs and butter or even the wasted cooking fuel. But while I scooped the little balls onto the metal sheet, I decided to run half a dozen cookies over to Oliver's. Hopefully I could catch him before he headed out to his work shift. I'd probably already missed him but I figured I could just leave the cookies inside the back door to let him know I felt bad about his cat.

I set six of the oatmeal cookies in a small box and covered them with a piece of parchment paper. They looked like a pretty drab gift and at first I thought I shouldn't bother. But then I decided a big fancy cake wouldn't be right anyway, like wearing a yellow hat or bright red dress at a funeral, so I took the little box and headed over to Oliver's.

I stood with my hand hanging about to knock on the wooden edge of the door. The sight of Oliver holding Mrs. Grodin against his body froze me. I watched through the screen door as his hand moved down her back, seeming to press her closer still. "You shouldn't have taken such a chance. That's all I'm saying." Oliver's voice sounded even more velvety than usual.

"I just snapped. I saw these," Mrs. Grodin said, reaching her hand to trace the shadows under his eyes, "and I just snapped." I didn't recognize her voice, hardly louder than a whisper, but then I hadn't heard much of it either way. "But now maybe you can get some sleep." Her head dropped and her muffled voice came from Oliver's chest. "I'm just so sorry about your cat." Oliver rested his chin on Mrs. Grodin's head.

As I turned to leave, the parchment paper caught a light breeze. It flapped up and then rested gently back down on the box. But the soft crinkling noise brought the couple's attention to the doorway.

Seeing Mrs. Grodin jump away from Oliver and flush brightly made me feel like I'd done something wrong. Through my inexplicable guilt, I looked at my feet and tried to explain to Oliver. "I wanted to give you these cookies," I said and lifted the box a bit, offering proof to my statement, "and to say I was sorry about Gulliver." Even to me, my voice sounded awkward.

Oliver smiled at me like always and walked to the door. He held it open and stood back to invite me in. I shook my head, shy with him for the first time. I stepped backwards, trying to get away from him and the rush of unfamiliar feelings.

"Well, thanks, then, for the cookies," Oliver said, reaching for the box. He lifted the paper, and smiled familiarly at me. "Oatmeal raisin, my favorite."

I started back to my house but turned around to smile at him, to offer him a departing, "You're welcome." At some point, Mrs. Grodin had walked up next to Oliver and stood watching my departing back. Her normally dark skin, bright red at my earlier intrusion, was now stark white. Not really white, more a pasty blue-gray. Even her lips were pale. All her skin seemed to have a colorless fluorescence through the rusty squares of the door's screen.

Taking a few steps back towards the couple, I looked right at her and said, "Oliver, I just wanted to give you some cookies. That's all," I promised.

Going Up and Breaking Down

Bunchy knows what they are thinking, these two rich, white women. No, he doesn't read their minds, and maybe he doesn't know the precise words or even the exact diction and accent, but with no doubt in him, he knows what the old women across from him are thinking, knows what they've been thinking since he first got on the elevator. Gnarled fingers tighten on thick leather straps of the handbags hanging from their sloped, rounded shoulders. The brown bags are identical, differing only in that one is partially unzipped. They wear nearly the same tan coats as well, one buttoned up to the chin, the other fastened only at the waist with a loosely wrapped matching belt. Their pale blue eyes never leave him, even as they never look directly at him, staring instead at the textured wallpaper of the elevator wall behind him, staring blankly, creased lids barely blinking. The ladies stand, no, huddle, in one corner of the elevator, the one kiddy-corner from Bunchy. Of course.

The tiny black and white pattern of the elevator's cloth walls blend into gray hair which fades into their pasty, cracked skin. The colorlessness is shattered only by their almost matching true red lipstick shades. What is it with these worn-out white hags that make them want to look like their mouths are bleeding gashes cut deep into their powdered chins? Like a group of Howdy Doody or Buffalo Bob look-a-likes, whichever is the puppet. Bunchy cannot remember off-hand.

Bunchy hates how these women think they know him, simply because they watch the news, exchange mugging stories with their acquaintances, discuss the crime statistics as they live in self-created fear. Their near-invisible reaction to him actually causes his neck hair to waggle, stiffen. Why can't they see reason, allow logic to take over their

emotions? How can they think he'd want to beat or rape them, for instance? It is frustrating enough, even painful, that they would think because he is black he must be a criminal. But a rapist! That's beyond insulting. Even just intellectually, objectively, they could study their sagging, enervated sallow bodies and realize that just being alone with them would not drive anyone to rape them. Bunchy knows that rape is not about sex; he has heard the schooling, understands that rape is an act of violence. Still, even these two old bats must see that becoming a victim of rape is primarily a younger women's concern.

