2008

OF NECESSITY

Mary-Kay Wildenhain Belant

OF NECESSITY

By

Mary-Kay Wildenhain Belant

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
Graduate Studies Office
2008

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Mary-Kay Wildenhain Belant is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

_____

Committee Chair: Dr. Ronald L. Johnson Date

_____

First Reader: Dr. Stephen Burn Date

_____

Second Reader: Dr. Russell Prather Date

_____

Department Head: Dr. James Schiffer Date

_____

Dean of Graduate Studies: Dr. Cynthia A. Prosen Date

OLSON LIBRARY
NORTHERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

THESIS DATA FORM

In order to catalog your thesis properly and enter a record in the OCLC international bibliographic data base, Olson Library must have the following requested information to distinguish you from others with the same or similar names and to provide appropriate subject access for other researchers.

NAME: Mary-Kay Wildenhain Belant

FILING DATE: April 3, 2008

ABSTRACT

OF NECESSITY

By

Mary-Kay Wildenhain Belant

This collection of essays explores themes related to memory, midlife, the intersection of the personal with the political, and the life of a female person in a particular time and place, within a particular set of situations. Aesthetically speaking, although these essays vary in form, structure and tone, they maintain a single voice. As a group, they seek to answer the question implied by the thesis title: What is necessary?

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Jerry.

S.P., S.K., D.H.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my thesis director, Dr. Ron Johnson, whose guidance made the task possible and whose creative and scholarly gifts are matched by his tremendous kindness; Dr. Stephen Burn, for providing a perfect mixture of critique and encouragement; and Dr. Russ Prather, who helped me to see that a writer's life lies ahead, just around the bend.

I am grateful to my peers in the graduate program at N.M.U., especially nonfiction workshops EN502 (Fall, 2007) and EN602 (Winter, 2008), for their creative and personal courage, and for their critique, which was always both incisive and encouraging.

Thanks to my father, Don, for the sweet friendship of recent years, and to my sprawling family for their interest and support: sister, brothers, siblings-in-law, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, and cousins and cousins and cousins. I'm so glad to call you mine.

To Claire, J'sette, Luke and Jerry, who have given me permission to write, and plenty to write about. Think Beatles.

Miigwech to the Ones who keep a place where it is possible to pray.

Last, but by no means least, I would like to express my appreciation to Northern Michigan University for the funding it generously offers graduate students. I have been fortunate to be supported by a tuition waiver and teaching assistantship, a graduate assistantship as the managing editor of our well-respected literary journal, and by yearly opportunities to attend professional conferences for which N.M.U.'s English Department, Colleges of Arts and Sciences, Graduate Studies, and N.M.U. Student Travel Fund have provided the funds. The initial work on this thesis, which provided the basis for several of the essays presented here, occurred during the summer of 2007 when an Excellence in Education grant award allowed me to take time off from paid employment in order to write. It is with gratitude for these opportunities and the encouragement they represent that I submit this work.

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

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Patchwork: An Introduction

I didn't set out to be a writer. I was always a reader though, from the age of four on up, and it was there in the lives of characters in books that I tried on visions of my adult identity.

I had settled on becoming an actress by the time I was nine, but only after entertaining: astronomer (Martha Mitchell); teacher (Annie Sullivan); doctor (Elizabeth Blackwell); nurse (Clara Barton and Cherry Ames); detective (Harriet, Nancy, and Encyclopedia); and nun (Madeline's school teachers, in full habit). I didn't want to work in television or the movies, but maybe radio; certainly, definitely and without question on the stage. The western frontier stage, to be specific, which I had read about in biographies and novels, where I would be ready at short notice to perform any of a repertoire of roles, sometimes up on a makeshift stage or the bar in a local pub.

My mother did not approve.

"Do you want to wind up a whore in a hovel?" she asked once, during my teenage years, as she washed and I wiped dishes in the kitchen. She was at her wits' end with me. "Why don't you study psychology? All those kids who tell

you their problems – you'd be good at that. Or you could be a teacher."

I did become an actress. With my parents' financial, logistical and moral support, I studied drama and acting in a highly competitive professional actor training program which aimed to send us out ready to perform – you guessed it – repertory. Once committed, "bitten by the bug," I persisted no matter what discouragement offered itself to dog my progress. And I managed to avoid the profession Mom feared, the one she was pretty sure lay at the end of a slippery slope just beyond the theatrical gateway. Instead I waited tables, worked as a receptionist and did odd jobs for small cash in between low-paying acting gigs. My dad sometimes shook his head at my activities but he seemed to think it was my life to decide after I turned eighteen. Watching her daughter play a host of characters (from Portia at North Carolina School of the Arts to a comedy cabaret at Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park) seduced Mom into some small pride and pleasure, but the economic uncertainty of my profession continued to nag her worry bone and she took to reminding me about how fine my relatives all thought my thank-you letters were. And how, in fifth grade, Mrs. Flynn had praised my stories and

written in her elegant energetic cursive: *You should be a writer!*

My mom is gone now. A pulmonary embolism, the result of chemotherapy for advanced ovarian cancer, took her instantly one night when my youngest child was not quite a year old. She lived to see me married and with three children, my theatrical pursuits set aside indefinitely for the satisfactions of being a mother and for the necessities of my husband's work, which gave us our bread and shelter. She worried about this, too. Dependency on someone else to provide leaves a woman in a dicey situation at the end of the day.

Now, nearly thirteen years after I fell to the floor, hanging up the phone on the news of my mother's death, I revel and struggle within a nineteen-year marriage. I marvel at the children I have had a hand in raising as they get ready to fledge. I prepare to finish my own formal education, perching at the edge of completion of an advanced degree in creative writing. Thank-you letters are shamefully rare, but I do write fictional stories, poems, research, reflections and arguments. For this thesis collection I have written essays. Essays that try to tease out threads of meaning from a mixed-up ball of experiences created by a fast and busy life.

The process of writing these pieces, which has colored nearly every waking moment (and many a dream, too) during the past ten months, has been like pulling remnants from the scrap-bag of my memory to shape stories, like quilts, out of fragments of the past. They cohere, not as a contemporary patchwork might with carefully matched fabrics bought fresh for a preplanned architecture, but in the way that a traditional patchwork of necessity would be constructed: every sound piece of material from formerly useful things has been saved and used to fashion something new.

The scraps from academic life are substantial. They take up an entire corner in the room of my imagination, bags stacked upon bags. For nearly seven years, now, I have read literature, studied criticism, and practiced writing in many of its forms. When I rummage about for what's available, I find long swaths of aesthetic influence, from Willa Cather's sense of place to the poetics of Arundhati Roy. From the rhythm and philosophy of Shakespeare to the scope of Wallace Stevens. From the compressed imagery of William Carlos Williams, to the sharp relevance of Margaret Atwood.

Next to that, I find a bag of checkered plaids, writers whose political and philosophical courage are

weaved into brilliant backgrounds of eloquent articulation. Activists and scholars, poets and preachers, observers of place and fact, storytellers, all. They read out like a litany of literary saints from my graduate school syllabi and research notes: Paine, Wollstonecraft, the Grimke sisters, Truth, Stanton; Emerson, Thoreau, Douglass, Fuller, Alcott; Fanon, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Spivak; Friedan, Steinem, Chodorow, Shohat, Goodman.

Nearby is yet another batch, an overflowing chest of various textures, colors and patterns. These are the authors whose matter, form and style captured my imagination and inspired my development as a writer: Baldwin, Momaday, Least Heat Moon; Plath, Kaminsky, Moore, H.D, Sanchez, Clifton, Baraka, Perillo; Brontë, Hurston, Marquéz, Doctorow, Watson; Sanders, Talese, Kidder, Hampl, McPhee, Blew. Dennis. Alexie. Kinkaid. Morrison. Walker. Faulkner. O'Connor. Dillard. Wolff.

Though I am not mistress, yet, of any of these authors as subject, they all have touched my consciousness in meaningful ways. These years have been a season of life rich in literature, so quickly lived that the names above represent a subterranean mountain of reading ambitions as much as they do the literary influences which have shaped my thinking and writing on the pages that follow.

At the center of my piles of academic supplies, a smaller bin holds bits and pieces of theory, craft and style. These are not as numerous as the folks mentioned above, but they have been central to my effort to build something of substance, something beautiful. Here, some of the ideas date back to my theatre days. Stanislavski, the Group Theatre, the Actors' Studio, Uta Hagen, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, O'Neill, Odets, Kazan, Hellman, Simon, Wilson, the Greeks – I pull from these for character development and dialogue, and for dramatic structure. Janet Burroway's Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft gave me the vocabulary that allowed me to begin to talk about technique. Nick Delbanco's The Sincerest Form: Writing Fiction by Imitation taught me how to learn about style by writing "in the manner of." By the time I heard Robert Olen Butler lecture about "thrum" and "twang" at the Association of Writing Programs conference in Austin, Texas in 2006, then followed up by reading his book, From Where You Dream, I was ready and eager to sound my work against those emotive criteria.

I suppose the most prominent thread of influence on craft in my M.F.A. writing comes from this theoretical bin. Here, I keep short story writer, poet and essayist David Jauss's critical essay, "From Long Shots to X-Rays:

Distance & Point of View in Fiction Writing." Jauss gave me a vocabulary and framework for thinking about point of view not only in fiction, but in literary nonfiction as well. His discussion draws on material from other authors as well, two of whom likewise influenced this thesis: critic and theorist Wayne Booth, and turn-of-the-century Russian author Anton Chekhov.

In "Distance and Point of View: An Essay in Classification," Booth calls for the development of a vocabulary with which to discuss narrative distance and point of view in fiction. He then goes a remarkable distance toward answering his own request. His article outlines a detailed taxonomy of possible relationships between author, narrator and reader.

Jauss draws heavily on Booth's article, agreeing with his predecessor that it is a writer's technical approach in terms of point of view which distinguishes one story from another in a nuanced way (Jauss para.9). He expands upon and specifies Booth's approach to classification by drawing on the contemporary lexicon of film as a means of describing narrative point of view, and throughout his article he develops a comparative analysis of various author's treatments of narrative distance with the kinds of choices film directors must make.

As a novice writer of fiction, I observed that this comparison was very stimulating and fruitful to my efforts. Later, when I began to write essays, Jauss' ideas helped me to resist the extreme subjectivity I suspected might be a risk of working in the genre of memoir. I wanted to write something more substantial than simply artful reminiscences, and not only from a creative standpoint; this thesis project was also focused upon a personal set of psycho-social tasks. As a middle-aged woman whose children were no longer small, who had been so busy with responsibilities and activities that there was little time to reflect upon the my current path or its larger meaning, writing essays offered a chance to see my life more clearly. Jauss's ideas and the concepts Wayne Booth outlined forty years earlier offered artistic means to satisfy my need to get a fix on my current location without, I hope, excessive self-indulgence.

So I applied what I had been experimenting with in the fictional genre to essays. My classmates, also, helped to steer me in this direction. The cornerstone of N.M.U.'s M.F.A. program has been the writers' workshop, where exposure to many different imaginations at work inevitably jogs and sparks a corresponding, though still unique, set of ideas. During my first nonfiction workshop in the fall

of 2007, two fellow students (Cynthia Brandon and Lisa Coutley) heightened the aesthetic effect of their own workshop essays by crafting narrative point of view in very creative, yet authentic, ways. As I considered what to offer when it was my turn to workshop, experimentation with point of view was what consumed my imaginative energies.

I had already recognized that accomplished poets sometimes apply their craft in order to write successful nonfiction. I admired such authors, finding that their approach greatly enriched and deepened the aesthetic appeal of their work. The creation of strong, concrete images voiced in fresh, poetic language was something I desired to incorporate into my own writing. Also, I had encountered elements of fiction in many professionally authored essays and I hoped that my experience in that genre would help me to write satisfying nonfiction. Finally, it occurred to me that point of view could function like triangulation, a method used by surveyors, navigators, wildlife biologists and others to ascertain location by establishing three known points.

As a result, two of the essays here, “Of Necessity” and “A Life Still in Watercolor,” attempt to blend a personal, developmental quest with experimental structural choices. Both personally and aesthetically, the goal was

to get a fix on my current location in life by establishing not just three, but multiple scenes from which the present moment might be understood within a wide perspective. I fore-grounded time; the various segments within each essay move about on the timeline of my life and, in "Of Necessity," the timeline of my family's history before I was born. Narrative distance is also important. In both essays, I alternate between first and third person narration. "Of Necessity" remains mostly in present tense, although several sections use the present as a platform from which to reach into the known future. In "A Life Still in Watercolor," the experiment is further complicated by back and forth movement between present and past tenses. As I worked on the piece I hoped that rocking between perspectives in this way might mimic the theme of water imagery, giving the reader an interesting and satisfying experience.

Although the other essays here are more straightforward in their overall structures, I believe that my exploration encouraged more specific treatment of voice and pacing as a result of increased attention to point of view and distance.

Jauss's inclusion of Chekhov's work as an illustration helped me, too. The Russian master is credited as a root

source of so much that characterizes the short fiction we praise today: naturalism, humor and precise character development, to name just a few. Since the impulse to use the strengths of one genre to enrich the other appears vigorous and persistent, both in the writings of established professionals and in my own developing sense of craft, it seems inevitable to cite this master fictional storyteller as a creative inspiration to my essay-writing.

Even more relevant, in terms of sensibility, was my introduction to Chekhov's letters during the same form and technique class that gave me Booth and Jauss. Not only did I admire the Russian author's style, but I felt a kinship with him in terms of shared underlying assumptions. As I prepared to write this introduction, I tried to track down a letter in which Chekhov writes about casting off the thinking that characterizes a slave in order to become a free man, capable of doing real work. To my delight, I was reminded that my own thesis director had written a book which contained the information I needed. There, I found Chekhov's letters to his publisher and friend, Aleksey Suvorin, where the playwright (whose work I had so admired and enjoyed, both as an actress and an audience member) had written about the importance of "*a personal sense of freedom*" to an artist (Johnson 118).

Although Chekhov was successful during his lifetime - educated, holding responsible positions and poplar as an author and playwright - his came from humble origins as the son of serfs, of peasants. He claimed that he had to learn to defeat the slave mentality which was his legacy in order to pursue his work as a writer:

> What aristocratic writers take from nature gratis, the less privileged must pay for with their youth. Try and write a story about a young man —— the son of a serf, a former grocer, choirboy, schoolboy, and university student, raised on respect for rank, kissing the priests' hands, worshiping the ideas of others, and giving thanks for every piece of bread, receiving frequent whippings, making the rounds as the tutor without galoshes, brawling, torturing animals, enjoying dinners at the houses of rich relatives, needlessly hypocritical before God and man merely to acknowledge his own insignificance —— write about how this young man squeezes the slave out of himself drop by drop and how, on waking up one fine morning, he finds that the blood coursing through his veins is no longer the blood of a slave, but that of a real human being (Johnson 118).

On the surface of it, my times and situation would seem to have little in common with a late-nineteenth century, recently feudal experience of life. Still, the ideas Chekhov proposed resonate strongly with me. My middle-class status comes with a price tag that was paid, largely, by my grandparents' very hard-working, blue collar lives, and by my parents' narrow grasp on the economic security and social status which they obtained through education

and, again, hard work. There is nothing *assumed* about the privilege they gave me. In my own small, particular way, the essays I have written attempt to question the status – the freedom, even – of the narrator, of her actions and choices. This is particularly true about the experimental pieces discussed above, but also in the more structurally conventional essays, such as "Pollyanna Patriot" and "Sweet Mystery."

Chekhov's identity development as a person and a writer will, I expect, continue to be a tantalizing inspiration as I practice the crafts of writing both essays and fiction.

Back in the attic of my imagination, occupying more floor space than all the rest combined, are boxes and bags, chests and baskets, cupboards full of the experiences, impressions, images, judgments, and feelings that make up a life. My particular life, which is pretty ordinary as it turns out. These days, I like and approve of ordinary. I hope ordinary people might read what I've written and find that it says something for them. Something they might not have been able to express, but which satisfies and creates a sense that such a life can be the source of art. That art aims to reflect even our ordinary lives, and that, when it accomplishes this, it can help us to live better. I

feel that writing these essays has offered me the chance to do that.

I wish my mom could be here to read this group of essays. She would recognize the bits of baby blanket here and there, the snips of tee shirt souvenirs, the purple dress I bought too small and never did fit into, cut up now to make a single border for the patchwork cloth I've made. She wouldn't approve of all of it, I guess, but I long to think that she would understand and find my efforts valuable. That she might find most of it a pretty good read.

CRICKET KARMA

I did attempt the preservation of life at first, but actions are what really count, right? Fate lingered in the wings for decades, waited while I worked hard with scrupulous good intentions, with honesty and sincerity and proportionate generosity. But when my lifespan recently approached and passed its likely apex and sent me skipping down the other side of the hill, I gave in to exhaustion. I let everything slip. These days, crickets and me? There's old karma – bad karma – at work.

Twenty years ago, I inflicted a regional genocide on a cricket community which had moved indoors for the summer. They set up housekeeping in my bedroom walls, upstairs in the A-frame cottage I shared with a fellow actress.

Jess and I worked at American Players Theater, an outdoor summer Shakespearean repertory company. When we weren't rehearsing or studying lines, playing pool at the local bar, or being pathetically loyal to our pathetically long-distance boyfriends, we worked at trying to make vegetables grow in the sandy soil behind our small house. Our New York City-on-a-shoestring standards made the place seem spacious, and we both relished the chance to garden – and to save on the produce bill. Our meager crop of peas

and beans was enough to furnish a side dish for gifts from a fellow actor living out his own romantic rural script: the occasional brown trout, which we baked in foil with lemon, butter and pepper, as he directed. We enjoyed such easy-going attentions from a number of middle-aged actors, directors, designers and technicians, who might have wives or lovers far away, or who had, perhaps, become cynical about love and appreciated the undemanding companionship necessitated by our loyalties to distant partners. During the heat of July and August, through the lovely burn of September and into the occasional October frosts of late autumn in the upper Midwest, the walls of the cabin slanted over our innocent fun in the pine plantation just west of Spring Green.

I am paying today for what I did – and didn't – do then.

In my own defense, I can't think of too many people who might have acted differently. Maybe my vegan friends, or Buddhists, would have been higher-minded or kinder. Sure, yes, probably they would have found a different way to deal with the problem. But I am only average in my virtue, and we all know that's not saying much.

When it was just a matter of several crickets, perhaps as early as June, I carried the crusty jumpers outside and

set them free. In spite of the “ick” factor, which made me shiver at the strong legs scrambling against my loose fist; even, as I was, in the first flush of vigorous, requited love; under the influence of theatrical friends and mentors with enormous egos and shockingly narcissistic tendencies; even in that nescient era of appalling self-interest under Reaganomics – still, I had enough innate outward-looking gaze to sustain this gentle sense: killing stuff was not for me.

But I was also a product of the average suburban American upbringing at the whip-end of the 1960’s. I was from first- and second-generation Irish and German Catholics, with a mom who fit the job description most women accepted at the time and a dad whose teenage wartime experience garnered him a G.I. Bill education and entrée to the security of a corporate job. I ran the suburban streets, yards and woods with my brothers, sister and the neighborhood kids after school and all through the summers. In a time when our family of seven seemed just about average, I spent as much time as I could outside with as many as twenty other boys and girls. We played Black Cat and kick-the-can, freeze tag and swinging statues. Baseball and Frisbee and cops and robbers in the woods. Across the street and back again, through everybody’s

yards, hiding near the houses and keeping clear of basement window wells, where feet could give you away to the person who was “it”. We were just kids on a street in a subdivision of Bethel Park, a South Hills suburb of Pittsburgh, not gangsters, but here’s a fact about us you might not expect to hear: we used magnifying glasses to boil the blood of insects and spiders as they struggled, hemmed in and pinned down through a variety of means, on the cement sidewalks and steps outside our houses.

We did this, just to watch them pop.

And I know we weren’t the only kids in the country who tried that trick.

One summer, my brothers and I, along with most of the neighborhood, from diapers to high school, decided to act as the front line against the Japanese beetles which were taking a toll on the local trees. Pre-pheromone technology, only. We took our bug-catchers and butterfly nets, ourselves, and our campaign, seriously.

The beetles looked like shiny green warriors with their eye slits and metallic buzzing wings. They covered the neighborhood like a conquered territory. Every kind of tree had evidence of onslaught, with leaves like delicate lace after a pestilent occupation. It took hours – days – of sweaty labor under staggering humidity, but we

vanquished the pests with their shells that looked like armor, with their pincer legs and multiple spurs.

We were not kind. Captives went into jars with wasps or bees to see who would emerge victorious from the encounter. A stark, shocking curiosity that knew no proper boundaries gripped us. We could not see the connection between ourselves and the creatures we were at war with or with the other insects, and all of them fell as collateral damage to our wondering about the nature of battle.

This all happened when I was under the age of ten, which seems young enough to brush away as "not me" – too far back to be related to what I am now or will be in the years to come. But no excuse is really possible, even from the vantage point of thirty years' hindsight. The Catholic Church of my youth decreed that seven was "the age of reason," the magic number at which one is able to discern right from wrong. During the times described above, I regularly confessed my sins on Friday afternoons and tried to be good on Saturday so that I would be in a state of grace to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion Sunday mornings. So that I might not bring shame and embarrassment to my family by sitting alone in the front left pew when everyone else went up to the priests and Eucharistic ministers. I was awake to the paths of sin.

By the age of ten, then, I must have known what I was doing.

So, at the undeniable adult age of twenty-five, many years later, in rural southwestern Wisconsin, I was certainly wholly responsible for choosing to make war against some crickets living behind the tongue-and-groove ceiling of my bedroom.

I tried relocation first. The garden, the woods, sand and grass and open spaces where their song was all romance and soft country air – these were the right places for crickets. But they would have none of it and I, after all, was paying rent to the homeowners down in Chicago, or over in Milwaukee, or wherever they lived.