And if they would just look at his clothes, his shoes, they could see he doesn't need their money. Sure, he doesn't exude their wealth, but he doesn't need to steal. He hasn't stolen anything since he was a child and he took a Thunderbird matchbox car from the dime store. More than taking the car, he remembers returning it with his father when his sister, Midge, ratted him out. He could tell them that. *The last time I stole anything I was eight years old, you old hags.* But it wouldn't matter. They'd probably go on thinking he was a thief. They probably thought he'd stolen his charcoal suit, tailoring aside, or believed he paid for it with drug money or by pimping. Maybe they were even wondering where his bodyguards were.

Still, they should consider that they are all in the same high-priced office building; all are going to be heavily billed for whatever service they've come here to obtain. Bunchy is here to level with his investment broker, Stevenson, on the twenty-sixth floor, address the series of bad purchases he'd just negotiated, to discuss his possibly changing firms. The light on the elevator's button panel shows they are going to the forty-second floor. Bunchy doesn't remember ever knowing what was on that floor. Probably their

lawyers, changing their wills, wrinkled old crones, trying to decide which of their undeserving relatives will control their tracts of land in Manhattan, their condos in West Palm Beach, their Rolls Royces after their long overdue demises.

Bunchy remembers riding behind his father in the new light blue 1969 Ford with his little brother, Tucker, seated in front next to his mother. His three older sisters filled the rest of the back seat. The whole family, all recently bathed and dressed for Sunday services, added the fresh tang of soap to the car's clean carpet smell. At a stop sign, his father pulled next to a parked truck, an old one, with the rounded edges and slightly raised hood. The newer gleaming vehicle shined next to the dull paint on the rusty one as they waited for the traffic to ebb. The couple sitting in the truck both wore faded denim. The man wore a bright red baseball cap, the only splash of vibrant color. The woman's bare head revealed her thin, straight brown hair. She sat as far away as the big truck's wide bench seat would allow.

"Look at them flashy jigaboos, Ma." The man's voice cracked the air. Bunchy's mother's and sisters' eyes stayed focused on the traffic ahead, but his father's head snapped towards the parked truck. His eyes burned and his clenched mouth tightened. And that was it. He simply turned back towards the traffic and eased the car into its flow.

"Daddy?" Bunchy asked.

"Honey Bunchy," his dad had replied, "there's no changing some folks. Recognize that, and you'll save yourself a whole lot of trouble."

Bunchy hated his father's even, level voice, his calm. He hated him. His dad outweighed that white bastard, by a lot, would have crested over him. Even though he

was seated in the truck, Bunchy could see he was a small man. Why hadn't his father taught him a serious lesson, a bloody lesson?

Look at that flashy jigaboo. Bunchy can practically hear the old women's thoughts, almost hears the words in their pinched voices echo throughout the little elevator. Oh, these two, they are too refined, too well-trained, to actually say the words. In fact, they work hard forbidding even letting one word cross their thin, tight lips. Why would they lower themselves to converse with a flashy jigaboo like Bunchy? Suddenly, almost overwhelmingly, he regrets the striped purple tie he had chosen that morning, despises its loudness with the dark gray suit, cannot shake the feelings of gaudiness. He is conscious of his feet, big and shiny in his patent shoes, and wishes he had worn the soft brown leather shoes with the dark tan suit and a striped brown tie. He shuffles one foot, hating the women for how they make him feel about himself.

He yearns to teach them a lesson. Like his father, he looms over them, over most people, but certainly over these two shrunken icons of a shame he knows he shouldn't have to bear. He imagines swinging one big foot, allowing himself to enjoy the sensation of smashing it into their sides, feeling it sink into their flesh and through to their ribcages. He can nearly hear their shared moans as they writhe on the floor, maybe begging him to stop, maybe asking why, why, why over and over again. And he would answer each whining why with another resounding kick. After all, they *know* why. Maybe he would get down, straddle one of their weak bodies, rain punches on her face and throat as the other watches.

Without even realizing it, Bunchy remembers punches pummeling down on him, raining down on his face and throat. There are three of them, all white, all skinny with blotchy, pimply complexions, and thick light hair. They had jumped him as he walked alone toward the school. A series of apartment buildings lined the road and residents walked to work and to bus stops and to grocery stores, walked past the three boys punishing a young black boy for being alone. Afterwards, when he can no longer offer the boys any lies there, humiliated, burning with so much humiliation he doesn't even notice the pain. And he is confused, angry at himself for being black rather than being furious at the boys for being bullies who pick on young practically defenseless kids or furious at the passersby who do nothing to stop the beating.

The violence of his reaction awakens him. He considers his father's path. He could let it go, learn the lesson his father worked so diligently to teach him. "There's just no teaching some folks." But maybe these two women aren't "some folks." Maybe he can teach them. Maybe they are capable of learning a lesson, a lesson carefully meted out through his fist, his might, his rage. And then he thinks maybe he should steal their purses, mug them, leave them with the knowledge that their fears had been well-founded. Large black men in elevators are dangerous. He *can* teach them that.

He considers stopping the elevator. A simple pull of the emergency stop button and it would come to a jostling halt. The women with their watery eyes will look at his large hand, watch it lower from the control panel. Then, for the first time, they will look directly at Bunchy, their eyes emblazoned with fear. They'll huddle closer still. When the fear takes over, they will look at the floor, afraid to see their fate coming at them. Finally, he'll slam his fist into the wall beside one woman's head. He'll ignore the pain

in his hand, watching her flinch, pulling her head away. Maybe she does not scream. The other woman, she looks like she'd start to scream, probably a nasal, high squeal. He'll grab the screamer's handbag, give her something to scream about. He'll shake the leather bag. Already unzipped, the contents will spread out onto the elevator's floor. Gold pens and compacts and tubes of unreal red lipstick will stretch out into corners and different color slips of papers, remnants of bank deposits and valet parking and credit card uses, would float down like so many autumn leaves. Panicked faces will stare at the jumble of belongings, confusion and dread mingling, pinching leathery wrinkles into peach pits. He'll raise a threatening foot, watch their dread of his swinging kick. They'll rock on the floor in agonizing anticipation. Instead of ending their wait, he'll stomp down on a gold compact, perhaps, or a lipstick, watch it crush under his shoe. He'll raise a foot again, pause while they gape uncertainly, then crash it down again on the dented compact. He'll jump with all his weight, landing over and over again on the purse's contents, hearing objects break and scatter, hearing paper rip.

Paper ripping, just like it had eighteen years ago. He heard the paper shredding, looked up from counter where he was writing down course information in his tablet, and saw his enrollment card, now the two irregular pieces of paper dangling in the high school secretary's hands. Her narrow face seemed to be dragged down by gravity, jowls hanging, hooked nose pointing downward, eyebrows curving heavily over black eyes. "Drafting is for the college prep students." Her voice was neutral but she watched him unkindly, mockingly, looking for hurt or anger. When he offered no argument, and

before he could think to mention his grades, she added in a softer voice, “But football tryouts are for everybody.”

At first Bunchy was not angry. His mind wandered to the football field. He had never been particularly fast but that hadn't held him back in the neighborhood games and in gym class. Still he had never considered playing team sports for school. After the secretary turned back to her typewriter, Bunchy realized what had been taken from him. As compensation for giving up the course he desired, they offered to let him use his big body to guard their revered quarterback. By the end of his first day at Lincoln High, he was enrolled in two shop classes, physical ed, basic math and English and a study period: the vocational prep track.

His father, however, did not even address the subject of football. He said to Bunchy, his mother, and the entire listening neighborhood, “This ain't over. I haven't worked day and night so that my son can take welding and get beat up playing sports. Bunchy is not going to be some janitor.” No, his son would be a draftsman. He would be an architect. An engineer. He wouldn't sweat on an assembly line building cars he could not afford to drive; he'd design skyscrapers if that's what he wanted, bridges, entire towns even.

The next day, Bunchy's father left work early. He arrived at Lincoln High with paycheck stubs from his factory job, from his wife's restaurant job, rent receipts, savings books. He has Bunchy's report cards and old graded papers. Hot-faced, Bunchy stood next to him as he, coolly, with no regard for his rights, his privacy, shared all those documents that revealed his life and his goals, his efforts. His son, he said, never once

raising his voice, is College Prep. He repeated his argument to the secretary, to the drafting teacher, the principal. Even to Bunchy, his case felt endless, tireless, wearing.

With a shake, he clears the image from his head, although his hand is still drawn to the elevator's control panel. A lifetime of being pigeonholed wells inside him, fills him with a fuming energy he's never before acknowledged; his hands clench into tight balls near his thighs. Bunchy is afraid, afraid for the women, but also for himself. He knows he must do something, take something back from these two women for himself. Something for his father who worked so hard to give Bunchy everything he never had. All his father's work, all the opportunity his father created, and all his own work, and what did he have to show for it? An associate-ship at Reedman and Young Architect firm, no promotions in five years, a lousy cost-of-living raise and tiny retirement, no office.