My first weapon was the vacuum cleaner. I pulled my mattress from beneath the sloping eaves, moved boxes, books and papers down the spiral staircase and into the sitting space I shared with my housemate. Then, with an unobstructed field of battle, I set about sucking up the crickets, old and young alike. I felt bad about the killing, but justified it to myself: I would never (again, that is) murder living creatures in their own environment, or molest them with cruel intentions or with pleasure. I respected Nature, but I recognized the distinction between nature and my Self. Being a contemporary human I existed

outside that framework and it was necessary, if unpleasant and disturbing, to require that creatures not invited must remain outside.

With some efficiency, I accomplished the task. I can't remember now if the vacuum had a bag or canister nor whether I emptied the contents outside as an act of mercy to survivors or simply stashed the thing in the downstairs closet before carting my possessions back up the winding metal stairs. Most likely I left the bag intact and survivors escaped, still inside the house, to shortly repopulate my bedroom. Or they may have left behind their eggs, which hatched in such great numbers that even frequent vacuuming could not keep up. I found myself awash in generations of crickets, crickets who felt that this was not a space apart from Nature, but their own home as well as mine.

Maybe their insistence on not only retaining but gaining ground was based on some deep sense that they actually had the right of things. After all, the pine plantation itself was an incursion on the historic flora and fauna of the area. Human beings had invaded, logged or dredged, and then built houses where, until very recently, a varied forest or wetland had been. In that pre-red pine, pre-A-frame landscape, crickets had a license to ride

limited only by the supply and demand economy of the Web of Life.

Looking back on my actions then and on their repercussions in my life today, I may have fared better by living outside in a tent for the rest of the summer. But this is not what I did. Instead, when the crickets grew so populous that the chirping racket kept me up at night and waked me in the dark hours before official morning, and when tiny offspring fell upon me in my sleep and speckled the floor around my twin mattress and bedstead (really only a cardboard box with a flowered sheet neatly folded over it) and when the situation had me maddened with frustration, sick with revulsion – at this dramatic juncture, I ratcheted up my tactics.

It shames me to admit it, but I went to the hardware store and bought some version of Raid® to poison the crickets. To kill them all, so I could sleep again at night. So that my life might go back to normal, and I could pay attention to the roles I was rehearsing at American Players Theater and to the boyfriend who visited every other weekend but called most evenings, and whom I later married, and to . . . what else?

Was that really the sum of my concerns at age twenty-four? The totality of my preoccupations during Terry

Anderson's long captivity in Lebanon? While the Reagan administration gutted FDR's legacy of social programs? As the tide of backlash against 1970's era feminism threatened to wash away the work of five-plus generations of women? Was I honestly occupied with such personal minutia while Jerry Falwell's "moral majority" nested like larvae, growing strong enough to emerge as a ferocious swarm of hate-mongering radio pundits and reactionary neocons ten years later?

Yes. This is the truth. For narrowly self-involved reasons, in the summer of 1987, I resorted to setting a gaseous insecticide "bomb" which did its work while my roommate and I spent the night safely at our friends' apartments. We stayed away for the period of time recommended by the poison manufacturer's written instructions and, when we returned, I vacuumed what remained —— the carcasses of crickets.

I was young and energetic, intelligent and somewhat educated, interested in politics and social justice, often described as "overly analytical," "deep," and "smart," as well as, "sweet," and "cute," and "weird," but I felt incapable of being part of the solution. And I knew, on a fundamental level, that this really did make me part of the

stereotypical, corresponding problem. Guilty, though I wanted not to feel it.

I involved myself deeply with what touched me personally, tried to be as good a person as I could under the rules I had retained from my childhood, and adopted blinders to the rest —— crickets and the politics of my times, responsibilities and legacies. I could dimly see a little bit peripherally, but I didn't choose to look around too much, or for too long. I was in the grip of my own brand of narcissism, not egomaniacal but certainly egocentric in the completeness of my self-doubt.

Apathy. More karma I'm working out right now. I'm sure I deserve everything that's coming. I have plenty of company in that, too.

After this, life went back to normal.

The theatre season came to a rolling boil, and then simmered down into school matinees and spotty autumn crowds. My boyfriend and I had a pregnancy scare, which came to nothing in the end. I had an ovarian cyst which was dissolved and washed away by hormonal birth control pills.

My roommate moved back to New York City. I went to live in Steven's Point, where my boyfriend was a graduate student. I was depressed and couldn't find a job, but the

theatre called me back for winter office work. I wanted children, and Jerry proposed marriage. My mother pressured us about a Catholic ceremony, so we eloped. We had three babies, and we moved and moved and moved for my husband's jobs. Then my mother died of chemo treatments, and my too-often-absent mate became the glue for all my cracks.

During those years, one of my brothers flirted with hopelessness and nearly disappeared, but we caught him just in time. My dad became a fond father to me as he aged. With so many changes, I was always adjusting, losing and making friends and a sense of home. Jerry and I home-schooled our son and daughters, and life was rich, rich.

Just before the A-frame summer of crickets, I floated away from Catholicism. After that, I could never again fully embrace religious practices. But I had a sense, as the years eased by, that somehow Life was allowing me to be soft, to be a gentle person, an available soul. I was living out a karmic obligation to respond to needy, hurting people. I felt privileged to be part of that weaving, a figure on that tapestry. Always, for over twenty years, pain was balanced by joy. Not at all what I, a cricket-killer, deserved. Not at all.

And now, today, in my real life, the crickets have come home to chirp. They live in our basement, hiding low

to the floor in the laundry baskets and high up in the plastic-covered insulation. Some summers there are only a handful, so they're easy to catch and release, but having lived for many years with a wildlife biologist (my former pathetically long-distance boyfriend), I know that relocation is not without its risks.

To the crickets inside our house, home range is between the furnace and the washtubs. Sometimes it extends to the stairs, or even up a level or two into someone's bedroom —— but never with the population density of those prolific, determined Spring Green crickets. Outside the house, in the yard and pasture, is another territory entirely. Other crickets, grasshoppers, and locusts live out there, competing for space, for moisture, for food. When I toss someone into the backyard grass, a fight may be necessary in order find a place there in the world.

I don't know if it was the drought this past summer, or our increasingly infrequent cleaning regime, or if maybe we were just careless with the basement door. This year, the house was loud at night with chirping way back in July. By August, crickets, huge or tiny, but nothing in between, had moved into the basement. They concentrated on the washroom area, clinging to damp, hanging pants and somehow winding up in the washer, spun to pieces —— a leg here, a

carapace there. They hopped out from the two-inch space between the washing machine and dryer as I sorted out the sheets and towel. When I pursued, they climbed the concrete walls. They liked our underwear.

I didn't want to touch them. Stronger than yuck, I was almost afraid of their size and numbers, the way they were invisible at first glace, then everywhere once I started to move things around. And I was tired, and not thinking straight. Years of too little sleep and trying to do too much have taken a toll on my ability to pay attention. Sometimes I'm like a zombie, just running on the pre-set program. In the end, in my middle-aged complaisance, I took the vacuum cleaner out and did the dirty deed again.

And now, it seems like everything is out of whack. My dad has cancer. My work life is a mess. Some people I once trusted have turned out to be liars who would not hesitate to do me harm. All my good works and intentions seem like useless blood poured down the drain before you wash and cook the meat. The harder I try, the harder things seem to get. A lesser Pollyanna would just give up. I'm in a bad patch, there's no denying it.

But that is not the me I plan to be.

The upshot is that I have some karmic work to do to make up for those crickets. I've got so much to protect. My kids are doing well. My marriage is refreshed, like a desert succulent, blooming after a brief rain. My friends are forgiving of neglect. There is still music.

I'll be more vigilant next spring about catching those first few crickets before they can reproduce. I won't be lazy when they chirp at night. Instead, I'll get out my headlamp and go downstairs to surprise them in the dark. I'll catch them with my hands and carry them far out into the back pasture, even in my bare feet across the dewy high grass, and set them up under the apple trees.

If I do this faithfully, maybe luck will turn the wheel my way again. Maybe good things will stay in place and bad things will get better. Maybe radiation and chemo will do a different job this time, and my dad will be okay. Maybe there will still be joy, and maybe I will feel it untainted by harsh self-judgment for past misdeeds. After all —— and this should count for something —— I let the spiders live.

EXTENDED CREDIT

The credit card people are never on your side. You can't realize this at first, not when they're offering you quick-approval service at the checkout counter, all *honey, you can save an extra ten percent!* and *let's see what kind of deal this gives you, dear*. You don't even think the clerk works for the collection agency at this point. All you can hear is motherly approval for your purchases: *great colors; what a deal!;* and *this will look so nice on you*.

I'm a sucker, no question. Motherless daughters —— we just can't resist the bait.

When I was young and my mother was alive, calling to nag and caution me, to pester and butt in, I was as assertive as they come. It used to be, *just try calling me some meaningless, manipulative endearment —— I'll set a boundary you won't forget in a hurry*. Not any more, buddy. I've lived without a mother's tender nagging or interest in the minutiae of my life for over a dozen years, and missing my mom sets me up to play the rube for every ambitious, eager checkout artist in the mall. It doesn't matter if the person ringing up the sale is eighteen or obviously working to supplement Social Security. She can even be a guy. The faux mothering gets right to me, pulls me in and

on, gets me to sign in triplicate at store after store for cards with limited credit, but with unlimited power to damage my credit rating.

This is not a benign neurosis. In the new, harsher-and-more-punitive America, corporations and their marketers are so slick, so savvy; you can't let yourself relax at all. No momentary, guilty succumbing to kind smiles and reassuring, competent hands that pluck the register keys and snap the paperwork out of the printer and onto the counter in front of your purse. Like the bad old days of *caveat emptor*, today you have to assume they can see you coming the minute you drive out of the gas station. Look at the prices you're paying there with barely a sigh. No wonder the corporate sharks are so aggressive – the call is out they're near the boat, but people like me just jump into the water anyway.

Things were not like this when I got my Penney's card. Long ago, when marketers had a different set of assumptions, I got my first plastic. Grandfathered in under more consumer-friendly circumstances, I've had the thing so long it used to be legal tender at the Thrift Drug Store chain in my hometown. Though Thrift disappeared from strip malls a decade ago (munched up by Eckerd's, which Penney's purchased and retains), J.C. remains parked in a

slot along with the other good citizens of my wallet: Chase MasterCard (procured under my husband's more substantial credit), my AAA card (membership instigated in 1989 when I had a mother to worry about me, and continued, since, by a dad who honors her memory by making sure I have a tow when I need one), and our family membership ID for The Upper Peninsula Children's Museum. That last carries sentimental value only —— my youngest turned thirteen last summer. At any rate, novice applicant though I was twenty-odd years ago, I received a courteous welcome, an understated gold-and-black card, and approval for up to six hundred dollars in credit.

Penney's has seemed like a bastion of moderation during an era when textile profits rose in direct proportion to the decreased quantity of fabric used for making women's garments. While the term, "prosti-tot," was coined to describe fashions marketed to preschool-aged girls, this solid department store kept smocked pinafores and loose, modest, scoop-necked play shirts on the racks. Although they did, briefly, succumb to popular trends requiring silk-screened insults on articles of clothing ranging from tee shirts to g-string thongs, it was a mistake they quickly recognized and corrected. To be sure, g-strings do share space with cotton nursing bras in the

lingerie department, even at Penney's. And yes, they do charge upwards of eighty dollars for a swim suit with adequate tummy control for a middle-aged matron whose first two babies came fourteen months apart. Still, they keep you coming back with good deals on quality merchandise. Not much that's sleazy here. Just watch for the sales, plan your shopping to coincide, and you'll wind up happy every time. When you keep a card at Penney's they reward you with fifteen and sometimes even twenty-five percent price reductions. So you finish with a bill you can pay off when it's due, if you keep to your shopping list.

But that's old reliable Penney's, and everybody knows there's a seamy side to department store credit. My susceptibility to ten-percent-off bait and not-so-gentle pressure from quasi-nurturing barracudas in koala outfits has led me into treacherous waters over the past year. Radio Shack, for instance, caught me in its trolling nets, abused me mightily, and cast me back with an electronic tag that marks me as "less than credit-worthy." The system is firmly theirs, and my attempts to navigate it or to contest them have been puny and pitiful.

Here's what happened. Last year, during one of my husband's many extended absences, in a panic about trying to maintain my various job responsibilities and also keep

track of my children, I marched into Radio Shack with explicit criteria: two free cell phones, enough minutes to make our calling card obsolete, and a monthly bill under seventy dollars.

I also needed to walk out of the store in twenty minutes or less.

The clerks were so nice. They set me up with penny phones, guaranteed to be worth their usual hundred-and-fifty-dollar price tags, not junk that might make you say, *well, you get what you pay for*. They proposed a two-year plan with two-hundred dollar fines for each phone if I should choose to cancel before the term was up. Eighty dollars isn't much more than seventy, and nine hundred minutes should be plenty for any reasonable group of five people. They smiled, and joked, and I joked back. They laughed at my jokes.

They taught me how to record my greeting and retrieve voicemail. I felt cute, rather than inept. One guy impressed me by keying in my registration information so quickly that we received two consecutive phone numbers from Alltel. I walked out of there in half an hour with elevated blood pressure, but truly, it had already been a tense day.

A week later, one of the penny phones went on the blink. I wasn't too worried; it was well within the month-long warrantee against manufacturer defects. Of course they would replace the phone. When I went to the store to look into the problem, my teenage son came with me. He had recently started earning money as a dishwasher at a local restaurant. He was interested in his own phone, which might be pretty affordable if Radio Shack would let him piggy-back on our family contract.

The clerks looked surprised to see us. They confirmed the malfunction, but were sorry to tell us that, since penny phones were no longer the featured special, there were none in stock to replace my dud. Would I like to look at a snarky red camera phone? It was actually worth nearly two hundred dollars, but the weekly special would allow us to get one for only forty-nine ninety-five. The mail-in rebate brought the price down to nothing, even less than the penny phone we were replacing. My son was definitely interested.

In the old days, the days of J.C. Penney-style corporate ideals, no one would expect you to fall for that pitch. They'd be embarrassed to try. Why should my ability to replace a defective phone purchased last week be determined by whether the same deal was being offered

today? You go by the rules under which you sign up, right? If the tables turned, what would they do? They sure weren't going to let me out of the two-year deal just because I decided on a different special.

This is not the way marketing logic works today.

After more time than I had to spare was poured like water down the drain, and skillful rhetorical evasion prevailed by virtue of Radio Shack's implacable insistence that there simply were no more penny phones, I signed up for the red one. I signed my son up for an additional contract with a red phone, too, which he agreed to pay monthly out of his earnings. By this time I was down to the attention of only one clerk, who offered to give me ten percent off if I'd like to apply for and use a Radio Shack credit card for the purchase. And wouldn't I like to look at cell phone covers?

Okay, I was dumb, but dumb like kazillions of other Americans are dumb. We're up to our necks in credit without any savings in the bank. We run like hamsters on the exercise wheel, trying to do more than we possibly can with more than we actually have. I applied for the card even though halfway through the lengthy process I realized that, given the rebate situation, the ten percent was moot. I nixed the thirty-dollar leather cover my son held up. To

his credit, he decided it wasn't worth the five hours of work it would cost him, either.

Does a foolish choice create a just dessert? I never should have rushed to get those phones. I knew it even as I pursued them, step by silly step. I enjoyed knowing how to use them without fumbling, and the reassurance they provided during my son's senior year in high school, when high activity levels created logistical confusion. Our home is out in the country, far from Marquette where we work and go to school, and not knowing where a child is or what miscommunication has occurred to prevent our meeting as planned – these things created tremendous anxiety. Having the phones helped a lot. But they cost a lot, too.

They were supposed to be free in the end. But about a month after I'd sent in the rebate paperwork to claim back my ten-hours-worth of pay from Radio Shack, I received a form letter in the mail saying that my claim had been denied. A number was assigned to explain the rejection, just like on a medical insurance statement. The corresponding blurb stated that the rebate could not be issued because I had not submitted the receipt within the required timeframe.

What a whopper. My conspiracy-detection meter drowned out the reasonable part of my mind, that small voice that

said, just pay for the damn things and be done with it. The part of me that's loud, the Irish part that most people don't see too often, screamed, why should I put in more time for pay, less time with my kids, to pay money the store clerks had promised would be refunded? I had done the tricky paperwork meticulously, returning to our local Radio Shack yet a third time for my original clerk to walk me through filling out the form and documenting my purchase in accordance with the rebate requirements. I made copies of everything before I sent it out, priority mail, paying extra for a confirmation receipt. Only thing is —— and I'll lose face entirely now —— by the time the rejection arrived, I couldn't find any of this documentation in order to challenge it. Not that it would have mattered anyway, which is my point in the end. The big "they" —— the corporate ones —— they have my number. They probably have statistics on how many people never send in the paperwork to claim rebates, and on how many lose the records in the paper shuffle at home like I did. My paranoia was fed by the absence of any direct contact information for personnel whose job it was to field complaints like mine.

Romantic ideas about nurturing clerks were mostly gone by the time I made my fourth trip to the mall store to consult with the manager, my plastic logo-ed bag, cell

phone boxes and receipts (but no copies of the rebate packet) in hand. She smilingly assured me that absolutely no one in Marquette had any influence over rebate decisions, or the ability to speak with anyone who did. As a matter of fact, the storefront entity that we know as Radio Shack is not identical to the Radio Shack that deals with credit. And neither one of them is really a close relative of the portion of the company responsible for the rebate. This sounds clearer than it actually was to me at the time. Have I mentioned how overwhelmed I was?

I left the store that time with nothing resolved in my favor and no plan of action. The only conceivable option was to write a letter of complaint to some high-up muckety-muck in customer service at Alltel, but this was only vaguely in my mind. With no contact information, it would require internet and telephone time, and I was busy working for pay between forty and fifty hours each week, in addition to keeping my head above water as a student, and —— mentioned last, but really first with me —— mothering three adolescents. Soon after attempting to resolve the situation at the mall, I sort of forgot about the whole thing.

The next month, in preparation for both the coming U.P. winter and my son’s senior high school social and

athletic schedules, I rented a small house in town. We paid for this partly through my third part-time paid position, and partly with our trusty Chase MasterCard. My older daughter's persistent headaches, combined with anxiety and depression, caused her to drop to part-time status at high school. She lived like a defiant stranger in the small house we rented in Marquette, keeping the only bedroom with a door blocked off like a barrier reef. There was a lot of yelling, and I hoped that the neighbors couldn't hear, that they wouldn't call in the police. She threatened to run away. I, who had saved my high school earnings for just that purpose thirty years ago, worried that she might.

There were deadlines at work, academic papers to write, Thanksgiving and Christmas rolled around, and swim season got underway. My son's college and scholarship applications. My daughter's medical concerns, often requiring time out of school and work each week for doctors' appointments. The high school play. I was my younger daughter's forensics coach. True winter held off until after Christmas, and the rental house arrangement became a trial separation for my husband and me.

In a life like this, forgetting about a rebate snafu is pretty easy. And it seemed as if the god of economics

wanted it that way, since no Radio Shack credit card or accompanying bill ever arrived in our post office box. This was false comfort, though. The absence of cards or a billing statement was simply a mistake, a feint of fate. Businesses and banks routinely have trouble matching rural postal systems with their data files, which do not like post office boxes. In urban areas, these addresses signal a range of unreliability from nefarious drug-related schemes to homelessness. Although experience has taught me to be almost insulting in the clarity with which I transmit mailing and physical addresses to customer service agents and loan officers, somehow the information got garbled at our local Radio Shack.

Around February, the month of drifting snow and monster winds, a call came in from the credit collection folks. They had the wrong address for me, and all their mailings had been returned. I owed them not only the original hundred or so dollars from the cost of two red camera cell phones, but also three late fees that would require more than ten hours of work at my various jobs to repay.

I'm almost always beyond courteous to telemarketers and customer service workers. I worked making cold calls from a Cole's telephone directory for State Farm during the

first summer of my college years. Much later, when my husband and I had temporarily settled our family in Esko, a small town to the south of Duluth, I took on a part-time telemarketing job. At the time, my mother was on a home stretch of chemo treatments and my brother was getting married in California. We didn't have the money for travel to the wedding, so the evening job was my strategy to get us there, allowing me to earn money while my husband was at home with our new baby and two small children. On the strength of these experiences, I usually tend to see sales, survey and even collections callers as people very much like myself, with not enough income and too much debt. They are young, or female, or retired, or have been downsized midcareer. Perceiving credit collections workers to be from a sympathetic population subset was one of the countless mistakes I made in my credit card dealings this past year.

My caller was probably a great deal more desperate than I had ever been in a job. Her approach was aggressive, meant to intimidate me and gain the information they needed to put the bill on its rightful path. I'm a pretty flexible person, myself. Sympathetic. A new-ish friend recently called me, "sweet and polite." But I've got a huge resistance to being pushed around, too, which

kicked in during that frustrating phone call. It went something like this:

Caller: Miss Belant? I'm calling on your Radio Shack credit card account. Miss Belant, we need a correct address for you so we can send you your bill. Will you provide us with that information now?

Me: Well, I'd like to tell you my situation first and ask for some help with contacting someone who can help to figure it out.

Caller: That's fine. Give me your address and I'll see what I can do.

Me: Well, I know you aren't in a position to do anything about the problem I encountered with my rebate, but I'd appreciate it if you would either let me talk to your supervisor, or give me a direct customer service number.

Caller (amid keyboard clicking): So you're refusing to give me your address? You're refusing to pay your bill?

Me (now panicking): No! I'll be happy to give you my address. I just want a phone number from you, first. You know, a number that will allow me to talk to a real person who actually knows about Radio Shack rebates on Alltel phones?

Caller: I don't know anything about that. If you'll just give me your address –

She had a script, it was obvious, and no ability or inclination to help me to resolve the rebate. Still, I tried to reach across the great fiber-optic divide.

Me: I know you're just doing your job. But I only make ten dollars an hour myself, and this money means something to me. Isn't there some number you can give me to help me resolve the mistake?