With no idea what comes next, he steps toward the women, slips between them and the control box. Their eyes follow his movement, locked on the air a few inches to his side. They do not look at each other. His eyes catch briefly on the unzipped purse, seeing it rest low against the woman's hip. His left hand hesitates over the emergency stop button only briefly before he touches the button for floor forty-five; its light turns on. "I see I pressed the wrong button," he says to the woman, explaining why he'd crossed the elevator, entered their space. To continue to hold their attention on his mouth, away from his right hand, he laughs lightly at his error. Stumbling a bit, he takes another step, purposely bumping the woman with the open handbag. Without hesitation, that hidden right hand snakes easily, quickly, into the open purse, encircles a wallet. With his large

hand engulfing the small leather wallet, he gently pats the woman, offering her a supporting elbow against the force of his fall. Ignoring his outstretched arm, she steps towards her friend, providing Bunchy with more room. Exhilarated, Bunchy slips the wallet into his suit jacket pocket, thrilling in its weight, its pull on his jacket's fine fabric. He says, "Oh, I'm sorry. Are you alright, then?" forcing her well-bred answer, taking that from her as well.

"Yes, thank you." And she moves away from him again, sidling even nearer her companion, the two of them even smaller than when he first entered the elevator. Bunchy steps back toward the control panel, giving her another foot of space. He is outwardly calm, looking directly at the women, keeping their attention. Inside, he rejoices, feels every breath as it renews him.

The elevator's doors slide apart and the women scurry through into the hallway. They turn to walk down the hall and look directly at Bunchy, straight at him, smile diminutively then turn back to the hallway as the doors slide shut and the elevator rocks back into motion.

Bunchy touches the wallet in his pocket, feels a rush of success, almost not believing its presence. He pulls the wallet out and looks in the first compartment. It holds three bank credit cards and several store credit cards. There is no cash in the wallet, but Bunchy didn't take the wallet for the money. He doesn't know exactly why he stole the wallet but he knows it was not for money. He only knows he needed to present a difficulty to the women, make them feel a bit of his hardship. He looks at the wallet, sees the woman's photographs each in its own plastic encasing. The first, a worn print, is of the woman, decades younger standing next to a dignified-looking man, both dressed and

primped properly. Next, new school pictures of blonde children dressed in current fashions, three of them, smiling and innocent: her grandchildren. Then another old, yellowed picture with a whitish border: the woman again, this time cradling the fuzzy, yellow head of her own child. And a black and white image of the woman, half bent at the waist, hands filled with glasses as she passes out lemonade to two little girls dressed in petticoated skirts. Their hands are reaching out for the glasses, eyes laughing, happy. Bunchy remembers his own mother, her brown body holding the same poise, partially bent at the middle, head held up to keep her scarf from sliding forward, as she doled out Kool-aid to his sisters and him. She smiled, enjoying her children's happiness, their anticipation of the iced sweetness.

That gesture, that way of holding her head to keep her scarf from slipping forward and that automatic hand lifting to readjust it had become the image Bunchy held in his head of his mother. This time, though, she stops holding her head up, lets her scarf fall forward. With an unfamiliar gesture, she reaches up and grabs the scarf, uses it to wipe her face. Her incomprehension clear in her face, she looks over to Bunchy's father, who sits watching Bunchy intently. He looks directly at Bunchy until Bunchy has to look away. "You lost your job?" His voice is mystified, making Bunchy want to explain, but he cannot form words. What can he say? His father stands from his chair, walks to kitchen, and says quietly, "I didn't have any of your chances and I was never fired." For years, Bunchy wonders if the words had been real.

The elevator doors swish open exposing another hallway, this one empty. Floor forty-five. His face heats and he leans back against the elevator's wall, conscious of his breathing, how his breath flows with the throbs he only just now notices pulsing in his head. He feels his hands, detects a clamminess that had also been overlooked even just seconds before. He rubs his free hand down the fabric of his pant leg. The doors shut and the elevator begins, taking him up the final floor. When the doors open again, Bunchy darts through them without allowing them to open fully. He turns and waits, watches the doors slide shut on torture chamber he had created for himself. Just before the two doors rejoin behind him, he throws the vile wallet, pitches it away from himself.

Brief Lessons from Victoria's Secret and Ricky Martin
Or
Why Ricky Martin and Victoria's Secret Can Kiss My @*!#%*

Today, while doing laundry, I found slinky, black undies, miniscule triangles of satin embroidered with tiny roses. And they were not mine. I stared at them, unable to think rationally. My brain repeated no, no, no over and over. I found myself literally praying that the panties had fallen into the wash out of my son Tommy's pocket, a trophy from a rendezvous with his most recent girlfriend. Or even from some affair of Tom, Senior, and one of my own best friends. Anyone but my little girl. Anyone but my Maria.

Where would Maria even get underwear like these?

Maria's best friend, Paige Anders. I knew it even as I wondered.

Even when Maria and Paige first became friends back in grade school, Paige knew too much. What kind of eight-year-old wears nylons, not tights but pantyhose, to a Third Grade Christmas Recital? My mother would have called her boy-crazy. I should have discouraged their friendship right off.

"Elaine," my mother had said, leaning over her pattern, cutting the material carefully, pinning it together, and folding it into those neat, little piles of hers. "Elaine, you stay away from those Nolan girls, especially that Bev. Those girls are trouble, nothing but a couple of boy-crazy chippies whose mother ought to be pure ashamed." She kept cutting, oblivious to how she'd only made Bev Nolan more attractive to me, more exciting.

I hadn't wanted to add that allure to Paige Anders.

Separating the sleek little garment out of the pile of darks I'd sorted onto the basement floor, I prayed again. Please let them be anyone's but Maria's. Something, maybe it was my fear, made me certain they belonged to my little girl, my baby. I looked at the vile garment hanging from my fingertip. Only the undeveloped body of a twelve year old could squeeze into these. They were hardly wider across than one of my hands, the very hands that had patted her back, supported her delicate head, smoothed her fuzzy brown hair. The hands that had changed her diapers--diapers that had been wider across than these jimjams.

My heart moaned Maria's name, each syllable bringing the ache lower until even my gut panged. I felt a mild wave of queasiness. My little girl. She was only twelve years old, way too young to be enhancing, or even thinking about, her sexuality. Wasn't she?

That thought stopped everything. Dear God, please let it be only *her* sexuality she's exploring, not some pimply, greasy, teenage, groping, panting, clumsy boy's. An image of the next door neighbor boy, Rodney Cairns, sliding the despicable black satin triangle down Maria's slim hips exposing her own newly grown black triangle raised more feelings of queasiness. I dropped the panties, nearly gagging, my hands rising automatically to cover my mouth.

Why was I reacting this way? I was a reasoned Mom of the '90s, too busy for drama. And it certainly hadn't been like this with Tommy. I hadn't once been haunted by the image of Tommy's narrow, hairless chest gleaming with sweat as he pumped away at his first girlfriend. But there's a lot of growing between twelve years old and fourteen, right? He had come home from a *ninth grade* dance with two large, angry looking

hickeys. Tom Senior and I saw them as soon as he came in. We sent him to his room, mostly so we could share a good chuckle. Later, I sent Tom Senior in to talk about condoms and responsibility and disease, knowing it would be my turn with Maria sometime in the future, the far and distant future.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to force the emotion away and regain my stomach. Another deep breath and I leaned back against a wooden pillar. A support beam intended to keep the kitchen from caving onto the basement floor, the pole now stopped me from collapsing. Even closing my eyes couldn't completely eliminate the flashes of Maria's legs entangled with Rodney's, the strobe-like visions of him stroking her flat belly.

"I'm not ready for this," I sobbed aloud to nobody. Or maybe to God again. I didn't remember starting to cry, but I felt myself wiping tears away. Okay, get it together, Elaine, I thought, exhaling shakily. Get it together. They're just black underwear. They're not crotchless or edible or stuck with dollar bills.

The image of Rodney's legs on Maria's bed appeared again, then faded slowly, replaced by the memory of Wayne McMasterson's naked legs on my parents' old couch. My breathy excitement, fueled by Wayne's charm, his experience, and even his forcefulness, and his eventual insistence, soon shifted to panic then awkwardness and embarrassment as he fumbled with the tiny fasteners on my stiff white bra. He swore, frustrated with the bra's resistance. What was it he had said? God damn it? No. What was it? "Piece of shit," I said aloud. That's what it was. He said, "Piece of shit."

My underwear had been nothing like this little number here, this black miniature swatch of material. And I had been much older. I went through an entire spiel intended to convince myself that Maria's switch from her regular white cotton underthings was

natural and healthy and beautiful even. With the arrival of her tiny budding breasts would obviously come a sexual awakening, right?

But she was only twelve years old. At twelve, children should be playing with dolls, skipping rope, hosting tea parties. That's what I'd been doing then, wasn't it? But sixth graders didn't play with dolls anymore. Instead, Maria had recently started listening to cds, lively, catchy tunes that repeat the same five or six provocative lines over and over, songs sung by groups of nineteen-year-old, and even older, boys—no men—pandering to twelve year old girls. It was wrong. It was just wrong.