Caller (softer voice, more sympathetic now): I can give you a number, but you have to give me your address.

Me (foolish woman, trying to blow into the mouth of a dragon): I will give you my address, but I need to get the customer service number first.

There was a silence of hesitation, followed by the silence of a disconnected call.

Now that Radio Shack had made direct contact, the credit card bill was at the front of my mind. I'm pretty responsible and honest, so I wanted the situation resolved. I also didn't want bad marks on my credit report. But I was brutally busy, with days and weeks blowing past like a March blizzard across an open field. This is no excuse, I now know, but I will confess that, at the time, I was feeling uniquely burdened. When another call came through,

I tried the same approach, hoping a different agent might respond differently and yield a valid number for me to call in exchange for setting right the database. No go. Different voice, same script.

I still couldn't quite believe it. In a small way, I was living outside reality, in another dimension where a year like the one I was having might reasonably be expected to evoke understanding and special allowances. Where I got this attitude – well, that's another story. Let's just say that the next collection caller disabused me of these self-indulgent notions.

Caller: Miss Belant? I'm calling about your Radio Shack credit card account. Miss Belant, we need a correct address for you so we can send your bill. Will you provide that information now?

Me: Well. I know you're not the person who makes these decisions, but I'm actually the one who's been wronged here. May I tell you my situation?

At first, I thought I'd struck pay dirt, so far as sympathetic collections folks go. The caller, a Southern woman with a smoker's rumbly voice, went off-script and listened to my whole scenario. She told a brief, sympathetic story about her husband, who had also recently been muscled over by a corporation. She even offered to go

and talk to her supervisor, if I would agree to wait on the line. Sure, mom.

When she returned, she started out slow – none of the aggressiveness I'd confronted with the previous two callers. She explained, politely, that the billing was coming from a vendor hired by Radio Shack to handle this portion of their business. They honestly had no knowledge about or power over rebates. She was authorized to forgive two of the late fees that had accrued to my account if I verified my address and paid the account now, over the phone. Then, she could give me a customer service number that might be of assistance with recovering my rebate.

I was defeated. She was being so nice, and I knew it was only a matter of time anyway before the whole mess would show up on my credit report and give the bank a reason to charge more interest for our next mortgage. I gave the address. She gave the number. But then I got stubborn about the late payments. I appreciated the withdrawal of two of the fees, but why should I have to pay any extra money at all when the entire charge was wrong to begin with?

She did not like this last-ditch rebellion. Her voice spanked me through the receiver:

Caller: Mary-Kay. Mary-Kay.

Now that she had what the company required, she was on a first-name basis with me.

Caller: You don't seem to understand your responsibility here. I'll just go back to my supervisor and see what's what.

After a wait:

Caller: I'm afraid I can only take off one of the late fees now. What credit card would you like to use?

Me: You mean to say that the company will not only insist on my paying at least one of these late fees, but I'm to be punished for arguing about it? That fee represents four hours of my life.

Caller: Mary-Kay. You're over-thinking things here. What credit card will you use to make your payment?

I tried to bring up her husband again, but she wouldn't be budged. Was the call now being monitored? What could explain her changed tone and attitude? Is there a collections file somewhere now, identifying me as susceptible to anonymous mothering?

I took out my wallet, found MasterCard in his usual place, and paid the bill. I also asked her to close the account, right then and there. No cards ever came in the mail, but confirmation of the closed account arrived about

two weeks later. I worked as many hours as I humanly could during the winter and spring.

I wish I could say I learned my lesson. That a quick, convincing, "no," emerges when cashiers spout their assigned rigmarole, required, as they are, to make the attempt at any rate. But it's been slow going. I now know that Younkers uses a separate collections vendor, just like Radio Shack, and that offering to reduce three late payments to only one is standard operating procedure. Let's leave it at that.

So I've been out swimming with the sharks and they've had a few bites out of me. That's okay. I've got some to spare, and anyway, I'm back in the boat now and I'm sounding the bell to warn other swimmers.

I am slowly learning this: you can't trust the clerks. No matter how much they put you in mind of sincere young Judy Garland *In the Good Old Summertime*, or Jimmy Stewart's absolute commitment to customer service in *It's a Wonderful Life*, or even the very likeable Claire Danes in Steve Martin's recent film, *Shop Girl*, you can't trust them because clerks today don't even know the part they're playing.

It's a mildly willful not-knowing they're involved in. And I don't blame any of them. After all, how much is a

person supposed to reflect upon ethics and context while working part time, without benefits, for a minimum wage that might sparsely support you if you agree to work two full-time positions? The devil might advocate for that arrangement on the assumption that it could result in higher savings across the population, including, as it does, no time or energy to spend any of the cash that's left once rent, utilities, transportation and food are covered. And putting food as the last necessity might encourage a revival of the pursuit of thinness. But even embracing these shaky pluses doesn't encourage me to believe that casual employees today feel very responsible for their corporation's business practices or ethics.

Marketing surveys tell the companies who you are, when and where to find and hook you, and what you're looking for. Management and leadership training teaches the people on the phone and their bosses how to manipulate the four w's. And the power equation is not an equivalency. Corporation > clerk > customer. Better beware.

When I recently tried to accept one of the scads of zero-percent-introductory-offer credit cards in my own name, rather than on my shared credit history with my husband, the application was denied. There's a judgment against me that will certainly require some sleuthing (and,

most likely, some sucking up) to resolve before the big boys will trust me with credit in my own name. This, despite the fact that I've been my family's bill-payer for over nineteen years. In spite of the fact that my checkbook-balancing would provide excellent material for a stand-up comedian, we're never overdrawn. I send out our mortgages, credit card and car payments, utilities, medical expenses and charitable contributions. And things get paid on time, with very few and minor exceptions. But ever since the Radio Shack snafu, none of this is visible to the credit-checkers.

Some good has come out of the whole mess, though. I'm finally growing up about my longing for an absent mother. The collections gal who accused me of irresponsibility had a point, don't you know. My rather early loss of what many people enjoy into their own retirement doesn't excuse my helplessness and vulnerability to the marketing sharks. Mom, herself, coming as she did from a Great Depression-era girlhood, would be appalled at the wastefulness of my experiences this past year. Her motto was: *Use it up, wear it out, make it do*. Woe to the salesperson who tried to get the best of her! She was a deceptively gentle, non-gossiping populist Democrat who routinely challenged tricky clerks and won. At forty-something and with a heritage

like that, it’s high time I started being a mother-substitute instead of looking for one.

A LIFE STILL IN WATER COLOR

My best dreams are in water. Not something you might talk about in terms of casual plot description or amusing absurdities. Dreams, nightmares —— anyone who pays attention to the mind during sleep will reap them both.

A flying dream starts with some impossible situation, like when the flying carpet unravels and you are left midair with no support. There's that moment of gripping fear, the tensing of all your muscles in the bed as you wait for the plummet that will smash you on the ground. Then, just before the hit, a sudden lightness suffuses you – something like the moment between down stroke and upswing on an amusement park ride. In dreams, this brief instant expands. It seems infinite. Relief crescendos to power – you really can fly.

In water dreams, the anxiety is not from fear of free-fall. It is the claustrophobic certainty of suffocation, the holding of breath against the intake of water. The struggle not to black out. It is waiting for the coming loss of consciousness, after a brief struggle, which will leave you loosely floating, danced about at the tide's whim.

I'm a lucky dreamer. Some optimistic neural networking always rescues me from gruesome endings. When I can't hold out any longer, when my body's scream for oxygen forces intake against my will, a flying moment of surprised relief occurs – I can breathe the water. I can breathe.

∩

The girl splashes hard at her brother, kicking and punching water up into the air, a competition she will not lose today. Their father rests not far away in the hotel room. He is tired from ferrying a wagon-load of children hundreds of miles through July's heat to their vacation destination.

At the shallow end of the pool, the mother fusses with towels and suntan lotion which she does not know will do nothing to prevent her children's skin from burning. Pain and peeling will make the girl with longish braids want a shirtless nap on pillows later in the week, but there will be no privacy for such a thing.

Another brother is in the water, too, younger and overly excited by the battle. Somewhere outside the frame are two more siblings. The oldest one, a sister, and yet another boy.

Dunking is allowed in these days before everything becomes safe and monitored. These innocent days, soon to be mocked and parodied by the next generation's *Seventies Show*. Now, rough games ask the girl to use her strength, to resist and overcome the boys. This brother is generally relentless. He has a big smile and big teeth. His ears stick out, with hair buzzed short against a wide head. Both kids are freckled. He is near-sighted, older, with more to lose if she wins. He holds his sister's arms tight and squeezes with his fingers, making sure she stays under long enough to come up sputtering, then plunges away backward, gushing water at her face with his cupped hands.

"Let's play buck'n bronco," she yells, wiping her hair away and rubbing at what runs from her nose.

"Okay," the boys agree.

She locks her legs around his waist. He twists and bucks and dives to knock her off. She is barely ten to his thirteen-and-a-half, but she is tall and has big muscles. She clamps her thighs against his ribs, holds long breaths when he goes beneath the surface, and he cannot throw her.

The day is ebbing, with moving clouds that shade the pool from time to time. Soon enough the family will sit to eat, hot dogs in buns that look like slices of white bread, cut, then sewed together in the middle. French fries and

applesauce. Salt water taffy to eat in the car tomorrow if they are good. Nothing to drink during the meal, but milk with ice cream for dessert.

The girl's grip loosens, ebbing, too. Her interest is a fickle thing. Is she foolish? Is she weak? This is just her nature. Now, the brother sharply twists, grabs, and sets his feet to thrust her hard, away. Hurt makes a wake across the pool. Her face, when she stands up, says something to him, but she is too confused to know. He looks angry, and they leave each other alone.

∩

Summer rains in my childhood western Pennsylvania were an irresistible invitation for kids of a certain age and inclination. My little brother and I would beg our mom to let us go outside, running back and forth between kitchen conversations and the picture window in the living room. We had a clear view there of the house across from ours, water pouring off the rain gutter, volume in excess of the pipes' capacity. The gutters at the bottom of our hill, too, were overcome, and a small lake grew at the bottom of the street. Though later she was firm under torrents of

teenage pleading, Mom was easy to convince for these adventures. She helped us find our swim gear.

We follow the magnet pull of the porch roof waterfall across the street, jumping two-footed into driveway puddles on the way, pausing to make rapids with our hands and feet in the hard rush of water draining steeply down beside the road. At the other house, we laughed and splashed, taking showers by turns in the flowing curtain of water.

Did we ring the bell to ask the neighbor first? Our mother would have given such instructions. But my memory yields just the two of us playing there: the day so hot that water from the sky was a relief and not a shock; the storm, without thunder or lightning, pouring generous buckets; the two of us, young enough yet to know no self-consciousness as we played, together in the afternoon rain.

∩

The girls sweat beneath the thick, plastic-sheeting roof tacked up over the ramshackle fort, a platform nailed about a dozen feet up, manufactured out of scraps from neighborhood dads' building projects, or from the local sawmill's junk heap. It is the pride of local boys of late elementary school age, a patchwork of plywoods with little

bracing for support. The exclusivity of the spot is formally proclaimed: “No Girls Allowed.”

The boys will reconsider, but only if the girls can pass a test. It may be that this initiation is a bit longer, a tad more grueling, than what the young males endured, but they built the thing, after all. Let those girls sweat it out up there, sopping bandanas and salt running into their eyes, with not even the relief of taking off their damp shirts as the boys had done. Girls have to be as worthy as the strongest boy, or no way are they coming up.

∩

It took me four go’s at Level One swimming instruction before I finally passed the test. My mother, who did not swim, herself, but only waded in the shallow ends of pools or knee-deep in the ocean, resolved that all her children would be better prepared for life’s water situations. She signed us up each summer and drove us faithfully, as she did for all of our activities and obligations, having accepted the role of chauffer as well as being disciplinarian, cheerleader, confidant and nag.

I was nine or so when it finally clicked. No one was happier than my swimming teacher, Mr. Carter, who also happened to be the swim team coach for the public school district. He called me, “Red.” For this alone I would have loved him. But he had hair so brown it was black, an energetic, muscular body, a sense of humor that bit at you, and he gave the focused kind of attention that made me feel like *something*. I would marry his whole package, never mind his age.

Mr. Carter was still the coach when I tried out for the swim team in seventh grade. I carpooled evenings to the high school with two Chris-es from my neighborhood, a boy and a girl, someone’s parents always honking outside to take us there. Always on time or early, never late.

Male Chris was a serious swimmer with a serious chance at the team. At twelve a boy is just getting started, and he was fast, with a smooth stroke that caught the coach’s eye. The other Chris and me, well, girls at puberty lose the glorious edge they had during childhood. Our bodies were changing from the flat, smooth promise of androgyny to a generous percentage of body fat. The hormonal emphasis from now on would foster flexibility over brute strength. Endurance was our one advantage, but in swimming you have to have speed, too.

A month into it, girl-Chris gave it up and decided to stay home. I kept on, having read *The Little Engine That Could* many times, forcing Mr. Carter to tell me explicitly, in the coach's office with its big safety-glass window where we were private from ears but not from eyes, that it just wasn't going to happen. This was only one time in my life when it felt like everyone must know my pain. I would have given anything not to let it show as I walked the endless steps across the slippery cold tile to the girls' locker room.

∩

The sharpness of chlorine is what they breathe as they line up and dive, one after another, arms swinging up and out, then clasped to point the way, bodies barely arched and legs that follow first the upsweep, then the cut into the surface of the pool. They optimize the glide and smoothly start to kick, to stroke and breathe, each setting a rhythm as she eats the distance, as she flips with barely a splash. Two girls stand out as beginners, with choppy strokes and awkward turns, falling behind as swimmer after swimmer passes them by. One is tall with freckles and reddish hair. She is the slowest of them all. The other

one is smaller, but she has an air of knowing what she's about.

The Catholic school has no pool, so these girls are here to try out for the public team. Two months' probation was the agreement with the coach. At twelve, it's probably too late to get fast enough, but they don't know that yet. The public school kids have been at it for a while. One swimmer is only six years old. She passes many of the others. She laps the Catholics, again and again.

It's cold even though they took freezing showers in the locker room, hoping, as they hopped along the tiles and concrete, that the shivers would make the first dive less difficult, turn it into comfort rather than a shock. They started out in the middle, but now they are at the end of the line of swimmers, struggling up one lane and down the next.

These girls are convenient intimates rather than kindred spirits. They live on the same street and walk to the same bus, which they regularly miss because they have trouble walking and talking at the same time. They both like to talk a lot. They go to the same church and school, and their mothers are in the same garden club and Christian women's group. The redhead prays in rhythm with her freestyle: *Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee*

Our Father glory be dear Jesus Jesus Mary and Joseph Hail Holy Queen motherofmercy if you let me make the wall this time I'll never do bad things again . . . I won't take cigarettes or be mean to Paul. I'll tell the truth. Help Mom. I won't read at night or in the desk. I'll be a nun. I will.

∩

It's summer and the neighborhood kids are outside as much as they can stand in Western Pennsylvania's summer humidity. In houses, where they retreat for air conditioning from time to time, mothers are working, or reading, or watching T.V. During the week, dads are at work.

These kids don't do much that would ruffle expectations. They play a million different things outdoors. Running, hiding, using sports equipment or board games on occasion, but just as often they design their own entertainments and rules. The gap between this generation's adults and children is a chasm the parents themselves have cultivated, so most kids are fiercely independent. Only crybabies seek Mom's company for its own value. Few even think about spending time with Dad, who is

busy resting when he's not at work. Or, if he is a man who cares about grass, he might even get angry at his kids or their friends, who sometimes make bare spots in the lawn.

Two girls and a boy are near the top of the hill in somebody's yard. They banter back and forth —— jokes and insults. The girls, who are twelve, compete for the older boy's attention. He is thirteen.

"I know what your friends are doing at the pool this summer," says the brown-haired girl. She is thin and wiry, a girl who gets horseback riding lessons in exchange for cleaning stalls at a local stable. Her bike is her transportation, the means by which she accomplishes this arrangement.

"What?" asks the other girl, the one with jaw-length reddish hair and bangs pulled back tightly in plastic barrettes. She has no bike, having surrendered her twenty-two inch convertible boy-or-girl hand-me-down to her younger brother a while ago. She is saving all of her babysitting money this year for a twenty-seven-inch ten-speed.

The first girl is visibly eager to tell what she knows.

"They go with the lifeguards on their breaks," she says.

The other girl and boy are quiet. She has trouble taking it in, and looks from one friend to the other. They both grin, expressions on their faces that say, *everybody knows what that means*, and he kicks his sneaker against the curb.

"No they don't. You're lying!" The redhead yells the last words, her face a grimace of shame and anger.

Later, she lies on her parent's bed and calls the girls in question, both of them her best friend at school. She dials the numbers, certain they will deny this slander, that they have not betrayed the pact to wait for someone they love, the unspoken agreement to talk about it infinitely on the phone, first, anyway. She has spent many hours at the pool with them during this and other summers, taking lessons in the morning when the water was so cold it made them scream, when the leaves the trees shed during the night had to be scooped out by the swimming-teacher lifeguards, who used long-handled nets from the perimeter of the pool.

They have often scoffed together, she and her friends, at the pathetic, sappy couples twined together, looking like crabs as they float, a young woman's arms on her partner's bare, tanned shoulders, her legs wrapped around his waist, wet hair smoothed just so, makeup still intact

except for dark smudges of mascara, kissing lightly as they move around the pool.

She knows they did not sneak out with lifeguards on their breaks, to sit in cars, to kiss and fondle or maybe something worse. They are only twelve-and-a-half, after all.

∩

The summer my church's folk group went to Clarion was the year my dad had his heart attack.

I welcomed the break from worry and loneliness. It would be an exciting trip - first the long ride and then the singing, surely, around the fire circle, at dusk. Best of all, it was a chance to be near the man I loved.

I was fifteen. My dad was still in the hospital. I knew that parents could die, and that he nearly had, and that he still might. Ahead, for me, lay lonely weeks of playing the good girl, cooking, cleaning, saying, "yes," when my mom asked me to do anything. A long summer, washed with the feeling that my actions could either assist, or delay, my dad's recovery. It was a surprise when I got my own "yes": permission to go with the New Light Singers on a

day trip to the lake cottage owned by our co-director's family.

I loved to sing, I loved to swim, and I also currently loved Don, our twenty-something co-director. He had a serious girlfriend, an alto, Donna. I liked her a great deal, too. She was very likeable —— so much so that he married her a few years later.

All in all, this golden day in the otherwise bleak summer of 1977 offered transportation from the badness of reality to a dream of adventure, fellowship, and impossible, unrequited, unprofessed affection.

Don was in his mid-twenties, tall and slim, with dark, curly hair, gentle eyes and an easy laugh. He played guitar, both six- and twelve-string, while our group sang every popular tune we could justify catechistically for the Sunday evening folk Mass, a whole songbook that wouldn't make it past most parish councils anymore.

Don's family's vacation house perched above the lake set back a bit from a cliff, where a thick, knotted rope hung from the branch of a grandfather tree. We teenagers took turns getting ready in the house, then lined up, barefoot in the dirt and moss, waiting to run up to the edge and launch, to swing out over the water and jump. It was important to wait for the full trajectory before

releasing. Otherwise, the water below might be too shallow for a safe landing. It was equally important to actually let go. Loss of nerve at the last minute would return the rope-rider to the tree's trunk, or the surrounding scratchy brush, or cause a tangle with the others waiting there to leap.

I was in the stage of teenage girlhood when love is intense but brief, and often never revealed, and I felt the cowardice of my hidden feelings like a festering splinter. I longed to make myself known.

Each time it was my turn to rush the cliff's edge, my body's experience seemed like both a lesson and a taunt, surprising me with my strength and nerve, reproaching about how little I otherwise dared. Fear lent intensity to excitement, time and again, as I ran and launched, swooped out, weightless, let go, flying. I mouthed the words, *I love you*, hoping he might see, but was otherwise silent for that moment in the sky. Then I fell, feet-first like a pencil, consumed by water, deep and smooth.

∩

Sandpipers dot the shore and this is opportunity for the man to pull the woman close, to brush his cheek against her

temple as he matches their lines of vision and points out the charming, obvious birds chasing the lapping edge of the lake. The day is all late-August warmth after an early cold snap, autumn in the wind already in the Far North, though the birds are still here, and the boats on the flowage, and the dawns that break before six a.m. with double rainbows to ordain their love, to sanctify their passion. They are both young, and strong, and beautiful, though each will only acknowledge being strong.

∩

I kept my underwear on for my first sauna, though my top came off and I played cribbage sitting in a row on the top bench. My boyfriend's friend peeked at me and I peeked back, but it was only friendly curiosity and no one took offense. The jump through the ice afterwards jolts me even now, and from all this distance it seems as if I still inhabit that young, strong body, so beautiful and sensitive to life.

∩

When they leave it is early morning, and whatever hasn't been done will have to stay that way. The car and truck were loaded last night, sagging under loads that will overtax the engines, that will ruin the S-10 and eat up more money than they can afford with gallons of antifreeze before they arrive in the state of New York, their new home. North Dakota's gravel road crunches its goodbye as they rumble in tandem along the miles to the four-lane, where black ice waits to make her spin and fishtail when she tries to keep his speed. She'll know to keep her panic down and still her foot, to never touch the brake but use the steering wheel and bring it back in line, and this she does with a heart squished high beneath her breasts by the baby who is nearly eight months grown. She pulls over but she doesn't cry —— she's tough you know —— and when he comes to the window from the truck idling on the shoulder ahead (*sorry, sorry*), she only says *you'd better slow down* and off they go again, with good jobs behind and nothing for certain ahead, to get going on their profligate, impulsive life.

∩

I can't remember the gush of water breaking during any of my births. My daughters came after some hours of pretty hard work, and the feelings I expected to have immediately after finally pushing them into doctor's and midwife's hands were overshadowed by profound exhaustion and relief. *The baby is okay. I am still alive.*

With my son, our first, the membranes leaked feebly in the early morning hours. Jerry and I made the hour-and-a-half trip from our tiny house in the snowy Adirondacks to the hospital in Glens Falls, expecting that the arrival of our baby was imminent. Along the way, the amniotic sac resealed itself, making the official start of labor days previous to my body's actual readiness to stage a birth. Midmorning, mid-afternoon, as I power-walked laps around the birthing ward in Glens Falls, New York, with my husband by my side and the nurses casting sympathetic, knowing looks (they knew this was going to be a C-section), it didn't occur to me that this part of the process would escape me. I expected to be brave (I was), and placid (I was not), and for my body to wash the baby down the birth canal in a wave of blood and fluids, not unlike the fun to be had at water parks. We passed the nurses' station, then

passed again, time after time looking up to smile and wave like Neil Simon characters, for the sake of dramatic irony. When it was all over —— the prepping and the spinal and the doctors talking golf while I could feel the pulling, not the pain, of stitches, after the anesthesiologist sweetly held my hand so Jerry could go (I said, *you go with him!*) and keep our baby safe from medical thugs in the special nursery, after an hour in recovery where I met Marie, the nurse I loved with aching gratitude because she was so kind —— I finally rang the bell beside the bed and asked, *I want my son*. They brought him in, then, in the wee hours, which once meant after-hours breakfasts but would from that point on mean dark and trembling intimacy and caring for children. Jerry slept in the corner, his length stretched along the recliner chair, while I took the little blanket bundle in my arms, tiny perfect head and hands and muddy, unfocused eyes, dark hair standing straight up, this warm being with a scent that I would breathe instead of air, who they had lifted from a gaping slit in two layers of my body instead of snatching him from a tide of liquid in the conventional way.

∩

The sun is setting there, across the lake, its corona burning red like woeful embers, sad to end the beauty of the day. A woman and her children have the dock, with plastic buckets and a car seat cradle for the smaller one.

"All right then. Here's your shovel – put your sand shoes on. See the water? You like that?" She laughs and gabbles, and the toddler boy laughs, too.

The baby girl is sleeping, a lacy white bonnet shading her smooth, cheeky face. The boy pats at the water, lifting first one foot and then the other, making helping motions as his mother puts rubber slippers on his feet to shield them from the rocks. She pulls his shirt and shorts off, arm, arm, leg, leg, unpins his cloth diaper, sets it aside, and he is free.

The woman slides out of her sandals and steps down off the dock. The water here is shallow, so her shorts will work although she'd like to strip down, too. She lifts the boy up from the wooden planks and sets him down into rippling water the color of tea. His legs kick as he is carried through the air, and he springs his knees and puffs his cheeks when he feels the wet and cool.

The children's father is at work. They visited him with a picnic supper, and he let the boy pretend to drive a brown Ford truck while the new baby nursed. Her husband is a mystery to the woman now, working every waking hour, missing out on this evening swim as he does on so much. It is not what she predicted. Not what she imagined or wished for, when she said yes and planned for babies.

And so the three are by themselves, the only people on the shore, the only ones for miles, having access as they do to private wilderness. The husband's work brings them this, and other benefits.

In this moment, with one baby sleeping and the other splashing droplets high into the air, the woman knows that only elements matter in the end. The sun, the trees that ring the lake reflecting forest to its depths, and loons with their distinctive, haunting call – she is present to this moment in her life, to the solemn loneliness of it, to the unutterable gift of joy.

The child can speak – he is precocious, having already logged countless hours in the rocker on her lap, books pouring over him in his mother's steady voice. He has been baptized in literacy, and he speaks in full sentences at only eighteen months of age. But a day like this is not for words, and he is still a very little boy, so the woman

makes herself a motorboat for him, pulling him in circles by the hands, his open-mouthed smile and several teeth gleaming up at her in pure pleasure. *Motorboat, motorboat, go real slow, motorboat, motorboat, go round fast . . .*

The ring of low, old mountains is their witness. Perhaps satellites can already see them here, but if that's so, the woman doesn't know it. The great span of air, the trees, the water. Anything that might have been important is nothing now compared to this moment, to these small people in her care.

∩

One time when I had really had it, I changed my mind and told my husband I was staying home from our vacation.

"I'm not going. I'll stay here and you can take the kids."

We had planned a trip to the Arctic Ocean, hundreds of miles of mostly gravel "highway" to the north of Healy, Alaska, where we lived when our children were still homeschooled.

"Why don't you want to go?" he asked. "Could anything change your mind?"

He always gets me like that. He knew I didn't really want to miss out on an adventure.

"Okay, here it is: if I go on this trip, I want to be allowed to read. A lot. You have to take care of the kids some, not just drive like you're on a mission while I try to keep them happy. And if anyone wants to stop to see something, to take a picture or explore, you have to do it. Willingly. In a friendly manner."

"Okay," he said.

Like I said, he really gets me sometimes.

So we set off during July of the second of four Alaskan summers, first stopping for mosquito head nets (which we found at the Kmart in Fairbanks), then up the Parks Highway and, later on, the Dalton Highway (also known as the "Haul" road), which turns from blacktop to gravel and, eventually, from conventional gravel to mostly drainage-sized rocks.

Jerry kept his promise, and I rested and read while he drove, all of us grateful for the air conditioning in our Bronco, since open windows would have choked us with the dust. The speed at which this kind of road can be travelled is surprising and not much fun for shock absorbers and skeletal systems, but the larger stone substrate farther north slowed us down, first with flat

tires, and then with prudence and experience. We had only one spare, so we were lucky to get only three punctures during the trip.

Northbound, we bought a new tire in Coldfoot, where I paid for a shower while the others took care of the repair. By the time we reached Deadhorse, we had the spare on another wheel. We had the good fortune to renew acquaintance with the garage folks in Coldfoot on our return trip, and then, when we got back to Fairbanks, we replaced all four tires at the Midas, since they were now mismatched.

I'm so glad my husband convinced me to go on that trip. He stopped for pictures of rocks and creeks, mountain passes and Dahl sheep, snowshoe hares in summer brown that lined the road like spectators at the Iditarod start. I read while he drove, while he fished with the kids, while everyone tried to sleep during the sunny night. But I also stood with my family in fields of Alaskan summer wildflowers, the mosquitoes thick on Jerry's flannel shirtback as they hid from the stiff wind. I set camp and kept the fire, snuggled into the tent with four people I loved with choking gratitude, when there was time enough to feel it properly.

I stood, barefoot, with my pants rolled to the knee, at the top of the continent in water just shy of ice.

∩

The woman with a husband and three children dreamed one night about another man. His face was etched in walls of water that banked the trough she rode in her small dinghy. In sleep, she could not see the children's faces – they didn't speak or cry, but they were safe if she paddled, safe so long as she kept the vessel steady. Her husband lay in the bow, unconscious of the gale. Some unknown hurt had overcome him.

She dreamed that she was fighting the whole of the sea, and when the killer wave rose up to finally tip them out, she saw eyes like the god Poseidon, part of the ocean, the ocean itself, and the foam upon the waves became his hair. Her effort had been so great for so long, and she was dreadfully tired, so tired that it seemed as if relief would come if only she could let go of the paddles and dive in, just dive into the face that called to her, that hesitated briefly for her choice. She watched his waiting gaze, the moment long and strange, full of hope and guilt

and wishes for everything at once, but her muscles knew her mind and they held the dinghy steady in the raging sea.

She watched the face recede into the water.

The children's voices rose up then, above the storm, and she counted all of them survivors – the boy who wished to live in town; the girl who had begun to hide her life; the youngest, a very little girl yet at the time; the man she had not quit loving; and the ghost of the one she still and always grieved.

∩

It is fall and we are trying to do impossible things. My brother has come to live with us and we want to believe we can cure him of depression. We have signed up for massive debt, and Jerry is working at building our new house like it's a second full-time job. The children are all back at public schools, and, though I do not know it yet, our homeschooling days are entirely in the past. I am now a graduate teaching assistant, burning my last candles at both ends, using up the final vigor of my fourth decade to study way past everyone's bedtimes, to rise at three a.m. as I push to finish up what's left.

It's all too much. At Menard's, where we spend as much time as we do at home, my husband wants my input on decisions about materials and decorating. I struggle to care. I believe we will not make it, that I will never really live in this house, that we will get a divorce.

It is September, and it rains. And rains, and rains. The roof is not yet on the house. I could cry thinking about the damage, the wasted money and time and effort if at all has to be redone. I take a break from daily visits to the home site.

My husband and I keep dancing the same steps. We are too busy. We are distant. We get lonely, and draw closer, and it seems as if we might get through, but we fight and then we are busy, and distant once again, like spectres on different planes, barely visible to one another though we occupy the same spaces.

I drive endlessly, having chosen to sleep in one town and live in another. The children and I used to make car-time into fun, with tapes and books, songs and games. Now, my son and older daughter are adolescents. I have not read the right books to prepare for the transition, do not know how be with them, and we are often silent with our own seething thoughts. Sometimes now, we listen to the pop station on the radio. It is an education for us all.

My youngest seems to be okay, but later I will wonder what it cost her, this period of excess and confusion, when so much changed and no one seemed to be in charge.

When the rains let up one afternoon, I help my daughters rake the hay. The builders are on the roof, hoping this dry window of time will allow them to finish laying the plywood sheeting. From the field below I can see an extra man climbing free on the fourteen-pitch roof, his body quick and confident, his hands getting things done. *You go Jerry, don't let it get wet again,* I think.

∩

The frogs laid eggs in both their pools, the small one on the deck and the deeper one out in the yard. Their acre, a triangle cut from Ohio farmland on two sides with a fast rural highway, not much traveled, in the front, felt private with the house and trees to shield them, and the farmer's choice of crop, corn, that stood tall against the side road that year. Before the tadpoles, they would skinny-dip at night after the children were in bed. By seven they were all asleep, with the routines of supper and pickup, baths and stories all complete, and the man and woman would seek each other out for love and comfort, for

the small adventure of naked skin in summer country air, their pleasure in the water sharpened by the heat they had endured that day.

∩

I am driving by the lake in weather no one should confront. I know that I am crazy, irresponsible, with no excuse for living as I do. My children and my husband and my brother are at home in Munising, sleeping, and the slushy rain drives my aging eyes buggy with reflected light each time another vehicle approaches. I crawl along, the tires loud in slop an inch thick, praying that I won't have to stop suddenly, that another reckless driver won't slide into me as they pass in a no-passing zone, impatient, at an obscene speed.

It is after midnight - hours after. The droning tension exhausts me, but coffee helps me keep alert. Sometimes a glaze settles in, but I turn up the radio and shake it off. My mind works at problems like a parasite feeding on rich intestinal stew. I turn the radio off.

So many nights I have been awake while my family slept. At home and on the road, with problems and with projects. It has not been an ordinary life.

At Deerton, the half-way point, I put the music back on and I sing. Avril Lavigne. Nickelback. Kelly Clarkson. *I . . . am calling all angels . . .* Santana and Michelle Branch. Somehow, I am part of all this present, though I am middle-aged.

When my mother was my age, she was pregnant with me. She knew who she was, what she had chosen to be, and we relied on her certainty though we fought to escape it, too.

She would never be out on the road at two a.m. in a storm.

I reach Christmas, and my tensions ease up just a bit.

I will be so glad to press the button for the automatic door on the garage. The driveway will be clear because Jerry will have yooper-scooped the snow and slush away before he went to bed. The kitchen will be neat and clean and he will have hung the laundry up to dry. I will tiptoe past our guest room where my brother, I hope, is in the balm of sleep. I will check the sleeping kids, their night-lights glowing, making cozy patterns on the rugs.

Jerry will be sleeping, but his arms will open when I slide in, tight, beside him. His feet will wrap mine up, will pull my coldness to his warmth, and we will breathe each other like water, like the thing you cannot live

without, though it might kill you unless you dream it right.

"How was your night, gal?" He rumbles.

"Fine," I whisper back against his neck.

I'm home and safe. It's true – it was just fine.

SWEET MYSTERY

Sex. The great mystery of American life, before commerce overcame parental discomfort. In my Irish Catholic home, this word was one of many that were simply never heard. Once, in third grade, I used a bathroom hall pass to get out of class and whisper to my friend, Lois, *I think it has something to do with sleeping together*. I had deduced this information from an article in my family's copy of *Columbian Magazine*, where Mary's virginity had been mentioned in a context that hinted at its meaning.

Later, in the fifth grade, the teachers segregated us boys from girls to tell us about menstruation and personal hygiene. We reconvened afterwards with giggles, blushes, and a weird sense of exposed, unwilling intimacy about this now-universal knowledge.

The following summer, a bunch of us neighborhood kids discovered a stash of *Playboy* magazines under the floorboards in the older boys' clubhouse. The shack was as removed from houses as you could get in our suburban setting, up in the wooded ridge that ran between parallel streets. We younger ones were thrilled and titillated, exuberant about the lucky find which gave us a bit of power

over the teenagers. They would be in unthinkable trouble if their mothers found out.

At the same time, we were afraid. Big boys can be unpredictable and rough, and they would certainly be angry. We decided to tear out some of the pictures and hide them in a plastic bag in an old hollow maple. This accomplished two wonderful coups. For one thing, those boys would wonder and worry about where the pages had gone, spoiling their privacy and pleasure, even reducing their power over us. Our continued access to the pictures was just a bonus.

For a while fascination ran pretty strong and we looked for safe opportunities to retrieve the contraband, which we oogled and giggled over nervously, clandestine in the shack with the door locked from the inside. I admired one image in particular. It was a centerfold photograph of a woman with blonde, loosely curled hair, lying on her back, a blanket covering part of one leg and then drawn between them so that her “privates” were covered up. Above the soft fabric, her body was bare. Naked. She had lovely, large breasts, all pink and white, with standout nipples that made me shiver to look at them. This was what a woman was supposed to look like. To be beautiful. To make boys risk sin, and their mothers’ anger.

I went to the woods once, alone, to look at the pictures, but I found that the fun was really in the conspiracy. On my own, nervous about the approach of other kids on the dark, leaf-strewn path that ran down the middle of the woods along the length of our street, the secret felt uncomfortable. Like an itchy sweater, or a foot that was asleep. The pleasure was gone from a solitary outing. Boring.

Once school resumed in the fall, the other kids and I stopped visiting our cache in the maple tree. The older boys had placed a lock on the outside of the clubhouse, a move that filled us with both frustration and glee. No one, early or late adolescent, could mention the situation without giving ourselves away to an older authority and risking – who knew what punishment?

Later, as I grew into my own woman's body, I gravitated toward the feminist morality of the day. Though I was moving away from the religious dogmas of my upbringing and toward the beckoning freedom of the ripening "sexual revolution," I retained, as we all do, I suppose, the underlying judgments of my upbringing. The women's movement's disapproval for pornography and the sexual objectification of female bodies was a comfortable fit, but

the fact that they had a different set of reasons for the same opinions as the Catholic Church worked great for me.

I liked the idea of free love, but love was the operating factor, and love was and remains a rare and precious thing. Sex removed from guilt and shame? Enjoying the body, with its youthful sensations and vigor? I embraced the changed attitudes that freed me from hating my body, but sex remained inextricably linked to love for me and for most of my friends, both female and male. There was, sometimes, the predictable gender divide that left my girlfriends and me aghast and hurt when young men loved and then moved quickly on. Love didn't always, or even often, mean commitment, but there you are.

As young women, we began to adopt some of this detachment ourselves. No longer were marriage and babies the presumed path. Our fertility could be part of a fuller, more independent life, like men seemed to have always had. Our ideas and presumptions were solidly middle class, but I don't think any of us had the education or experience to understand that at the time.

In the early nineteen-eighties, women as a class were moving into new roles in every area of American society. We were free to make decisions about things that religion, society, and circumstances had dictated to most women for

most of human history, and it seemed as though being physically female worked in two, almost opposite ways. We enjoyed increased sexual freedom, but we didn't want to be defined by it any more that we wanted to be forced by expectation into the role of dependent wife and mother. Fashion and the popular culture reflected these ideas back to us on the television and in magazine and billboard advertising. All around the country, women in business suits with linebacker-ish padded shoulders walked to city jobs in running shoes. In our duffle bags, we carried sensible, low-heeled, moderately feminine pumps to slip on at the office. Our suits were usually jackets and skirts, not pants, and blouses fastened up high, near the neck. The idea was to be perceived as businesslike, not sexy.

Television scripts of that era sometimes focused on pornography and "objectified" images of women in critical ways, pointing out how these and other practices in the media and in private life dehumanized women, reducing us to bodies, or even worse, to body parts. Advertising worked the other side of the street, acknowledging changed assumptions but insisting on sexualized femininity at the end of the day. Enjoli fragrance, for instance, showed us that the way to succeed as a woman included three things:

“I can bring home the bacon, fry it up in the pan, and never, never let you forget you’re a man.”

This tension between freedom to choose and pressure to perform led me to object when male friends had *Playboy* or other “girlie” magazines around, or if they slobbered over the actresses on *Miami Vice*. My girlfriends and I stood up for other women if they were called whores, or bitches. At work, we wanted a sort of desexualized, neutral environment. Not to give up being female, but for our femaleness to be beside the point. The obscene moniker, “femi-nazi,” was coined during this period in what has always seemed like a savvy attempt to silence women like me, women who wanted the new freedoms as well as the responsibilities, but did not willingly pay the price in diminished dignity and regard for all things feminine.

Now, twenty years down the pike, I am the mother of two nearly-grown-up children and one who is at the crossroads of adolescence. I often find myself in surprising agreement with conservative Christians, with their condemnation of popular culture and its wretched, commerce-driven representations of everything, including human sexuality, both male and female. As with the Catholicism of my youth, I don’t agree with some of the religious right’s reasoning. I’m not motivated by a belief

that teenage or unmarried sex breaks God's laws, but I know that these behaviors bear risks that go well beyond pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. When preachers on the radio complain that our current television, movies, books and video games are a flood of negative influences on young people, they're right.

The bad fruit of our market-driven information age is that, for most people, the entire environment is awash in images and messages selected by people whose only interest in us is as consumers. Sex and death. Those are their tools for marketing. Our brains respond more vigorously to these primal stimulations than to anything else, so they always work to get our attention. It's not hard to put together.

People talk about "porn" casually, like it's just another fun entertainment. When I visit family members who have cable T.V., I get an education in what's considered normal daytime programming. Violence, often against women, is grim and graphic. The women themselves are dressed in the clothing that women wear today, which has increasingly emphasized and exposed breasts and bottoms. At night, there is sleazy, titillating fare on some stations, while the more mainstream talk shows are populated by men and

women who seem mostly preoccupied with appearance, and, often, sexual innuendo.

When I try to shop with my now-teenage daughters for clothing, we find ourselves in a battle almost every time. The trend toward body-hugging, skin-revealing garments has moved from junior fashions, to the girls' sizes seven-to-fourteen department, and sometimes even replaces what little girls used to wear. This last group has always been gendered, with frilly dresses and smocked, embroidered pinafores, but that "innocent" femininity is mostly unavailable to girls and women today. I want my daughters to feel good about their bodies, to feel their strength and the pleasure of being alive and female. But I don't want them to conform to the requirement that they should be on display to gratify other people. What does it mean to be "eye candy"? I want them to experience times and places that de-emphasize their gendered identity. They really want these things, too, but they also want to feel that they fit with their peers. And some of their peers are wearing Victoria's Secret.

I find myself wondering, where are the feminists? And I realize that this is a finger pointing back at myself. What happened? How did we allow this state of affairs to evolve?

Recently, I stumbled upon a young woman in a sweater and a thong on the Internet. In the midst of a set of You-Tube mini-films about Ralph Nader, there she was, bent over with her back to me, her straight legs making a triangle within the small rectangle on the menu of opening images. At first I ignored her. I was busy researching Nader's probable bid for candidacy in the current presidential election. But after exhausting the other options at the site, which all dealt with politics, I was curious. Could this be something other than pornography? Just to be safe, I muted my computer. Then I clicked.

The woman strutted and danced, moving around a small area across a rug with the signature bunny logo. She gyrated her hips and rolled around on the rug giving front, back, and side peeks.

I pressed escape.

The picture that made such a deep impression on me as a girl, the bare-chested woman reclining across the staples in a magazine meant for boys and men, seems as innocent as my third-grade, pre-informed self by comparison to this video, but the You-Tube lady would seem innocent, or at least uninvolved, if played side-by-side with some music videos I've seen. And this is just the mild stuff that's available. I don't even want to look around to confirm

what I'm told is easily had by anyone, including young people, through various media sources.

At her request, I take my older daughter with me to a home-product sales party hosted by a neighbor. These parties are not a great match for my anti-consumerist, frumpy self, but I don't have many close friends who live nearby at present, and I am very happy to be invited. It's a lovely time. A dozen or more women of all ages, a smattering of small children and a couple of teens, including my daughter.

Josie and I arrive a bit late, and the presentation portion of the evening is already underway. Our hostess, Crystal, shows us where to stash our coats and boots and offers us refreshments in the kitchen, where company crockery holds a variety of pasta salads, dips and crackers.

Crystal has three sons and a daughter. She and her husband and the kids have been working on their house in stages, adding on and refurbishing the older homestead they bought when they moved to the area about twenty years ago. They are from farm country in Nebraska and they like to do

the usual outdoor U.P. things, like four-wheeling in the summer and snowmobiling during our long season of snow.

Their house reflects their love of the outdoors and nature in their choices of artwork and wood flooring, as well as a traditionalist bent in the furnishings. Silvery planks of wood, recovered from a local barn that fell to a storm after years of disuse, are angled along the entry rooms. A vintage nineteen-fifties payphone, one of the products in the catalogue the saleslady provides, lives in its own lighted phone booth against one wall.

Josie and I set ourselves up together in the circle of women. I sit on a chair in the arched doorway between living and dining rooms with Josie standing beside and a bit behind me so she can duck out of sight if she feels shy. We know more people than I had expected, and the shopping part becomes, as I had hoped, the setting for plenty of friendly conversation. Lots of laughing. Moms keep an eye on several small children, getting up and down to tend their needs. When the saleswoman finishes her spiel, she sits and chats with us all, adding up our orders on her hand-held calculator.