“It's just wrong,” my mother had said, speaking to Auntie Marigene. “Nobody's said any names, but for my money, it was that Bev Nolan. Both those Nolan girls are just out of control.” They had been talking about the most recent town scandal. Someone, it was said, had thrown a pair of panties at the band's lead singer during the Senior Prom, inspired by similar performances at recent Beatles concerts. My mother had responded by prohibiting “that type” of music from our house. We could listen to Roy Rogers and Dale Evans or Dean Martin, same as always, she had said.

I wasn't considering banning my daughter's music, was I? I knew that'd only elevate it to the taboo status of Ritchie Valens' 45s and Bev Nolan. Besides, that wasn't who I was. I wasn't my mother. I wasn't.

I was the cool mom, the mom who played with Maria, took her to every one of her basketball games, her tap-dancing lessons. I was the Mom who learned algebra all over, helping her pass Mr. Burstein's class. I was the mom Maria could talk to, *did* talk to. We were friends, but I was not ready for this. At all. Oh, Lord. I sure didn't feel like the cool mom right now.

Maybe, to be the cool mom I thought I was, I should embrace, so to speak, Maria's venture into her sexual development. Celebrate her first period as more than *her* rite of passage. Celebrate it as my own into my new role as the mother of a sexually active—Oh God, sexually active—daughter.

Okay, slow down, Elaine, I thought. There's a big step, a huge leap, between black panties and sexually active. Oh, there was that image of Rodney Cairns again. What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I stop imagining my little girl's hipless body being clumsily exposed and violated?

I hated that Rodney Cairns. I did, I hated him.

I wiped more tears away. Without really recognizing my intentions, I picked up the black panties by the waistband as though they were tainted, exuding venomous vapors, like the cooties of Maria's waning youth. With a flip, I sent them sailing into the plastic-lined trashcan next to the laundry sink. Okay, no more thinking about them. They're gone. Rodney Cairns will never even see Maria in these panties, much less roll them down her slender thighs, alright? Okay, just do the rest of the laundry. Forget about it and do the rest of the laundry.

The rest of the laundry. The REST of it.

The rest except my daughter's sex clothes.

My body slid down the supporting beam, eyes fixed on the wastebasket, and I actually wailed. I wailed hard. I howled until my lungs hurt. Then I sat crying silently. At some point the tears for my beautiful, innocent daughter and her approaching maturity ebbed, giving way to tears for myself, first for my romanceless initiation, then for my passionless future with Tom Senior, for his lack of imagination, for that small gap

between his front teeth that snags the brown-yellow husks of popcorn, for the long days of hating with no one to disrupt the hate. When the weeping finally stopped, I admit I felt a bit better. A bit. I knew I still wasn't ready for Maria's burgeoning womanhood, but I felt that Maria and I could move into that more slowly than in my brutally vivid, untamed imagination.

I dug Maria's undies out of the pastel lint sheets in the trash bin. Adding the panties to the darks, I began planning what I would say to Maria. What I had to say to Tom Senior would be a lot harder.

Lost Connections

He entered first, carrying a large, battered laundry basket, frowning, letting the door slam behind him. His dirty, red and black plaid frame seemed out of place in the soap-smelling laundry mat. His body's fullness and his unlined skin made the graying of his thick hair appear premature.

The woman followed mere seconds later, lugging her own even larger basket of dingy clothes. Her legs colliding with her heavy load slowed each hurried step. She stopped to look around the rows of machines, trying to wriggle the basket up for a more secure grip. She spotted the man near the middle of the room with his basket at his feet where he had dropped it.

I recognized her immediately. How many times had I watched her walk past the house carrying a twelve pack of Budweiser from the overpriced corner store? So many I had dubbed her the Bud Lady. Of course, I didn't know anything about her, had never even spoken to her. I sure hadn't realized she had a husband. In fact, I had secretly forgiven her heavy drinking out of empathy for her presumed loneliness. But that still didn't stop me from ignoring her as she slowly walked in one direction empty-handed and returned shortly later carrying the beer. I would look for any excuse to avoid the possibility of making eye contact. When none presented itself, I would resort to blatant rudeness, pretending not to see her.

She continued her jerky walk to the center of the room, the wicker basket slipping lower with every movement. Reaching the spot where the man stood, she put her basket down, removed her weathered tan jacket, and threw it on a nearby machine. With

sluggish movements, she emptied both baskets of laundry into two sea-foam green front-loaders, pausing only to brush her graying, shaggy curls from in front of her dark eyes.

The movement made her look tired, not sleepy, just tired.

Once the dirty laundry had been distributed into the machines, the woman peered around the room, again searching for the man. Spotting him seated at one of the sporting trivia games lining the laundry mat's front wall, she started a basket-free, yet slow, somehow burdened shuffle towards him.