We are rural people, either by birth or choice, and this equates to flannel shirts, sensible outerwear, and

less makeup and high-maintenance hairdos than you might see at a similar city gathering.

As Josie and I ponder the obligatory purchase, our neighbors, Lucy and Sharon, come to stand nearby. They visit with us for nearly twenty minutes. Lucy, whose hardworking brothers blow the snow off our driveway when the volume of it overwhelms our thirty-two inch walk-behind, has recently been diagnosed with diabetes. We commiserate about the difficulty of changing eating habits, and I offer to be her walking partner in the spring.

"I hate to walk," she says. "Talk to me about gardening."

Sharon, who also lives on our road, and who more than once has watched over an escaped horse or donkey until we could be contacted and brought home, smiles and talks with us, too. When she and Lucy decide it's time for them to go, she bends to hug me, soft and warm and kind. Both of these women are a bit older than I am, though at our ages one hesitates to guess.

Josie and I make our orders. She'll pay me back for the set of three ornate keys she means to split with her siblings. She wants them each to have one on a wall in their house when they are grown and gone from ours. I order some wine glasses for my husband, who I think will

like them, since we often enjoy a glass of wine together after the kids are in bed at night.

When we move into the kitchen to taste the snacks, Crystal introduces us to her long-time friend, Cindy. Both women are gracious and warm. Friendly. Easy to like. Cindy has a son Josie's age. Both women seem to be genuinely interested in my daughter.

When Josie tells them about being one of two girls in her welding class, Crystal wraps an arm around my tall, funny daughter and hugs her close.

"I was the best welder in my class!" she cries.

I hadn't known this about her, though I did know that she played competitive sports in college, back when Title Nine was first taking effect.

I wonder about that *Playboy* woman all those years ago. What kind of life did she have after that? That naked model, thirty-five years past, is somewhat older than I am, of course. Lucy's age? Sharon's? If she's still living, she might be a grandmother. She might host friendly product parties with the women in her town, or have a garden. If she was lucky, she got to move past being the object of other people's desires and had the chance to pursue some of her own. Maybe she wore power suits and sneakers. Or flannel and denim. Maybe she used her

beautiful breasts to feed a baby, who sucked life from her generous nipples.

What waits around the corner for the You-Tube dancer?

I'm not always sure about myself as a role model for my girls. I've made so many mistakes. But she's a good model for femininity, that Crystal. She's physically and emotionally strong, and she also keeps a beautiful home in the best sense: with order but not finicky; comfortable, but not chaotic. Her house feels calm.

As we leave the party, Josie offers me her arm so I won't slip on the ice between the house and our car.

"I just love middle-aged women!" she tells me.

For all the publicized sex and scandal, emphasis on violence, and continuing struggle for equality, the simple pleasure of community life and the society of women prevail. What's not to like?

THE BIGGEST LOSER(S)

December 9, 2007

One of my workplaces is sponsoring a team competition to encourage weight loss and health improvement for employees. I signed up as one of a team of ten. By August, if we are the biggest losers, a $5000 purse is ours. The initial weigh-in is in January, so we will best situate ourselves competitively by fully enjoying the end-of-year holidays. Eat with abandon and get lots of sleep, for tomorrow we will be restricting calories and exercising daily.

December 31, 2007

I wish this party would get started. I realized the other day (how can I be surprised by stuff like this?) that I carry around fifty pounds that doesn't belong on my body, on my middle-aged, calcium-shedding skeletal framework. I even know what I need to do to get rid of at least half of it, yet I wait around for the contest to start - this is crazy! I'm not waiting any more. I'm going to get thinking about what steps to take, when, how, and just do it.

I have been in a state of mental preparation, though. Don't laugh. It's Harold Hill's "think system"! Remember what it did for small-town Iowans? I know this is true from quitting smoking. Pre-planning helped me take at least a dozen vacations from the habit before I went on what I hope is a permanent hiatus over ten years ago now.

It's important to keep expectations realistic. I don't have to lose the whole fifty pounds. Twenty will accomplish every desirable health benefit. That'll put me at the reduced size I earned on Weight Watchers five years ago and maintained for four more - there are lots of clothes in my closet that will fit again for work this winter, and God knows saving the pocket book is a big motivator right now. Keep it do-able, that's the trick. I know some lose larger amounts and keep it off, but people with personalities like mine who lose big seem to gain it all back and then some.

Folks who make big changes in their bodies make big changes in their lives. I don't know if I'm capable of that. Or willing, even if I have the capacity.

Last year I abused myself by trying to be superwoman and fell off the healthy-foods-and-exercise wagon so hard it has seemed as if I might not be able to get back on at all. Surely I can at least get up and put life back

together as it was before that year of overwork, overindulgence, and physical torpor.

I gave up caffeine a week ago. The withdrawal headache slammed me hard, and I got very sick and nauseated, feeling just awful all over. I'm glad I never tried heroine – three days with a throbbing head and an afternoon that felt like the result of food poisoning were hard enough to give me awe and sympathy for recovering drug addicts and what they face when they try to quit.

I've started skiing again. The first day was hard, and the second, too, but by the third time at Valley Spur, I knew something reassuring: I am still susceptible to the pleasure of physical activity. This will help me to draw back from the pit of obesity.

The girl I once was did not predict the woman I am now. I often wish I could wake up and find that I've jumped reality tracks, that there is a thread of life's possibilities in which I made different choices. In that scenario, I still have my children, all of them, but I am also a woman who kept her body intact, who paid enough attention to her own needs.

January 1. 2008

New Year's Day and my first thought is to check the weather – is the driveway snowed in? The second impulse is to get busy making hot breakfast for Jerry and the kids.

This is why I'm fat. Food is related to love and comfort for me. I feel comfortable with my competency at pleasing people by preparing bacon and eggs or waffles, substantial whole wheat, rich with milk and butter; soups and casseroles; breads and meats; vegetables, fresh or steamed with pepper or cheese – it's all a known quantity. I'm not a gourmet, nor anything like that character who cooks up love and fate in Like Water for Chocolate, but I love the effect my food has on people in a similar way to both. When it is appreciated. When they give in and enjoy the comfort of it, too.

My husband does not eat for comfort. Anyone who looks at us can see who's doing better on the whole. There he is, tall and slim and handsome, confident in every area of life – except home. And then me: shrinking height, fatter and fatter, overly concerned with pleasing, hamstrung by my dependence on responding to other people's needs, feeling

anything but capable of taking care of myself in the world outside the kitchen.

So today, the first day of a new year, I sit to write instead of standing to cook. Later, I'll eat with greater attention to my feelings, but without any narrow, impossible-to-sustain New Year's resolutions. Then I'll move my body through the house to gather my ski equipment, to dress in warm, but not too warm, layers of clothing. I'll drive or ride (depending on whether Jerry comes, too) to Valley Spur, and I'll do the "B" loop with its lovely opening stretch of gentle hills, narrow curve over wetland ravine, the tracks freshly groomed over snow that came lightly last night, in lieu of the promised raging blizzard.

January 2, 2008

8:55 a.m.

I have a new fitness book. The Final Makeover: Your 40-Day Guide to Personal Fitness by Dino Nowak. Since I don't watch television, I don't know him as a notable trainer, but I don't question his editors' claims about his great successes with famous folks. When I bought the book, on

impulse, I didn't notice that he was pitching Christianity along with fitness. This blending of religion with salesmanship always seems antithetical to me, but really, I can use all the help I can get.

The main attraction when I picked this book up was that it included some organizational materials, charts, calendars, schedules, diagrams of specific exercises – things that I really seem to need, externally, in order to accomplish something. But there's a lot of text, too.

My husband scoffs at self-help books like this one. He criticizes them as overly repetitive. It's as if the authors have to achieve some pre-determined word count, or else that they have no restrictions on how long they take to say what they're trying to communicate. Jerry is a scientist; he prefers charts and graphs over prose. He's right, of course, but the reader and storyteller in me seeks out these personal anecdotes to illustrate, to take the information beyond persuasion and into motivation.

I don't know how I might be defined (artist? dilettante?), but the stories these authors tell are important to me. Yes, sometimes simplistic, bombastic, artificial or obvious. But, often, something that connects, too.

January 5, 2007

10:11 a.m.

All I want now is skiing! I'm past the draggy feeling that it all takes too much effort, and past the fear of falling. The dormant muscles from all my years of dance, walking and other exercise are awake now, and eager to be busy, like somnambulists wakened by L-dopa, thrilled to be alive!

Yesterday, I stopped at Valley Spur on my way to work to ski the "A" loop, twice. It's an easy trail - just about a mile long with enough up to have some down. Short, but enough work to make me take off my hat, despite temperatures in the low teens. My car was first in the lot so I was alone on the trail, scooting my bulk along un-groomed tracks that were littered, here and there, with pale beech leaves. Very pretty and innocent-seeming, but they can send a skier into a snowy face-plant if she's not careful. This probably doesn't occur with waxless equipment, but the wax on my skis catches on the thin, tan droppings. They stick there, gumming up the bottoms and causing friction against the snow even after I've passed on to a clear portion of the trail.

After my first lap, I took my skis off and tried to remove the streaks of brown on the bottoms. The metal scraper attached to the cork I use for smoothing out the wax was too hard, and I risked digging into the base wax or even the plastic of the ski itself. I backed off, deciding that the time has come for the seasonal hot-wax I've been putting off. Or maybe they make a solvent that will remove the sticky debris easily. I cleaned up as best I could and headed back out for another loop.

By now another car was in the lot, but A was still a solitary path. This time, I tried to avoid the beech leaves, shifting my weight to the clean track and even lifting up the other ski to step over obstructions.

At first, I doubted that I would have the muscular capacity to allow this kind of move, which requires both balance and strength. But my body surprised me. It was marginal; if I had tried this the day before, it wouldn't have worked out so well. I might have fallen awkwardly, risking more injury than with the controlled, slow tumbles that are part of most ski outings for me. Or I might have felt the abdominal burning that indicates tearing scar tissue and adhesions from my C-section nearly eighteen years ago.

Yesterday, after only a couple of weeks' resumed activity, I had enough deep muscle control to avoid picking up any more leaves. I even moved out of the tracks where they were thickest, and skied down a small incline in the parallel path intended for skate-skiers. They would disapprove, no doubt – I was leaving marks from my poles inside the width of their swooping tracks. But for this moment, I didn't care. The small rush of the downhill thrilled me, crouched as I was with my poles tucked up, my face forward into the nipping breeze.

January 6, 2008

11:55 a.m.

No skiing yesterday (don't ask) and only marginal today. It's forty degrees out. Scummy weather for a renewed cross-country addict like me. Still, outside is better than in on this overcast mid-winter day. Jerry and Claire and I took to the icy trail this morning with glops of red warm-weather wax thick on the middle portion of our ski bottoms – well beyond the proper "kick zone", but just the ticket to keep us moving forward instead of sliding our

feet back and forth while our bodies occupy the same air space, like a trio of vaudevillian shufflers.

My boss at one of my jobs, Becky, told me on Friday that our weight loss challenge is stalled. The high-up muckety-mucks in our organization were pleased to hear that we have a team, but they're being vague, now, about when the contest will actually start. If we're the only location that put together a group, it's possible they may cancel it. Not an option, according to Becky. As we savored our hearty diner breakfasts, she gestured with a mock fist:

"I don't care if we're the only ones. We've got a team and we should go ahead.
They'll just have to give us each our five hundred bucks if no one else does it."

~ Entry interrupted by lunch, at which I ate too much ~

So I'm exercising now. I do feel better, but it won't bring any weight loss unless I stop overeating. I keep eating when I'm already full, all the time. I know I'm really trying to fill something other than my stomach: my heart and soul, to use sincere clichés. I feel sad and exhausted, but there is no time to stop and unpack these things. Responsibilities and commitments crowd in like high water into tidal pools, filling all my crevices, any

spot of time I might use to pay attention to my own sadness, to rest from what exhausts me. I keep responding, responding, trying to get my feet under me and wade up above the water line, but each new wave throws me off balance and sometimes topples me into the salt and sand.

January 19, 2008

7:59 a.m.

My son just left with his dad to go back to college. I am sitting in our office/closet, typing and eating cake, by turns.

January 21, 2008

8:02 a.m.

You might say this journaling isn't going so well. Or wonder, what's happening with Dino? Or even shake your head and think: *if everyone on the team is like this, their only shot is if no one else signs up*.

Let's say you're wrong. Let's say that Pollyanna Power will prevail, and that I'll get it together, with or

without a group. That I'll do more than limp along with a little extra exercise to make me feel improved enough to keep functioning, but not a patch on the commitment and drive it will take to really get healthier. Bear with me. No more right now – I'm going to meet with Dino.

January 21, 2008

9:08 p.m.

Dino may be a Christian writer, but he's sincere. He goes after the marketers of weight-loss products with righteous zeal. If anything, he's even more critical of the religious stations that sell advertising spots to those scumbuckets.

I don't know if I have what it takes to follow his forty-day program. As I tried to read next to Jerry on our bed, the two of us a matched pair, working at home in wire-rimmed glasses, my husband reminded me that this is the number of days Noah and Company spent on the Ark. I had already put it together with Jesus' fast in the desert and Lent, which commemorates that long deprivation. Even though I already know almost everything Dino is trying to teach, and even though I agree with his thinking (though

not his doctrines) almost all of the time, I think it may take me the whole six weeks just to read the damn book.

I got up this morning at 5:15. I either worked or spent time with my kids or drove the car until after supper, which my sweet husband had on the table, warm, when the girls and I arrived at home a bit after six. I have had no time alone. I did not get any exercise today. I really want to eat some of the ice cream we bought for my son's goodbye supper. I don't know yet what I'll do about that.

January 22, 2008

6:29 a.m.

Ice cream it was. But I'd read my Dino, and I kept My Olde Weightwatchers/AA dictum in mind. Small goals: one step, one minute at a time. My treat was in a mug, not a bowl – about half of what I might have scooped otherwise. Progress? A small victory? A return to gracious living? My scale was four pounds down this morning, and I'm not even on the program yet, so I'll take it as encouragement to keep trying.

January 27, 2008

7:20 a.m.

Had a great ski yesterday – perfect weather! Temperatures required purple wax – the swing color between warm-weather, sticky red and the hard blue I've been using during the past week's cold snap. We had about an inch of new snow at our house, lovely large flakes that "smoosh to nothing," as Jerry said.

In the late afternoon at Valley Spur with my husband, my younger daughter Claire and her friend Cassie, the tracks were packed down hard and slick. I was the caboose though I really can ski faster. Like my own Mom, who lost at games so that no child ever came in last, I like to provide some comic incompetence that lets the girls feel their strength, to have a sense that they are on a trajectory that will shoot them beyond the grownups eventually. And this is not a lie. Though I have more muscle than they do, my considerable fat and neglected cardio-vascular system make me stop to rest and gasp for breath on the uphill sections of trail.

It was cold enough to make us keep moving for warmth, so the "B" loop was behind us relatively quickly. The lure

of Heaven, a series of longer, steeper downhill slopes, inspired us to continue on “D,” the more gradual of our uphill options.

At the top of the first hill, we gathered for the descent. Here I was the undisputed last in line. My approach to these runs, which make me feel both excitement and fear of re-injuring the fused lumbar discs in my spine, is to adopt a genuflecting posture and ride down crouched with one knee balanced on my ski, almost like sledding. If I pick up more speed than I’m comfortable with, I just fall down to the side. Quite deliberately. It works great. I get all the thrills with only soft spills. The problem is that I mess up the grooves in the trail for the next skiers. This troubles my conscience, but physical speed is rare in my life these days, so I push my qualms away and just enjoy the ride.

Yesterday, as I watched my companions, by turns, tilt into the first slope, knees bent and thrusting with both poles for more speed, I sized up my own body’s growing ability to negotiate pitch and curve. It almost didn’t look as steep today, though each of the others disappeared from my view as they approached the bottom, then reemerged on the level, yards beyond. No one else fell down.

The snow was not soft – a week of near-zero temperatures had hardened and compacted it, and what had fallen in the past day or so was just a thin covering over hard, icy drifts. I'm still way too fat to be very flexible, and if I fell down it would hurt. But I so wanted to feel that tilt and rush, to shift and round the curve without falling, to shout, "Woohoo!" instead of quietly, timidly stopping before I'd even reached full-speed.

So I did. I kept it slow at the tops of all three hills, inching myself forward until gravity took over. Each time, I dragged my poles to slow down a bit until I was halfway down. Then I tucked them up under my arms, bent my knees, and felt the cold wind snap against my face and neck. The past few weeks have yielded little weight loss, but my strength and balance have improved, and I kept upright, keeping up with Jerry and Claire and Cassie on all three slopes. When I trundled along the final flat section, momentum carrying me briskly along, arms pumping my poles above my head, they were waiting there, *woohoo*-ing with me as I approached.

February 4, 2008

8:55 p.m.

This is always my downfall: I get too busy to exercise, and I eat too much when I'm under stress. It helps not at all that the "too much" is all comfort food – salt and sweet and chocolate. And fats. Butter on my bagels, Butterball Me.

But the contest has started, and I signed up and weighed in. I'm a finisher, not a quitter. The team thing will activate my overly-responsible caretaker quirks, so surely, surely, I am going to take myself in hand and change my munchy ways.

Tuesdays. 9:00 a.m. weigh-in. I love the leader – she's encouraging and not boring. She's about my age and was even a bit bigger than I am now when she finally got serious five years ago. She lost seventy pounds. Over time, not overnight.

So I have Weightwatchers. And Dino. And this log to keep me focused, honest. And the other Losers from work. And the suit in my closet that I wore for my M.A. reading three years ago. That doesn't fit me now, but could, in

two months' time, when I will read my next and final thesis for friend and foe alike.

I suggested a "before" group picture to one of my teammates, Jenna, last week. She waggled her eyebrows at me. "In bikinis," she crooned.

"Oh, yeah," I scoffed. "I didn't even wear a bikini when I was young and thin and could pull it off."

"We could use it for some negative motivation," Jenna suggested. "Keep that scale going down, or the picture goes right up on YouTube."

Now that would be some powerful motivation. Negative. Yeah.

Too ashamed to log the date

8:32 a.m.

Since I wrote last, I have lost and gained and lost eight pounds. At the same time, I've gained and lost and regained deep muscle mass - the kind that begins to act as a natural girdle, to rein in my faux-pregnancy pot belly. This muscle stabilizes my hips, knees and back so that I can work and play without getting hurt, but it seems to

dissipate very quickly unless I maintain daily exercise. Use it or lose it, truly.

I had lunch recently with two thin friends, one who is five or so years older than me, the other fifteen years younger. Eva, who is in her fifties, has kept her body healthy, strong and fit. Our thirty-something friend, Lisa, has decided to try to add some weight to her extremely slender body. Boney, she describes herself.

When thin people protest, *but I eat a lot!*, I believe that they don't intend to lie, but that it's a question of perspective. When a fat person starts to count calories, she's often surprised to find how very many she's consuming. The opposite is probably true for people who keep their weight low – if they counted, the number would be a surprise.

Skinny is a distant memory from my earliest hyperactive girlhood, but I *have* lived in a normal, healthy-sized body from time to time. That condition was always the result of balanced living. Reasonable eating, reasonable physical activity, compatible rhythms in a life that worked pretty smoothly. A life that prioritized self-care. Since I became a wife and mother (over nineteen years ago!) such balance has been a rare thing.

This is not true for my friends, though each has had experiences that might justify more dysfunction than I feel any right to claim. On the contrary, they carve out time to pay attention to their own needs. They each have come, victorious, through daunting circumstances, and seem to have learned how to take good care of themselves.

I do not take care of myself. I respond, respond, respond to what I think other people want and need from me.

At our lunch, I was mostly quiet while my thin friends talked about weight. I did make a small predictable joke suggesting that Lisa and I should hang out together and each eat what the other normally would. Instead of laughing with me, my friends began to talk to me about how I might address my overweight – food choices, exercise options. I stopped them fairly quickly.

"I know all of this – what I should be doing. But my life is screwed up because I've allowed and created a situation that includes no time to take proper care of myself. Being fat is a side effect. It's not the real problem."

We moved on to talk about a lot of other things, and I enjoyed the visit very much. But when we parted ways, I went and bought a new pair of sneakers. Instead of

stopping at my office to working or going home, I went for a long walk in the late winter, late afternoon sunshine.

I don't want to be the fattest person in the room. I don't want to be old before my time. I want to be the middle-aged woman I imaged I would be, when I was young, and single, and fit.

March 4, 2008

6:51 a.m.

We went for a night-time ski last night. Twice around "A" with Claire in the lead, then Jerry, then me. We gave Jerry a headlamp for his birthday on Sunday, and I had the idea to get one for each of our girls as party favors. Josie loaned hers to me since she stayed home to finish cleaning her room (a prerequisite for permissions to go to out with friends, to dances, etc.) and I suspect for some time alone. She's a smart girl. Quiet time for oneself is so important.

None of us really wanted to go. It had been a long day with an early start and long drives in and out of town for us. Once we're home it's pretty hard to want to leave again. But Claire was excited about skiing in the dark, I

had let the day slip by without exercise and Jerry was bent on being supportive of both family closeness and improving my health. So off we went.

In the deepest part of the gloaming light, a single car waited in the lot for the last couple coming off the trails just as we arrived. We said twilight hellos, asking about trail conditions. “It’s fast,” the fellow said. Jerry banged on the blue kick wax, corked it smooth, squeaked on the glide, then handed off skis to Claire and me. We strapped the lamps over our hats, then walked to the trailhead and stepped into our skis. The glowing blue beams pointed out and down from our foreheads, so we had to be careful not to shine our lights in one another’s eyes.

Earlier in the season, I overheard a guy in the warming cabin talking about wolves. He felt too afraid to ski alone, especially at night. “I don’t trust them,” he told the volunteer welcome-worker.