She must have asked him for money because he leaned his bulk to one side and took out an old brown leather wallet. With a deep frown and heavy sigh, he passed her three worn dollar bills, digging each one out of his wallet separately. She slipped the first dollar into the old change-making machine. The machine grabbed the money, slid it in halfway, stopped and returned the bill to its starting position. She tried a second time but age and abuse made the machine temperamental and again the money was rejected.

The woman persisted and stuck the tattered bill in the machine's receptacle once more. But the machine sucked the bill in only halfway and returned it. The woman temporarily gave up on the dollar and tried the others the man had handed her. These passed all the way into the metal box and the jingle of coins announced her success. With only one dollar left to change, the woman straightened the edges of the previously rejected bill, uncrumpling any wrinkles, paying special attention to the corners. She then slipped the dollar into the bill receiver and watched the machine take it only halfway before spitting it out again.

The woman peeked towards the man, still at the play station to see if he was watching her, saw that he was and quickly turned away, not meeting his eyes, not

indicating her troubles. She tried the coin machine again. Still the machine refused the money. The woman took the dollar, attempting again to straighten any leftover imperfections before sliding it, once more, into the machine's slot.

As she touched the bill to the slot, however, it was ripped out of her hands. The gray-haired man confronted her with a dark glower. "Can't you do anything? I swear, a simple job like laundry and I have to hold your hand."

His raised voice caught the attention of two yellow-haired girls and stopped their game of wheeling a laundry cart through the rows of washers. Their blue eyes watched the man return the money to his beaten wallet without ever trying the offending bill himself and remove a crisp, new dollar. With the girls still waiting for more conflict, the woman cautiously reached for the bill. The man pushed her hand away. "You'd better let me do it. We don't have all day for you to do a couple of loads of laundry." He slid the dollar bill into the machine and quarters noisily greeted those already in the cup.

His sharp spin and disgusted look left the woman to gather the quarters and insert them in the washing machines. The girls' young eyes continued to follow the woman's movements. As the washing machine added water to the barely spinning clothes, the woman stood looking lost. She avoided looking towards the video games where the man remained at one of the monitors. She also avoided, just as carefully, any glances towards the end of washing machines where the girls stood watching.

The woman's curls flopped over her forehead, as though to remind her that she needed a haircut and she didn't bother to brush them back. At the machines' signals, she added soap to both loads then returned to her aimless gaze. The girls, now bored, sought

out their mother across the large room, checking for the availability of quarters for the Coke machine.

The woman's hands ran through her baggy pants pockets, searching for something, but coming up with nothing. She seemed to force herself into action, walking towards an empty chair sitting by itself near the washing machines. Her feet shuffled across the waxed tile floor, her figure casting crazy reflections in the washing machine's concave windows. She dropped her tiny body into the orange plastic chair that had been molded for a form much larger than hers, making her appear even smaller. Her stare seemed drawn helplessly to the vast wrinkles of her faded red slacks. The bright sunlight pouring in the door and windows showered the woman in a glow that seemed out of place, incongruous, even wrong.

"Hey, Dumbo." The man broke her tranced look several minutes later. "The washing's done." He jerked his head at their clothes sitting idle in the machines. The interruptions caused her small body to jump. "What, do I gotta do the fucking laundry, too?" he asked. I wondered if this variety of rhetoric was his idea of humor.

The harsh language swung several heads in his direction. The two blondes crept to the edge of the row of chairs where they had been sipping their Cokes. Their mother, uncomfortable at their obvious interest, called them back to their chairs with a loud whisper. "Amanda, Julie, get back over here. Right now."

The gray-haired woman leapt from the chair and removed the clothes from the washing machine. She placed them in a nearby laundry cart, seemingly aware and weighted down by the pitying glances. She pushed the cart to the dryers, sending rabbit-quick darts of her eyes towards the man as she loaded the clothes in two of the big

commercial dryers lining the laundry mat's back wall. When she finished, she hesitated only long enough to sigh before shuffling towards the man where he continued to fiddle with the knobs and controls on the play station. He did not break his concentration on the sport trivia game for five or six seconds before snapping at her. "What now?" The woman, waiting at his side, leaned away from the man as though blown back by his words. "Can't you see I'm busy?" he asked.

Again she must have asked for money because the man said, "I just gave you laundry money." He shook his head in exasperation and blew out the word, "Dumbo." Presumably she explained that the two loads had used the three dollars, indicating the magic marker sign she had read earlier. The man leaned to his side again and exhaled, "Jesus Christ," as he took out his wallet. He handed her the money with a look that blamed her for the price hike. Keeping a grasp on the dollar he handed her, he looked over at the bill exchanging machine and said, "Maybe I better do it. We don't have all day for you to screw around at that machine again." He released the bill to the lady, settling his weight back into the squeaking plastic chair. Jerking his head towards monitor he said, "But I gotta score of 155 going here so why don't you see if you can manage it alone."

The woman's feet dragged along the floor as she shuffled to the coin machine where a young man wearing a baseball cap backwards was groping through his pockets. He looked at his collection of wadded bills. "Go ahead," he offered. "It's going to take me a while to straighten these."

She peeked over to the gray-haired man and saw him watching. She slipped the dollar into the machine, which thankfully grabbed the bill and sucked it inside, releasing

four quarters into the change cup. The woman snatched the coins with a quick, relieved glance towards the man at the play station. She trudged a hurried version of her boot-dragging walk back to the dryers she had loaded earlier, without ever having said a word to the young man. She dropped a quarter into the first dryer. Nothing happened. She slapped her palm on the machine near the coin slot. The machine continued to sit. She put another quarter into the machine. Still nothing. She looked anxiously towards the man, her forehead creases deep and marked. She hustled the clothes from that nonfunctional dryer into the one next to it, closed the door gently and dropped one of her two remaining coins in its slot. Immediately, the clothes started spinning. The woman peered toward the play station, looking away quickly. She contemplated the remaining quarter and sadly pushed it into the second dryer.

With the dryers spinning, the woman started back to the chair she had vacated. “Hey,” the man shouted across the noisy room. “Where’s my change?”

The woman walked towards the man, moving faster than she had since first entering the laundry mat. Her lips moved but her voice could not be heard. “What the hell kind of excuse is that?” the man demanded even before her lips had stopped moving. The woman started to talk but again the sounds of the old washers and dryers, laundry doers and their active children, and the piped-in country and western music drowned her out.

“What?” the man snapped. “How many times have I told you to speak up? I don’t know how you expect me to hear a single word you say.” This time he must have heard her because when she finished talking, he yelled, “You stupid bitch.” He leaned his face towards her and continued. “It doesn’t work so you dump good money after bad

into it. Good job.” His face remained emotionless through the tirade. The woman’s face burned red as she shrunk smaller in her worn clothes. Perhaps she apologized because the man simply said, “Yeah, you’re more than sorry; you’re miserable.”

Maybe it was her defeated look or maybe it was his unbidden dominance and mingled cruelty but I found myself saying, not mumbling, but stating clearly, “Well, *someone* is,” before I knew what I was doing. Even after the words were out, I wasn’t sure I’d actually said them. The horrified stare of the woman and hatred glaring from the man assured me that I had.

The man stood from his chair, counting on his largeness to intimidate me. For some reason, that knowledge made all my fears dissipate. I felt far larger than him, enormous even, as the man approached me where I stood placing my folded laundry into a rubber basket. “You talkin’ to me, lady?”

The commotion and activities of the laundry mat seemed to move slower now, with more clarity. For the first time, I noticed the restrooms against the far wall stood with their doors propped open as though they had been recently mopped. The janitor’s closet door was also propped open and the mop leaned against a grungy sink. I felt the burn of attention color my cheeks and an awareness of the blond girls’ stares. I also saw the baseball-capped young man stand, ready to come to my rescue. Even in the brief instant I knew I should feel appreciation of his support but instead I felt so much courage, so much righteousness pushing me forward that I stood taller, turned to directly face this bully.

I started to say, “You bet I’m talking to you.” I was ready to add how vulgar and ignorant he was. I wanted to use big words, just to prove how inferior he was. There was

so much I wanted to tell him. I wanted to tell him my thirteen-year-old cousin could get a 155 on the sport trivia game.

As the words formed, my eyes locked on the woman's eyes, filled with real fear now. I saw three small fading purple bruises, maybe fingerprint-sized, forming a crescent on the woman's forearm. The words stopped, never leaving my brain. I backed down, instead, shaking my head. What must have appeared as, at the very least, an act of cowardice to my on-lookers, was more painful to me than any beating the man could have delivered.

I tried to catch the eye of the baseball-capped man, tried to express my innocence, somehow relay that I was trying to protect the woman, that I had not chickened out. My look was returned only by his briefly accusing one before he pretended to look right though me.

There had been accusation in the woman's eyes, too, before a slightly grateful look fleetingly replaced it, telling me what I already knew, that she would be the one to pay for my defiance. When her lifeless look returned to her eyes, I knew there would be no time for my friendship now and not in the future when she shuffled past the house with the beer.

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