I used to have some fears like his. I was taught at home, church and through the news to fear the animal, “man.” When our kids were small and I took them to state and local parks to hike and skip stones in creeks and rivers, I had to overcome an inner tremble about who we might run across and what harm they might mean to do. At our house on the river in Minong, Wisconsin, there was fear

of the crazy neighbor who thought we'd been sold part of his land, and of the black bear whose scent and scat let us know when it had visited our yard. Later, when we lived in Alaska, statistically real risks from Grizzlies, moose and sled dogs (which, I am told, injure more children each year than the previous two animals combined) helped me to pull vague worries about relatively unlikely events off my simmer burner and treat caution with some common sense.

So I didn't worry about animals, human or otherwise, as we shushed along the trail last night. We saw no wildlife, not even a nocturnal skunk or bat. We did see the god Orion, all of us stopped in a row on an upward incline, covering our lamps with our mittens to darken the field, to make the stars shine brighter overhead.

March 12, 2008

8:01 a.m.

I am truly a weight-loss loser. Why am I not able to do this? I've done it before. I know what it takes. I just feel too . . . soft. Too soft to make myself get tough. With exercise and fitness. With resisting comforting foods and fullness.

It's partly circumstance. My job, the job that was sponsoring our weight-loss team, has disappeared. I took an unofficial leave of absence this past month as I tried to complete my graduate work, and while I was gone the organization lost one of its sustaining grants. Transitional apartment housing for homeless young adults had to be closed down locally and regionally, and the seedling program that I was nurturing in my home county has been suspended. The effect on me is nothing compared to the young people who need the programs and housing, but it does mean that the six hundred or so dollars I used to earn at this job each month will need to come from some other employment. And soon.

I'm still welcome to be an honorary member of the team, but since I'm not doing such a great job it's hard to feel motivated to initiate contact.

Yesterday, I chatted briefly with Michelle, an acquaintance who works at the university library. She's a single woman, a few years younger than me, and, on occasion, we've been walking buddies. She looked fitter than I remembered, younger, without the dark circles I recalled under her eyes. I commented when she helped me at the desk:

"Have you been working out? You look wonderful!"

Michelle gave me a long look. “I haven’t moved since October,” she said. “I don’t know what’s up with me. How can an active person spend five months without moving?”

“Maybe you just needed time at home,” I suggested. “You’re skin looks great, and you look happy and rested.”

She smiled at this, but denied any weight loss, claiming that her winter hibernation had included little-to-no skiing and plenty of time on the couch curled up with her dog. She thought I looked just the same as when we’d last walked together, about three years ago.

“No,” I shook my head. “I’ve gained twenty pounds since then. It’s terrible.” I leaned in to speak more softly. “I’m hoping it’ll be easier post-menopause. I’ve seen it with other women – they can finally lose it, keep it off and get fit. I’m not quite there yet, but that’s my hope.”

Michelle nodded. “My mom did that.”

“This age – I guess the body just wants to hang on to everything, to make sure there’s enough calcium for bones, enough fat for . . .”

“Hatching eggs,” she finished the thought for me. “It doesn’t want to let go, just in case.”

I took that thought with me into the day. Letting go. This is my challenge, and not just with my bad eating and

exercise habits. It's a metaphor, I guess, for what confronts me in life. The end of a lengthy educational journey and the beginning of a job search. Another change of place as my husband starts a new job in another state, far away to the south. I am still in the process of letting go of my son, who lives away at college now. Of my daughters, who need me less frequently and prominently than they once did. My dad, who reminds me each time we talk that the cancer recurrence rate for cases like his is fifty percent within two years, and that he intends to let the tumor take him when it returns. And always, like a color wash over everything else, the tendrils of missing my mom.

Like my stubborn midlife metabolism, I hang on instead of letting go. We've moved a baker's dozen times during our married life, Jerry and me. Since many of these moves were paid for by his new employer, we had the luxury of carting most of our stuff with us each time instead of paring down and re-stocking at the new location. We're not big consumer materialists, but we do have scads of books, arts and crafts supplies, tools, and winter and outdoor gear. Boxes, boxes, and boxes of photos not yet in albums. Homeschooling supplies from that era in our family life. Artifacts of our outings, trips, and children's projects. The idea of packing all of this up for yet another move is

terribly dispiriting. But so is the thought that we should sort and weed, choose only what's most important to take with us. How can this question be answered? It's all important, and none of it is.

I recently watched a movie with my daughters, one in a string of female coming-of-age films that my younger daughter has been interested in and my older daughter usually relishes, too. Jerry is not allowed to watch these with us right now. It's just us girls, which makes me feel sorry for him. He must miss Luke even more than I do.

In this story, the mother is a very young, the daughter, twelve or thirteen. They live with the mother's abusive boyfriend, but their escape occurs within the first few scenes. At first, the daughter sulks in the front passenger seat of their convertible, unresponsive to the mother's gay attempts to celebrate freedom and the excitement of setting out for the unknown. The mom works hard to get the girl to look ahead, to choose a destination from the map. She *woohoo*'s and drives fast. Finally, she keeps the car in lane with one hand on the steering wheel while grabbing clothing from their bags in the back seat with the other. She holds these by the handful, up above her head, and then lets go. The fabrics billow out over

the trunk of the car, then settle on the road behind the pair.

"Out with the old, in with the new!" This cry is convincing, to us, watching, and to her daughter in the script as well.

I've been thinking about this scene a lot lately. Once, I relished independence and autonomy. I was completely portable. It was a point of pride that I owned only what would fit in my car with room left over for sleeping there if necessary. I felt free. Very free.

What distance would I have to cover, how much must litter the road behind me, in order to feel that way again? Is the daunting answer to this question what keeps me eating, what stops me from moving my body in lively, healthy ways?

Maybe it's not such a difficult thing. Maybe it's just a difficult step and once a decision is made, speed and wind will take care of debris. Of regret. Of clinging to what belongs to the past and keeps me from living the present.

Out with the old. In with the new. Move on. Let go. Be free, again. Be free.

I-76, EAST OF AKRON AND KENT

The man looks dead to me. The woman is crying, shaking, taking steps this way and that. I hug her round the shoulders, touch her elbow, say, *let's stay here, they'll be here soon*. The lady who called 911 steps up to block her view and we break the cautious boundary between strangers, conspiring like sisters to care for this probable widow until the experts arrive.

I am on my way to the house I grew up in, outside Pittsburgh, where my father is entering his final week of cancer treatments. Home, now, is in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan with my husband and daughters, and with our son when he is home from college. This is my week with Dad, my turn to cook and drive for him and help him to remember what the doctors say. To keep him company, most of all.

Another driver has stopped too, a man about my age with white-blond hair, fit, wearing glasses. He approaches the car, a blue convertible with its top down, braced, now, against a tree, at a mild angle on the upward slope of the roadside ditch. The man who had been driving lies there with his head flopped back. He has a grizzled, unshaven face and neck. The engine is still running. The third Samaritan climbs across the rear of the car into the

backseat, looks the driver over, and gingerly reaches around him to turn off the ignition. He comes back to the three of us standing by the trunk of the car. “I’m not going to move him.”

“Is he okay?” The woman is shuddering and sobbing in gasps, small catches of breath and impulsive little movements, as if she will take some action soon, but can’t connect with an intention past the shock of the accident. “I couldn’t stop him. I couldn’t wake him up.”

Another man and some children have emerged from the lady’s van. She offers her phone for a call to the daughter and he keeps the girls at a distance as he arranges with his wife to take the kids to their destination. Later, he will return for her.

The man in the crashed car rolls his head this way and that. He is alive! I don’t know what to do, but I keep patting the woman and saying whatever I can think of to keep her attention.

Her feet are bare.

“I’ll get your shoes.”

The lady from the van does the patting while I take a few steps across the grass to the open passenger door. A purse is outside on the ground; I pick it up. The door hangs there, left open when she got out, after they struck

the tree. I reach into the car to get the shoes, canvas slip-ons, from the floorboard. She must have been resting. Maybe she was asleep herself and only wakened when the car went out of control. I glance at the man, his face grey, eyes closed, mouth slack. He is older than me, but not as old as my dad. His baseball cap is still in place. He is not moving now.

I don't know what to do. I take the shoes back and help the woman slip them on. She's quite pudgy so it is an effort to get them on her feet. She tells me she's sixty-something. He fell asleep at the wheel and she couldn't wake him up, she says.

"He can't be dead. He can't be dead."

She makes motions to show me how the car weaved across the lanes, then veered across the median, and finally came to rest in the ditch, stopped by the tree.

An emergency vehicle pulls up, and I keep my arm around the woman as they take charge of the scene. The white-blonde man helps them move the driver, several of them lifting him like a scarecrow through the air, his arms and legs stiff and splayed wide. I can see his face clearly. His eyes are mostly closed, and I think now that this accident came from a heart attack, not exhaustion. I think his movements, only moments before, must have

signified another one. I think that he is dead, and they will not be able to bring him back with their breathing tube, compressions or electric paddles.

"Do you want to call someone?" I ask. Yes, she wants to call her daughter, who lives not far away. The cell phone lady dials the number and talks. We don't know what to say to the daughter about her father. There's been an accident. We're here with your mother. The EMT's are with your dad. Where are we? We look around for signs or markers; I struggle to remember the highway number, the direction, the name of the nearest town to the west.

I think, *it was a mistake to offer a call*. I worry that the daughter might rush out driving, fearful and panicked and grieving. She could get into an accident herself. By the time she arrives no one might be left at the scene, anyway.

Anther ambulance arrives with more equipment, and soon we hear the command, clear, and the voltage as they try to revive the man on the ground.

We ask an EMT where they will take the couple from the accident. By the time the cell phone lady has given this information to the daughter, her husband is back to pick her up. She speaks briefly with the police about what she saw, gives them her contact information and leaves.

I stay with the still-trembling woman as she answers questions about her own injuries. She hit the dashboard when they crashed, and her chest hurts. The EMT is in his fifties or early sixties. I notice that most of the workers are in this age range. He is kind and calm. A stretcher-board is brought over, and he helps the woman lie down. She clutches her purse to her stomach as they cover her with a blanket; then they lift her into the ambulance. The EMT turns to me.

"Thank you for stopping," he says. His tone is warm, with genuine feeling. Gratitude. For my inept attempt to "help."

I don't know what to say, so I make a confused gesture and try to smile. I feel incompetent. I didn't even think to ask about the lady's medical condition. I can feel that my face is wrenched with worry and stress, not at all calm like his.

I approach the police officer, a tall, slim woman in her early thirties.

"Did you see the accident?" she asks.

I saw the car against the tree as I passed by, I tell her, and the two other vehicles already pulled over. I stopped to see if they had called 911, if they needed a cell phone or more help.

“You can go, then.” She smiles at me. She is professional and reassuring.

Walking along the roadside to my car, I pass another rescue worker. Energetic and younger, late twenties or early thirties, he nods at me, friendly but brisk. He is on the job.

I sit for a minute before turning the key, my skin white in the rearview mirror, my face no help to anyone in crisis, expressive as it always is, right now a mask of shock and worry. I try to ease my eyebrows, to relax my lips. I don’t feel much like putting it in gear. What will happen to that lady? Should I have asked for contact information? Gone with her to meet her daughter at the hospital? How can I just go along on my own way after this?

I do drive on, though. At the first rest area, I stop to call my dad and brother. I’ll be later than they expected. I explain what’s happened, that I need to rest a bit before driving again. Of course, my brother says. Of course.

Inside, I’m cold. Or numb. It’s as if my own organs feel heavy with the knowledge that they, too, will stop working someday relatively soon.

That color on the man’s face as they carried him from the car and laid him in the grass. The look about his

mouth, a subtle indication that his heart no longer pumped blood to get oxygen to the muscles of his lips and cheeks. That he could be gone as I stood there, patting his wife on the arm to keep her fear and grief at bay.

I feel pity and shock, but also resignation. This is what life is – we live and we die. My mother is dead and in the ground, my father will follow her, if not as a result of this cancer, then from some other illness within a very few years. I am halfway through my own life, best-case scenario. Some of my friends have already gone that untimely way, from illness or suicide. This is what death, the end of life, looks like.

Will someone call the newspaper or T.V. station? Will it be on the news at six? Will headlines read, "Repent, for the End is Near?" I could have been just a few minutes faster at any point earlier in the day, and that couple's convertible might have struck me on its way to the tree.

I know that this sense of things will only remain for a short time – a few days at most. Then I will put away the awareness of mortality again, up in the box on the high shelf in the back of the closet of my consciousness. Like the other people at this rest area, who arrive after me without stopping at the scene of an accident, who drove that same stretch of I-76 after everything had been moved

and all the people were gone, like them, I will do what is in front of me and ignore the rareness of each moment of life.

I will drive on to Bethel Park and try to interest my dad in solid foods to supplement the thick nutritional drinks he works to gulp down three times each day, making a job out of it, a job he completes faithfully so he can avoid the feeding tube they threaten to insert if he loses too much weight. I'll drive him to his last treatment, and thank the radiation folks he came to know pretty well during these two months of daily meetings, almost like friends. I'll shop with him for a computer, his willingness to become interested in such things evidence of his impressive will to live.

When I can't do anything to help, since nothing tastes like anything and the radiation damage is at its very peak and *exceedingly painful*, I'll sometimes sit beside him in my mom's old rocker and pat his hand. When he doesn't want to be bothered, I'll play Sudoku on the couch or do crossword puzzles from the reams of newspapers waiting to be recycled. I'll *tsk* about the raunchy, maudlin television he's begun to watch and work hard to convince him to try a different pain medication, just for a week or

so, so that he can sleep at last and get some relief, some escape from the nightmare here-and-now of his long life.

I'll try not to think, though, about my mother's lips as she lay in her casket a dozen years ago.

HOT

I had my first true hot flash yesterday. I've been anticipating it for years now, like a pregnant woman thinking each Braxton Hicks is going to bring on the baby, but this was different. I think I'm finally entering Menopause Proper.

Peri-menopause, the fuzzy accumulation of symptoms typified by sleep disturbances, puffy weight gain, irregular menstrual periods, fuzzy thinking, and vaginal dryness has been my state of affairs for most of the past decade. But yesterday, during one of my turns driving the seven-hundred-and-twenty-odd miles to my dad's house in Pittsburgh, I think I felt the real McCoy.

Getting back into the car after a brief stop for lunch at the Taco Bell (my son's choice of feeding trough) along I75 north of Flint, I felt it: a tingling heat across my chest and shoulders. It was subtle, I'll say that. It would have been easy to mistake as my body's rebellion against air temperatures in the sixties, coming, as I was, from real winter in the U.P. of Michigan. This sensation was different, though, like a lightly draped, pricking blanket of pins. It hinted at itself, grew, then suffused my breasts and upper arms with mild intensity.

I recognized its identity, slid behind the wheel, and smiled. I was still wearing my winter jacket, a deep burnt-red fleece with knobby pile lining the color of fresh cream.

Being the weirdest of women, this arrival of what has been a long-looming development is something I welcomed, something I even felt oddly excited about. The Change. Who doesn't want change? New circumstances bring new opportunities. I'd like that. I've heard reports including spurts of rage that clarify decision-making, medical warnings that inspire healthier living, insomnia that opens up hours of time for reading or doing jigsaw puzzles. I've even been told that libido can renew itself once fears about unplanned mid-life pregnancies are gone for good.

This comfort with my physical self and its concerns runs counter to my upbringing. The athletic confidence I see everywhere in girls today was not available to me in my youth, and my schools and church emphasized how dangerous the physical world was, how apt to lead one into sin. At home, the prevailing attitude seemed to be that this part of me (my whole body, that is) did not bear mentioning unless the conversation was restricted from mixed company. Even in female segregation, we used dainty euphemisms for

anything otherwise vulgar or embarrassing. Mostly, I conformed to family and church expectations, feeling suitably embarrassed about my own or other physical selves, judging my physique as so repulsive that attention from anyone else (that is to say, from boys) was not on the agenda. I was as tense as rebar in cement, so self-conscious that I worried whether my piano teacher might hear me swallow as she sat beside me on the bench each week. I didn't try out for basketball because I felt fat and slow, a self image which photographs of that time reveal as a terrible lie.

Still, I loved to dance and play outdoor games, so I kept a thread of what we now call the mind/body/spirit connection going. I gave everything my whole effort, with energy that could have come from an artesian well, high-pressured and inexhaustible. Even when the bill was mine to pay, I kept taking dance classes, slowly building enough balance, technique and grace to provide a framework to free my mind and feel some affection and respect for my body.

One winter's night during my senior year in high school, after a dance class in Oakland, I boarded the homeward trolley in downtown Pittsburgh. A woman sat down next to me and we got to talking. She was a Christian Scientist, and, though I hadn't noticed her, she'd been

observing me as we waited at the stop outside Hite's Drugstore on the corner of Wood and 4th. Maybe I had been practicing *jete's* or *pas de bourrée's* on the sidewalk – this was the sort of thing I began to do in public places during those years.

The woman was dressed for winter in what we used to call a "midi" woolen coat. She wore a knitted tam over hair that was arranged in a practical pageboy style. No glasses. She was probably in her forties, though I wouldn't have been able to guess her age at the time.

"You've accepted your menstrual periods. I can tell," she said, as the trolley bumped us along the rails. "This is something you can see in a woman, and it's a very good thing. You won't have much trouble with cramping and all the rest."

I was already an accepter of odd acquaintances. A romantic. I didn't think, in so many words, *no one else I know would have this conversation*, though it was true of this and many similar instances in the thirty-plus years since that night. I don't know, really, what I thought in response to the woman's strange assertion. But I remember how I felt.

It was as if I'd been discovered by a scout for some big talent agent. I was flattered by her positive regard

and tamed by its sincerity. I felt like part of a club, like I had passed the test required for membership. I felt like a woman among women. Peace and power descended and then emanated from me, the Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life, invoked and conferred upon me in that gray trolley.

Later, when either our conversation had petered out or she had reached her stop, I'm sure I rested my head against the window, as I usually did during those long night rides home. I would look deep into the glass, where another trolley flew along beside mine. I watched the blurred reflection in the dark air, another girl with my hair and eyes and coat, gazing into my trolley, which must have seemed a ghost to her, as she and her companion passengers seemed to me.

My stop wasn't quite the end of the line, but pretty close. Sometimes, my mom or dad would be waiting there to drive me home. Often I walked the scant mile along one busy road, then up a steep, curved hill, down one even steeper, and halfway up again to our house on the right. I never dared the shortcut in the dark, through woods where rapists might be waiting. I doubted whether men who attacked girls would really brave the winter cold, and I suspected they'd be disappointed if they picked me, with my numerous layers of dance togs, street clothes, and winter

gear. Still I hustled along, just to be on the safe side, my emotions a mixture of thrumming excitement about being a young woman and fateful acceptance of female vulnerability to male aggression, too.

At midlife now, this passing into the age beyond fertility is full of some similar kind of wonder and fear, like crossing back across the same latitude I navigated on that trolley thirty-odd years ago. I am etching a circle with my life, coming back now along a longitude far removed from that girl and what she expected, and from what she didn't know to expect.

So often sadness is wrapped up in joy. Yet the reverse is true, too. When my mother died, quickly and painlessly, spared the usual suffering of an ovarian cancer death, I felt relief and gratitude that equaled my grief, though sorrow consumed me for years after her passing. When my children were born and during their growing years, delight flowed together with pain as I whittled away the parts of life a mother must abandon if she wants that role to be primary. Now, as my kids perch at the cusp of independence, I thrill to their accomplishments in concert with regrets about everything we didn't get to do, everything that lies within the box that's marked, *Too Late*.

I think that what surged in me yesterday, what poured into the spaces left behind by my evaporating estrogen, was a sense of promise. I was taking my son to see his grandfather, who had survived two things – his cancer and his cancer treatments. For the time being, that is, as my dad will remind me tomorrow when we talk about it.

When I sit with my son and younger brother to hear our older brother's good news about the vanished tumor, Dad will wave his finger in the face of my elation. *Fifty percent recurrence rate within a year*, he'll say. *I'm not having surgery or any more radiation. If it comes back, that's "sayonara." I'm eighty-one years old*.

"Okay, Dad. None of us can know what tomorrow holds. But this is a good reason to celebrate today," I'll say.

So we will visit while we can, and that is good.

The long trip from upper Michigan to western Pennsylvania was also car-time with my son, who doesn't have a tremendous amount to say to me these days. We shared the driving, taking turns navigating the maps and radio stations. It felt good to have this partnership, a steady travel rhythm that flowed when there was talk, and also when we were quiet.

During those sharp moments of heat yesterday, as I ducked my head to snug into our small car, I felt a

confirmation of my middle age. Every woman who lives this long goes through this door. Everywoman.

Today, I am with my son and my father and brother. I am still alive, in this flawed physical body that lets me feel so much pleasure and so much pain.

There is still time.

POLLYANA PATRIOT

Early in life, I decided to be a Pollyanna. Someone who looks on the bright side. Who sees what's good in the midst of a whole lot of bad. That might sound like an ostrich approach – head, sand, etc. – but what distinguishes a Pollyanna from a fool is the rule against digging holes. No hiding from reality – no, that's not part of my version of Disney's eternal optimist. Instead, my approach is pragmatic idealism. Acknowledge the facts, but refuse to concede that the whole is merely the sum of its parts. Because it's not. And people who want to say that it is, to convince us that the cynical view gives us all we need to know, that the grimmest facts of human existence determine all we can (and can't) justify believing in, are the enemies of life.

I see this stance as essentially American. Not exclusively American – I'm sure it's part of what motivates and sustains progressives in any society. But a youthful faith in the goodness of one's own motivations and intentions, an energetic confidence that we will do and discover wonderful things, that there are solutions to problems just waiting for us to discover them if only we can be persistent enough, smart enough, resourceful enough

– these attitudes are part of the American identity I was raised to revere.

A Pollyanna mindset works on the individual level first. It's served me pretty well in my own small life. For nearly eight years now, I have lived in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The U.P. During those years, my family has lived through illnesses and deaths, adventures and crises of the spirit and the heart, the corrosive effects of anxiety and depression, and the guidance of both wise and foolish councelors.

We moved here from Alaska, where my husband suffered from fairly severe S.A.D. – seasonal affective disorder, a title that tries to describe people who become depressed (delusional, even) during the wintertime. The name is pronounced, *sad*, like the feeling it generates. Sometimes, and this was true with Jerry, S.A.D. causes nervousness and agitation when photoperiod increases in the spring. Anyone who has experienced this condition can tell you that the whole family suffers along with the seasonally affected individual, and that it's a good reason to move to a different climate. Anyone who knows the Upper Peninsula can tell you that this is not a wise destination for someone with S.A.D. But there was a job here, and our move would be paid for, so we gambled on the tendency of people

to exaggerate reports about dire winters in the contiguous U.S, and on we came. However long and cold and snowy it might be, it couldn't be a patch on Fairbanks.

We were both right and wrong. Latitude and hemisphere determine the lengths of days, so that part was a no-brainer, and, at first, Jerry remarked positively about how long the days were lasting, deep into the fall. The cold was nothing compared to interior Alaska, with its solid weeks of minus-sixty, so extreme that the wind chill was never even reported. There was more snow here in Michigan, though, and much of it came just as the days should have been lengthening in January and February. All that frozen precipitation often masked the returning sun, and we found ourselves dreading fall and winter and the seeming inevitability of Jerry's corresponding descent into depression.

Enter the practical Pollyanna strategy.

It was a period of struggle, yes. What was indicated as possible by previous experience and considerable research might have justified giving up. But each time we seemed to reach the end of our options, some kind of faith kept at least one of us searching for another way, another, more effective approach. Although there was no miracle cure, no shutting the door forever on this problem, there

was at least some small help in almost every recommended treatment. Full spectrum lighting. Individual, marital and family counseling. Dietary changes, especially in the winter. Regular exercise, especially outdoors during daylight hours. At least eight, but no more than ten, hours of sleep each night. Slowly, over a period of several years, this combination of approaches decreased the severity, duration and abrupt autumn onset of my husband's symptoms. I'm not saying it was easy, or that it's all over. Just that it took some Pollyanna thinking to help us all to keep trying, and that trying was the right choice, the best and happiest choice we could have made.

So our family life here has been defined, in large part, by our various responses to our physical environment, and by our responses to each other's responses to the environment.

Like many, if not most, families, we split the ticket. Jerry and Josie (our older daughter) dread the winter darkness, snow, and cold. They have longed for another relocation. Claire, our youngest, and I are lovers of all things winter – cold, snow, light dynamics, magnificent extreme weather. Luke, the oldest of our three children, seems not to care much about his seasonal setting. He has mainly wanted to live in town instead of always being in a

rural setting. He is in college now in Minneapolis, a wish come true for him.

Jerry and I have waxed to our probable midpoint in life, and begun the slow waning of our fifth decade. Along the way, we built a house. We had horses and a donkey and a dog. We tried to be good neighbors, though more and more, as the years slipped past, we ran like hamsters in the wheel of our increasingly overextended lives.

We tried hard to stay married, though we often considered divorce. I took up paid work and advanced schooling just in case I might need to support a separate household. Our son grew up, with all the wonder and struggle that smooth phrase disguises, and he left for college. Our older daughter fought her way through early adolescence, *furioso*, her feelings and actions a crazy hall of mirrors for the physical changes that come with growing over a foot taller in less than three years. She is in the process of emerging as herself, now: strong and funny, and utterly unique. Our youngest, also a girl, rode the waves as they rocked her. She has been a miracle of balance in the face of swirling currents and riptides. Fortunately, the water at our house is calmer now, as she enters her own teenage years.

Through these same eight years, as my family has navigated the rocks and snags in our private harbor, we and everyone else on the planet have witnessed the consequences of our country's 2000 election, the 9/11 attack on America and subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. There is seemingly endless violence everywhere, on continent after continent of the real world, and in countless homes via television, film, the internet, and video gaming. A long period of madness in my family life has coincided with local, national and international insanities.

What happened to bring us all here? I try to muddle through this question on a regular basis, as if it might make a difference, as if understanding the why might affect the what. I often think, *it's too late now*, but that is inconsistent with my Pollyanna principals, so I try, instead, to grip the situation with my mind so that the problems can be seen clearly, so that solutions might emerge.

I personalize my country's political trajectory to that first fall in our Munising house. I considered other options during the 2000 election, but I settled on Nader in the end. I turned a deaf ear to people who called this a wasted vote. A vote should be cast for the person you really agree with, who you believe will practice what was

promised. I believed Ralph fit the bill for me. I also wanted to help the Green Party get the percentage they needed to obtain public campaign funding.

When I went to vote in our new town's elementary school gym, the precinct workers couldn't find my name on the rolls. I had registered at the Secretary of State's office when I got my Michigan driver's license, and I became one of what the media soon termed "motor voters," prevented from participating because my name was not included on the proper list. I had my pink registration card with me, but the officials shrugged their shoulders and shook their heads. I left shaking my own, but without fighting for my right to cast a ballot. The fact that I was casting my vote for someone who wouldn't win, anyway, was absolutely no comfort.

Nader got enough votes for the Greens to get funding, but Gore took Michigan. Bush, it seemed to many, somehow stole Florida, aided and abetted by the U.S. Supreme Court. Gore accepted the decision, in order to avoid – what? Riots in the streets? A toppled house of corporate cards in what used to be America? It seems sad and shameful, but he needn't have worried. Many people were appalled, but most muttered rather than marching.

I was depressed that year. We were settling into another new house in another new town. My kids were at school instead of at home. People openly warned us that our adopted community would never let us be anything other than outsiders.

"I've lived here for over twenty years and I'm still a Troll to them."

"I went to school here, but my parents were from somewhere else. If your grandparents weren't born here, you just can't belong."

I tried to cover my dismay with manufactured, but well-practiced pep. "How many friends does a person need?" Three thousand people live here – I'm sure I can find twenty who will like us. Who has time for more than twenty other people, anyway?" Then I started my usual routine, volunteering at every hint of a request and looking for a church that might accept agnostics with pagan tendencies, who kept an antisocial atheist at home.

I listened to NPR most days, early days in the Bush Administration, and I started asking ranting questions, like, "Is he trying to tank the economy?" and, "How far will they let him go? He's setting himself up to undo every good thing Clinton did. Where are the Democrats? Why isn't anybody saying anything?"

A family across from us, with five kids including a new baby girl, had heard we were homeschoolers, and they befriended us. Although our kids started public school that year, they still had more in common with this family than with anyone they were meeting at the school. We began to spent time together in the afternoons, and sometimes we shared evening meals. The other mother and I took to walking early in the mornings throughout that winter and into the summer. Both our families were considering building houses out on country acreage, so our husbands practiced helping each other and sharing tools for home projects in our current houses.

As we spent more time together, our religious and political differences became clear barriers to the deepening family friendship. Although we enjoyed the time we spent together and were growing genuinely fond of one other's children, our defining ideas were almost diametrical opposites. Their bookshelves included apocalyptic texts that warned about insidious, evil influences from people who seemed otherwise very pleasant and benign – like us. We had a substantial library that included the Bible, the Book of Mormon, Darwin, The Freeman, books about eastern mysticism and shamanism, and one volume of The Diaries of Anaïs Nin. We had not been

gutsy enough to defend Clinton during his embarrassments, but we had voted for him, and we were grateful for much of what he accomplished during the nineties. Our friends supported Bush as their Christian President no matter what he might do, from what I could tell. A persistent awkwardness grew up between us.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I went outside with my younger daughter, who had returned to homeschooling as a first-grader. My neighbor was just coming out of her front door as I rounded our sideyard, and she called out to me:

"Did you hear? They've bombed New York City! Fifty thousand people are dead!"

I had already stepped into the street, and I stopped there, confused and slow-witted. I felt so heavy, and I started to cry a little.

My neighbor had an odd smile on her face as she gripped her youngest child high up in her arms. Because I knew her reading material and radio habits, I interpreted this strange reaction to mean that she was glad, in some way, about the news. God was coming back. In rapture and in vengeance, to take the righteous to safety and then destroy the rest of us. His evil failures.

Sometimes people smile in a grimacing sort of way when they are nervous or scared, and most likely this is not at all what she thought, but I believed it and it made me feel nauseous and dizzy. I said something, asked some question, but then I thought about my little daughter coming from the house. I took her back inside and got her busy with something else so I could listen, very quietly, to the radio news. We had no television, so I was spared for a while from the images the teachers played and replayed for my older children at their school that day, the towers and the planes, the smoke billowing and the tiny people raining out of the windows.

I didn't know how to talk about this with my children, or my husband, or my neighbor. When the professor in my grad class asked us about it I was relieved, but I could only listen to the other students, who seemed so much more articulate and clear-thinking than I could be.

What was there to say? Only that it was horrible, but words couldn't wrap around the convolutions of my response, which included both grief about the loss of life and a sickened recognition of the way the media played that grief for ratings. Within hours of the attack, I wondered whether what has come to be called, "nine-eleven," would lead us toward a more fascistic nationalism, "willing"

reductions to our personal freedoms and privacy, and increased cultural and racial divisiveness centered on Arab-Americans or Muslims. I was comforted then by reports that people in Detroit and elsewhere were accompanying their Arab and Muslim neighbors on outings, intending to prevent misplaced but sadly predictable "retaliatory" violence. As my more vocal classmates in graduate school remarked during our literary theory class one evening that week, New York Mayor Giuliani won the public's gratitude and respect with his actions and rhetoric during the weeks after the hijackers, with the planes they used like bombs, destroyed so many lives.

We won't be made afraid. We'll find and rescue the survivors. We'll take care of the bereaved. We'll pull together, as a city and a nation. And we're not giving away freedoms to satisfy fear – that would only give the attackers a victory. No way.

But Rudy was not the President. George Bush, Dick Cheney, and the people they worked with and for had a different response, and it was easy to see that this crisis would increase the administration's power by orders of magnitude.

They moved quickly. Our press told us that Osama bin Laden, the mastermind behind the September attacks, was

hiding with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Bombing that country carried the broad approval of our country and our allies, not to mention the gratitude we were told it would earn on behalf of Afghani women, who were currently hostages to radical Islam.

No one knew what to expect. Would this be like the Gulf War in 1990-1991, when my son was an infant, which seemed to start and end so quickly?

Some people thought "Bush and Company" would use the situation as an excuse to attack Iraq, to "finish his father's business there," as I heard coffee-klatching retirees grumble at our local bakery. Since there was nothing linking Saddam Hussein to bin Laden, al Qaeda, or the 9/11 attacks, this seemed like the craziness of paranoid cranks, some of whom believed that the whole thing had been a covert U.S. action under the orders of the President.

I wanted no war. But there was so much I wanted none of. The corporate powers that seemed to drive everything, independent of and constantly influencing the will of the people in what seemed to me to be a very fragile democracy. The chasm between "conservatives" and "liberals" in the country. The increasingly sexualized and violent popular culture, which seeped everywhere and was impossible to

avoid. The shallow, acquisitive nature of a consumerist national identity. And within my own house, my family's internal strife and uncertainty. The loneliness of being in yet another new place without enough energy left to make it into a real home.

At this writing, it is six-and-a-half years after September 11, 2001. We all know what transpired during those years. The Bush Administration clamored for war in, yes, Iraq. Our Congress, both parties, both House and Senate, said yes. "Security" became the standard-bearer that could not be denied, and measures were passed establishing Acts and Departments that have fundamentally changed American society, governance, the economy, and our individual, private, lives.

The lone voice of opposition in the Senate, Paul Wellstone, died in a plane crash. Caricature artists made our President into a cowboy and a monkey in the press. Our Secretary of State walked as if in a minefield, urging restraint and, unheeded, eventually resigning. Our Secretary of Defense adopted a quirky, caustic attitude that won him a sort of celebrity, and we allowed him to title the destruction of Iraq, "Shock and Awe," with commentary on the news footage of bombing raids that would

have been more appropriate for viewing an exceptional fireworks display.

We waited while the President's assurances that we had cause to invade, and that military action would be, like that other Gulf War, over quickly, were proven to be either mistakes or lies. Death counts and damage reports were hard to come by in the news, whether you wanted to know about soldiers or civilians, Iraqis or Americans. I heard people say that world-wide protests against U.S. military action in Iraq were being underreported, especially in American mainstream media.

A video tape of the beheading of a U.S. civilian contractor was released. A reporter was taken hostage. Female military personnel participated in everything, it seemed, from ordinary boot camp and maneuvers to being taken hostage and rescued. A woman was even implicated in the torture of prisoners, who were now called "detainees."

Our country began to hold considerable numbers of people suspected of terrorist ties without due process. This was possible because they were being held outside our borders, where American rules do not apply.

The body count of our servicemen and women topped a thousand, then two, then three. Estimates of Iraqi loss of lives ranged into the hundreds of thousands. Some American

mothers and fathers cling to the idea that their soldier-child's death was noble. Others wept, or raged, or became chillingly silent, wondering, why? The feelings of Iraqi parents were not readily available to compare, but, since we are all human, the same range of responses must have occurred.

My family has fared better than my country during these long, but fast, eight years. Not without our share of stupidity, pain and suffering, but also with a generous measure of life's satisfactions, its joys. In many ways, my husband, children and I are both freer and more secure than we were when we moved to Michigan in 2000. It would seem that the same cannot be said about our nation. So much has been destabilized since September 11, 2001.

As a country, we stand at a crossing with decisions pressing in from all sides. A new president will take up residence in Washington within the year, perhaps a historic first female or African American president. The changes that these eight years have brought are facts we cannot, should not, deny. But there is hope, Pollyanna Patriot hope, in the change our direction that could come with new leadership.

This is what I wish for my country and for the population of the planet we are inextricably a part of:

that we will look reality in the eye and take responsibility for what's ours to claim. Like any honorable person must. The requisite element is faith; after we look, with honest and unflinching eyes, after we weep and grieve and cry out for our own and others' pain, that we will keep faith with the better days that wait for us to bring them into being. We will need to be a nation of Pollyannas to accomplish that.

OF NECESSITY

Midwinter, 2008

I am dying. The millions of millions of cells in my 16,769-day-old body have begun their groaning halt, like an obsolete factory powering down before demolition. Based on the averages insurance companies use to determine health and longevity, I can reasonably expect to live another twenty-seven or so years, barring physical accident or the flowering of some presently hidden disease.

You'd think stark self-awarenesses like these would motivate a person. That, having counted the hours and minutes, having quantified the time still left for love and pleasure, for feeling useful and for acting upon the world with some effect, a woman would be motivated to change her current, hyped-up, overextended status. To simply stop. To shift directions, acknowledging that her daily path is more like a high-velocity amusement park ride than a mandala, no matter what any soothing life coach says about journeys.

But this is not the way things work for me. Each day, with all of its tasks, obligations and necessities, seems almost entirely outside my control. The breakneck speed required for the life I inhabit could never be summoned

solely from my own increasingly floppy muscles. Some other force must be at work to power the ride, to keep the wheels and belts in motion. The fact is, I hand my ticket over sometime between four and six o'clock most mornings and often don't unhook the safety belt to climb back out until nearly eleven o'clock at night. The schedule has a will of its own, like a mechanical monster feeding on my blood and nerves, releasing me for bits of sleep before I climb into its grip again the next day, my own passivity the lubricant that greases the gears.

I am so completely and persistently exhausted that fatigue has seeped into the most basic structures of my cells.

I know it's my own fault. It's the addict herself who loads the needle, who smacks the vein to pop it up, who slides the point in gently at an angle, then presses at a steady rate. I have put myself in prison or in hell, but the way out eludes me. I am simply stupid.

Winter, 1933

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was just inaugurated to the presidency after a landslide victory in the fall. He and Eleanor have the support of John and Nellie Dwyer and their children, who live in the city of Providence, Rhode Island.

John and Nellie emigrated from Tipperary – he from the town, she from the country, though they'd never met until his brother and her sister introduced them to one another here, on this side of the Atlantic. He drives a trolley in the city and rules his children with love and disapproval, when it's called for, but not a heavy hand. Woe to any of them if they do something wrong in public, because somebody will tell him, that's for sure. Nellie is a fine mother to the babies that come along every other year or so. She took six-year-old Ed, whose mother died when he was born, as her own, too, when they married. The children call them "Papa' and "Ma", or "Ma and Pa Kettle" after the radio show. They are Americans, now.

This family will be always too proud for welfare, though John will die suddenly, of a heart attack, in just a few years. The children will band together, the oldest few made instantly into adults with after-school and weekend jobs, determined that their mother should not be forced to abandon the youngest children, two and four and six years old, in order to earn money. When their things are on the sidewalk they will somehow get another house, one they buy this time, and there they will find reasons to laugh and reasons to come home to one another. Always, they will choke a bit when they mention their father. They will

smile fiercely and move the conversation on to other matters, but it will be clear that they are fighters.

They will all finish high school. They know education is the way, the American way, out of a life of want. The boys will work at laboring jobs, and later, during the war, the Army will leave young John at home to win bread for his widowed mother and the younger children. He lets the trolley pass him by each day to save the fare, and walks across the city, lunchbox in his hand, down into Olneyville and up the big hill in Providence.

When they begin to give Nellie grandchildren, the ten of them will ask one another to stand up at the christenings, to say for the babies, who can't yet speak for themselves, *I reject Satan and all of his works, and all of his empty promises. I do.* At family gatherings they will laugh in loud, excited bursts, and answer questions from nieces and nephews with humor and a swift change of subject. *That's not for you to ask.* When they say, *your poor mother*, or, *That's. Your. Family.* it will wash the room of any other words. No one will doubt they love one another, that they are the ones who survived it all.

Late summer, 1983

I'm sitting with my mother in our station wagon outside Connelly's Funeral Home, across the side street from St. Valentine's, where the lot was all parked up. She listens as I tell her why I don't want to go back to college. I am so unhappy. She must be nearly sixty, but her hair is still its natural shade of brown, with soft 1940's-style curls that come from a box.

My father listened to my story yesterday at Freddie's II, when he took me out "to have a talk."

When I finish my litany of complaints, my mother is quiet there beside me for a moment. "It seems like you think life should be easy," she says. "But life is a battle. It's work." She makes fists in front of her above the steering wheel and tenses her forearms, elbows out. Then her hands ease and fall to her lap. "You have to be flexible, too, though. Flexibility is the key to survival," she says. She is looking out, through the windshield, not at me.

I want to cry. I love her so much, but this is not something we ever say. *I love you*.

Later, they sit me down on the hassock in the family room, Dad in his big chair with the newspaper just set aside, and Mom, leaning forward in her rocker, flanking the

doorway to our small kitchen. Would I like her to move to North Carolina with me for the coming year? They think I should finish it out, get my degree.

I am defeated by their kindness. What could not have been done by directive or ultimatum has been accomplished in this soft way. I will go back to school. Not with my mother in tow, but with the knowledge that she would have come, and that he would have let her do it.

Election season, 1972

My fourth grade teacher made a Drama Club for us. I'm going to be an actress, so I sign up. Our first project is to act out the candidates for President. I have to make a poster about busing. Mrs. Koch assigned the parts: Tim Faber is George McGovern, and I am Richard Nixon. I work on the project at home. I feel sort of weird about the points I have to make. The other kids call Tim and me "eggheads," and ask us when we'll get married. I am quite a bit taller than him and I don't like any boys yet, anyway. I argue hard to beat him, and I win the debate. I am ten years old.

Midwinter, 2002

This is my fortieth winter. Most days, I drive my oldest child, my son, the fifty-odd miles from Munising into Marquette for eighth grade at the school he begged to attend. Once or twice a week, I put him on the R-Tran bus at 6:30 a.m. The driver goes too fast, so I worry, those days, about the wind and weather along M-28.

The highway follows the southern shore of Lake Superior, sometimes buffered by stretches of lake homes and points of land between bays. Periodically, the road skims close to the shore or along an open ridge. There, you can see the great swath of lake, open water or ice, depending on the season. When the winter wind is from the north, these openings allow lake-effect snow to gust in, unrestricted, filling the air along the highway with clouds of frozen particles, curtains of tiny specks that billow up, down and sideways by turns, catching, reflecting and magnifying whatever light is present. At such times, day or night, driving visibility is not far beyond the front bumper. Buses, logging trucks, SUV's, and our little Escort – we're all driving blind.

September, 1955

The woman who will be my mother is preparing for her wedding. She is in her early thirties, old for a bride in this generation. She is leaving behind a responsible job she's worked for over ten years, but this fact, like so many others, will not be something she shares with her own children when they are young. Two sisters and a brother and her mother will stay behind in the small gray house on Lynch Street, where they have made their home since shortly after her father died, when she was fifteen years old. The rest of her siblings still live within reach, mostly married and living in other houses, still in-state. Places like Pawtucket, Bristol, Warwick and Cranston. Her older sister is the exception. She moved to Boston for college, and stayed there for a nursing job at a big hospital when she graduated.

In the backyard of the house she is leaving, a single maple continues to grow. She, her mother, her sisters and brothers took photographs when they planted the seed, a tiny helicopter they dropped into the hole John shoveled and then stood by for the shot.

Later, she will come back to visit with her own children, one, then two, then three, and four and five. She will send them out to run around the narrow strip of

grass beside and in front of her mother's house, shooing them away when their energy, a pressure keg from two days in the station wagon, makes them seem as if they might knock down the walls of the modest house, with its galley kitchen and formal parlor, its tiny dining room that houses a daybed in addition to the circular table, chairs and china cabinet. This is where she has slept, every night, for over a decade. *Go outside and see who can run around the house the most times*, she will tell those children, who still are eggs inside her now, as her sisters help her with the satin gown, so slim along her body, so full about her feet.

When she is in her woman's body, after all the births have changed her shape forever, her children will bring home the world to talk about, the world that is not all Catholic and middle class, where rich kids want to kill themselves and even Catholic men with seven children sometimes get divorced and marry younger women. Where mothers buy cherry vodka so their kids will drink in attics, and not in cars at night. At the afternoon kitchen table when they come home from school, she will *tsk* and listen as she gets the supper ready for her husband every day at six.

When they get big enough to talk about politics, she'll keep her voting record, like her age and weight, a private matter. But whenever poverty is discussed, Haiti's need for containers and contributions to missions, or the Laotian boat people wanting host parishes, or a kid in one of their classes who had a father die, she'll tell them just enough of her own story, and say, *there but for the grace of God go I*.

Her wedding day is rainy, so everyone dresses up and gathers again for pictures on a day with better weather. These black and white images, suffused with excitement, joy, even, will fascinate her younger daughter in the years to come. That girl will search them for signs, for answers to unspoken questions, about who her mother really is.

July, 1967

We're back from vacation and all my friends feel like strangers. There was a big storm while we were gone. That always happens. Kathy and Linda told me a stroller blew across the yard. We think it meant something. It was a message from God. I showed them how to kneel in the grass and pray, and we looked for Mary or Jesus in the clouds. We made crowns out of clover flowers. You cut a slit in

the stem with your thumbnail and thread them together that way.

The children in Fatima saw Our Lady and Jesus in the clouds and Mary told them promises from God. I think this could happen here, too, in our sky that's so blue and all the yards behind the houses. One big place for us to play.

High summer, 2000

Alaska is behind us now. Regret? Stuff it. Time to get the kids in school, to find a house, to unpack boxes for the umpteenth time in all these married years, and all my single ones, too.

Fourth grade, fifth grade – the older children settle in where the system places them, by age. Jerry and I make our own decision about our youngest. Kindergarten, where she will have days off each week, where she will still have some freedom to play, where she will not be pressured to read before she's ready.

Summer, 1973

It seems like my dad watches Watergate every day. We're all quiet when the T.V. is on, or helping Mom with dishes in the kitchen. Sixth grade is coming up at St.

Valentine's School, and I have loved Tom Schaad for almost one full year. I think he might know, but I'm not sure.

I watch the T.V., too, sometimes, with one of my baby dolls in my arms in Mom's rocker. No one at school knows I still play with dolls except my neighbor, Chris, who will sometimes do it, too.

Chris has a big family and most of them still live at home. Her brother, Bill, came home from Vietnam when we were in second grade. She told me in my driveway, when I showed her my first chicken pock. She was excited, and scared, too. He has a mustache and is studying to be a court reporter.

I don't say anything or ask questions when Watergate is on, but Dad gets upset and talks out loud about the people on the television. Mom says, *turn off that mess!*, and scoots around, picking up newspapers or folding clothes. The big boys watch, too, sometimes. They talk with Dad, all of them shaking their heads and arguing. A while ago I watched when the vice-president resigned. He had thick white hair and a big face, and he looked sort of like my Uncle Joe, who is the nicest guy and always smiles. I told this to Uncle Joe one time when we were on vacation in Rhode Island. He still smiled, but his face got red and I could tell he was upset.

Springtime, 2003

Peace activists have begun to march outside the post office in Marquette on Saturdays. When I drive by, I honk or wave to show support. I know some of them. My son wants to join this group, for me to drive him into town a sixth time each week, to protest our country's military actions in Iraq, to feel potent, at the age of thirteen, against the somber changes in his country and the world since September 11, 2001.

I want to say yes, but instead I avoid his requests. I put him off, but without saying "no." I want to walk in that circle, too, but I am tired and afraid. We can barely afford our transportation expenses as it is. I can barely manage my current responsibilities.

My son shares my politics, but he came to them independently, it seems to me. More as a result of my "hands-off" policy about indoctrinating children than because of any persuasion. When he was four years old, he had an opinion about capital punishment. When he was five, he began to navigate the issue of religious conviction. His opinions are on his own terms.

I worry about what he'll say and do, how he might confront people and what will happen when he does. I know

this is cowardly, but I can't seem to do it otherwise, right now.

Fall, 1976

When I answer questions in religion class, I get all heated up and nervous. Sister Laura listens and nods as I try to reason out the logic of being a Catholic, of being a Christian. I raise my hand a lot, and work it like some geometric proof that uses the Bible for theorems. If this and this and this are true, then it's obvious we should all . . . Everyone gets very quiet after I speak, and sometimes the other girls applaud.

I think things will get better soon. If people did what Jesus said, what Jesus did, none of this would be happening at all.

Fall into early winter, 2002

My daughters, Josie and Claire, are eleven- and eight-years-old. They are homeschooling, again, for this school year. Jerry and I still abide by the promise we made to keep ourselves on only one income, so I am free to do all kinds of interesting things with them. My son, Luke, has begged to try a bigger school in a town an hour's drive away. He doesn't want to homeschool any more, but he's so

far ahead the teachers don't know what to do with him at our small, rural schools. I railroaded Jerry into saying yes, and the new school skipped him ahead to eighth grade during the first week. Now, Luke is happy.

The girls and I are part of a new homeschooling group. We go for hikes and visit museums and the library. One of the parents hosts a weekly writing class at her house, and we stay to socialize after that, sometimes. Some of the other moms are truly nice, but I just can't seem to feel like part of things. Maybe I miss people from too many other states, from too many other homeschooling groups. Maybe I am not able to belong in yet another new place.

I do community volunteer work to keep myself from falling into real depression, and the girls come with me to help. Sometimes, we try to go to a church, but I can't quite pour myself back into it. Things are so busy, anyway.

Jerry arranged to work four tens each week this fall. This gives him Mondays off, when he takes care of the girls. On this one day each week, I disappear to do my school work. I'm a graduate student, now, taking several undergraduate courses so they'll consider me for an assistantship. This semester, my tuition goes directly on our Visa bill.

Being in school makes me feel better. I am shy about speaking in class. I fumble and stutter – whatever grease slicks the connection between my thoughts and voice has dwindled to the thinnest possible sheen across my gray matter. Still, the requirement to read and study allows me to choose these activities frequently. Sometimes even over the mountain of family needs, wants and requests that pull at me each day. Little by little, I regain some measure of ability to articulate my thoughts. These brief absences from mothering help me to relish my children again, too. Student and mother – a good match for me.

I am busy – I often drive too fast to get to class and have to run, then, a pudgy woman in a sweatshirt and a bun, to make it on time. But there is still some "margin" in my life, some room to add things not already on our rather crowded schedule. I still initiate hikes. I help with the "Starry Night" performance project the girls are doing with the other homeschoolers. I keep on as the leader of the Alger County 4-H Performing Arts Club, where I teach middle and high school kids how to buzz their lips, create a script, and improvise crossed-telephone-wire conversations. I take the children to jazz concerts at the Kaufmann, and plays at the high school and university. Jerry almost

never comes with us. He often works more than his four tens. There's no stopping that.

One week in early October, I buy campus tickets for us to hear Maya Angelou speak. I don't ask my kids. I just buy the tickets and make the plan. I don't ask Jerry. I call to let him know that we will be home late.

In the Berry Event Center, I sit with my two daughters and my son on folding chairs in the floor section of the audience. We wave to homeschoolers here and there above us in the stadium seating, but I am happy to be just us. Somehow, I feel that listening to this grandmother who has suffered and prevailed, whose words speak pain and love and forgiveness and anger and faith, can heal some of the hurt in me, can help me in the task of raising human children in this inhuman world.

Maya is in purple on the stage. Her face is one I might adore, achingly beautiful in its kindness, an elder madonna who survived a childhood rape and the selling of sex to get bread. The university has set up a video feed, projecting a huge image of the poet on beside the lectern where she stands. At first, this seems like a good idea. We can see her clearly, magnified enough that I can read her lips if any words escape my ears. But it doesn't take long for me to realize that this is a mistake. We are not

here for television. I want our eyes to touch this woman, to contact what she is and has to say. I whisper to my children, *look at her, not at the screen*. *Look at her*.

Fall, 1983

My Uncle Bill was murdered in Jacksonville, Florida, and the U.S. has invaded Grenada. I have just started to listen, to pay attention to what's going on. In my family, in the news – I've just begun to try to be informed, and these are the things I learn.

My friend, Becky, reacts with full emotional abandon to the news. She weeps and exclaims, waving her long red fingernails in airy gestures. Becky is eight years older than me, and she expects another Vietnam. At Berry's Restaurant where we all work as waitresses, Libby is a wreck. Her brother's unit was sent out. I don't remember Vietnam, but I believe I would have been a peacenik hippie if I'd been born just ten years earlier. Or maybe a go-ask-Alice drug addict. That could have happened to me, too. I follow my friends' leads, and pace and smoke through much of the night in the room I rent in a big student house on West Street.

My sister offers to pay for my flight to the funeral. I smoke seventy-five-cent packs of Winstons in my little

Pinto, driving from Winston-Salem to fly with her out of Virginia. Upstairs at my grandmother's house, where Aunt Peg will live, alone, since Grandma died last year and Uncle Bill is gone, now, too, I hear my mother and her sister talking, their voices rumbling up and down, made loud in sudden bursts by sobs they won't quite let out into the air. For these few days and into all the years to come, no one will talk about what happened to him, or whether the person who shot him has been found. It will be a closed casket, and we won't make things worse by asking questions or bringing up any of the hard things there are to talk about. *Don't upset Aunt Peg*, I'll hear from somewhere. Don't upset Mom, I'll hear from inside my own head.

Summer, 1968

This is the year of Tet and Mai Lai, of political assassinations, murders and sanctioned thuggery in America. I am six years old.

Our neighborhood has a big block party in Southgate up the cinder path. Someone brings chocolate marshmallows, and I get some after my hotdog and chips. The grownups sit in metal lawn chairs with criss-crossed plastic strips that make the backs and seats. When I sit down, some other kid

crawls underneath and pokes my bottom until I get back up to run around in the tall grass. When it starts to get dark, we catch fireflies in jars. We take their glowspots off and put them on our fingertips, wiggling our hands and writing in the air.

Summer, 1971

I sign up for the summer reading program, as usual. I want to read everything in the young adult nonfiction section. I start with biographies, a series that includes Maria Mitchell, Lotta Crabtree, Elizabeth Blackwell, Lucretia Mott and Clara Barton. John Fitch and Theodore Roosevelt, too, but I like reading about the women more. I'll be one. I guess that's why.

Fall, 1983

The senior repertory includes Lanford Wilson's Fifth of July, and I am cast as Aunt Sally. Our director, what we call an "actor's director," gets the best he can out of us. We do guided meditation exercises to "find our characters," work with masks and costumes to establish their ways of walking and talking, pose into mirrors and follow his instructions during improvised dialogue like women coupled with a superb tango dancer.

The Vietnam War is important to the characters, to the play itself, so our director shows us the film *Hearts and Minds*. Watching this is like waking from a fuzzy dream into the nightmare of real life. The film mentions the name of the chemical company that produced Agent Orange. My dad, who graduated from Bryant College on the G.I. Bill and supported our family as a corporate accountant, has just retired from a subsidiary of that company.

I listen as the voiceover says that the U.S. used Agent Orange to defoliate the Vietnamese landscape, to make it harder for the Vietcong to launch surprise attacks. The film shows clouds of poison billowing across hills and valleys, places where ordinary people live. I hear my mother's mantra – *there but for the grace of God go I*. I think, *what God is this?*

Springtime, 1967

There's a cartoon I like, with a bluebird that loses its mother. It's sad and it makes me cry. I like Yogi Bear, too. I just learned to ride my bike, the red and white one with the bar Dad switched to make it for a girl. First I banged into the mailbox when my training wheels were off. Then, he held the seat and scooted me on the street, and I

pedaled and it wobbled but I got my balance and now I can ride with everybody else.

April, 2003

Ralph Nader will be in the Great Lakes meeting rooms on campus tonight, and I plan to take the children to hear him speak. Standing in line to get our tickets at the PIEF, I picture Nader as he was during my childhood, when I stayed home sick from school and watched more television than I was usually allowed, or when my brothers and I watched *M.A.S.H.*, *The Gong Show* and *Family Feud* after school, brushing off our mother's warnings about "brainwashing" by the "boob-tube." The seventies, when Ralph was the nation's Consumer Advocate, and appeared on *The Phil Donahue Show*. A thin tall man with dark hair and sharp features. Vigorous, smart, and ready to argue but calm and kind, too.

I would have picked Nader in 2000, if I had been allowed to vote. I was one of the "motor voter" victims who arrived at the polls only to be turned away because my name was not on the precinct list. I wasn't deaf to arguments that he was unelectable, but I wanted the Green Party to get the percentage they needed to become a viable third party. It looked like Al Gore was going to take my

state, anyway, so it was a safe voting strategy. Instead, for the first time since I had been eligible to vote, I did not cast a presidential ballot. My guy rarely wins anyway, but this was no comfort.

My kids and I shuffle into the space where Nader has been slated to speak, our big winter boots clomping as we choose a line of chairs on the far side of the room, along an aisle so my youngest can poke her head out to see around the taller people will surely sit in front of us. A low platform has been set up in the center of a long set of three rooms, walls collapsed to make them one, and the place is filling fast.

Ralph Nader has aged well. Like my own father, who is about ten years older, he is still slim and energetic. I don't know what to expect, from him or from my kids. He might be a bore, or, worse, a puffed-up narcissist riding on fame and former idealism. My kids have already put in a long day and this is a school night. Although it is early spring, a nighttime squall is always possible and would make our drive home suck, big time. Low visibility, lake-effect snow, fifty miles to go along the lake in the dark with high winds – I've done it dozens of times these past two years, but it's something any reasonable person would avoid. I'll do it, though, if that's the price of staying

in town for Nader. Taking my children to hear this man, asking them to think about the questions I hope he will raise, feels important enough to risk disappointment, inconvenience and even the winter highway along the big lake.

Other people are craving something here, too. I'm not the only one who plunked her kids down to listen, for an hour plus questions, to a guy they don't really know from apples. And Nader catches us at once, connecting the past with the present with the future in a way that speaks to everybody in the room: the college kids who organized his visit and the ones who came as skeptics; the graybird activists who never stop, never give up; the middle-agers, parents like me and singles, too; the children, from high school right on down. He keeps his remarks within that rhetorically difficult pocket of attention – enough to send us off with food for thought, to motivate and, perhaps, even activate, but not so long that our bottoms flatten to our chairs. Then, he asks for questions. Students, community folks like me, kids – so many people want to talk to him, to hear more.

He is often funny. He is always honest it seems to me, not carefully sound-bitten and calculated in his answers. My ear distinguishes one message that seems to

saturate the evening: In America, we vote, again and again, in opposition to our own best interests.

When I sneak out the side door with my children, not able to justify staying for what looks like unlimited access to Nader for questions, I sign us up to receive emails from the Green Party. I suspect the group will grow in our area as a result of this night. I hope so. I feel relieved and hopeful, though I wasn't aware, before, that I had felt the opposite. He hadn't said much that I didn't already know, and I was an easy audience, since I share the bulk of his views. But it's a rare thing to see someone devote his life's energy to spreading an unpopular, maybe even dangerous, message. Nader is a kind of Cassandra, but no gods have determined that he must continue to tell us unwelcome truths. Whatever he does, he chooses to do. So I believe he really is in it for the little guy. *There but for the grace of God go I*. Like my mother.

Summer, 1994

The time is coming when I will be a motherless daughter, but I do not let myself know it yet. The baby is on its way. July here in Northwestern Wisconsin is heavy and humid with temperatures in the nineties, so Jerry paddles the kids and me up the Totagatic, our snarly, snaggy river,

to a bend where the current is slow enough to swim safely. I use the shorter paddle in the back. I am supposed to steer, but I don't really know how. Jerry tries to give instructions, but he seems annoyed and I get defensive, so he gives that up and just does it all himself.

Our property, for which we pay the bank three hundred and thirty-seven dollars each month, includes an older three-bedroom, 1200 square-foot house (with what I will later learn to call a "Michigan basement") and a quarter-mile of winding river frontage. It lies along Highway 53, south of Duluth/Superior, north of Spooner and Rice Lake. The highway is being widened. Soon it will be a four-lane. The sellers and realtor did not tell us this in advance, but we are too young, ignorant and overwhelmed with our parenting and breadwinning responsibilities to do anything about that.

We love this place, with its sliding glass doors that look out on the river from the large living room, paneled and carpeted sometime in the late sixties, one would guess. Sometimes in the mornings we gather here, hushed voices pointing out what we see – a beaver leaving a smooth wake in the dark water; a lofty, prehistoric blue heron wafting along the river corridor, wooded on both sides; countless gray squirrels which we counted, once, at twenty-three,

assaulting our birdfeeder, robbing the blue jays and cardinals.

This is the room where we all play together. Horses, with each child on a parent's back. Baby, with everyone taking turns pretending to be the little one we're waiting for, and everyone pretending to help and hold the troublesome hungry whiner, by turns. Fisher price people, with houses and an auto-repair garage, a plane, a farm - all gifts from my mother, great "finds," snatched competitively before some other grandma could get her hands on them at the garage sales she patrols, Saturdays, with her friends. Trolls - a whole family with intensely-colored hair twice as long as their bodies, tree-dwellers, if their carrying case is any indication. Duplos and tinker toys. Blocks.

As much as anything, we read. Curled up together, a little boy on one side and an even younger girl on the other, snuggled up on the country-blue couch we bought at the Goodwill store in Ohio two moves back, both of them pressed against the warmth the third one has created, growing inside me, growing, upside-down, like fruit.

This summer, our house is for sale. We bought the loveliest land we could afford, back at the end of last summer, before a baby was planned and conceived, before my

mom went for a checkup to clear her for a lung biopsy and wound up with everything out that could be removed when they found a massive ovarian tumor, instead of the lung cancer we'd all feared. Halfway through the winter Jerry's office was moved from Superior to Cloquet – twenty miles further west. Every month, now, some of the gas and other expenses go on a credit card. We are not making it.

We live on one modest salary. *We didn't have kids so someone else could raise them*, we tell people who ask. We live simply. We're not materialistic. Secondhand clothes are just fine; it's time that's important in life. But we did sign on the dotted line for a new truck back in Ohio, and we added garage construction onto this, our first mortgage. And now the added travel expenses have put us beyond our means. We'll have to move.

Today, though, Jerry is home from work. One of us has mowed the sparse lawn, lopping off the red and gold hawkweed flowers, circling the house and gardens, skirting the steep edge of the riverbank. Today there is time for our little family to withdraw from the midday heat, to travel on the river into what feels, to a suburban girl like me, like a primeval swamp, like *Land of the Lost* on Saturday morning T.V. Only better, because reality has

Sensaround. Real sounds. Real smells. Touch the water, feel the moss. Today, we will not worry about anything.

We park our red canoe on a narrow sandy bank where deadfall has made the way impassable. Jerry goes deep in the pool at the river's bend, fielding Luke, who is four, and Josie, three, as they launch themselves out of the safe, shallow area where I sit, reclining in my soggy shorts and pleated top, and into the river's plashing rush.

Fall, 1985

The Donegal coast of Ireland is the rockiest, wildest, most beautiful place I've ever seen. Hugh is my guide. We stroll along the boggy turf: he, in his khaki green jacket and sensible shoes; I, in my yellow plastic poncho and bright red rubber boots. The air wets our faces with the softest rain.

He was arguing with his father back at the house, the home he grew up in, where he invited me to visit and have tea if I could hitch a ride in from the hostel.

They speak Irish there, though they switched to English enough for me the get the gist. They didn't want to be rude. It's clear they don't agree on politics. I think the father wants Sinn Féin, while the son is against the Church in government.

Hugh is a lovely moody man, with a soft curly beard and rumpled hair. He is older than me by some years but hasn't married yet and says he can't. The economy is too bad, his job not good enough. I wonder if he'll kiss me out here walking, if I'll let him, if I'll kiss him back. He says, "You'll marry some rich American doctor, that's the kind of girl you are," words that are softened to the gentlest sarcasm by the Irish in his English. I am quiet, but I contradict him in my mind: *You don't know me. I'd marry you and move back to the country my grandparents left at the start of the century, if I loved you. If I chose*.

The mother asks me to go to Mass with them, and I do. Hugh does not come with us. The service is in the vernacular, the language of the people, Irish Gaelic, but the rhythms are familiar and the parts of the ceremony are the same Roman Catholic ritual I have attended for all of my life. I can follow along in the missal, chanting out the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* phonetically. I pass the peace with his mother and sister, and the people in the other pews.

On the bus ride back to Galway, Hugh invites me to stay with him until the train takes me back to Dublin for the ferry to Liverpool. I do. His roommates and friends gather with us in the evenings at their favorite pub and one night we go to see a play, The Importance of Being

Earnest. We stay up late, arguing about faith, about the Church, about life. Hugh pushes David Yallop's In God's Name on me, insisting I take it with me to read. *You won't be so sure after this*, he says.

The last night of my stay, Hugh's girlfriend, Anne, arrives. In the morning, as I head out on my own to travel back to London, I look up from the street outside to see her sitting in the second story window seat, arms around her knees, feet drawn up beneath a long, white nightgown. Like a child, leaning against the glass.

I hustle up the sidewalk, past the pub, parallel to the village green where cars are parked solid along the narrow roadway and every which way on the grass. This is Ireland. No one will be ticketed or towed. People will leave work and it will all clear itself up in the end. I feel like I belong, even as I know the real Irish would scoff at my romantic notions. *Hopelessly American*, they might say. As I hesitate to get my bearings, looking for the train station, a suited businessman slows to match my pace. "Are you here from Canada?" he asks.

"From the U.S.," I reply.

He comes too close then, and I can smell his hair and breath, see the lines around his eyes. "Would you like to have a dirty afternoon, then?"

I stop and look at him, not expecting this here, not like I would in New York or Chicago, where I've been followed, pinched, or propositioned at least once during every visit.

He stops too, expecting – what? To register at some motel with a girl twenty years his junior? Slow though I am to get it, I step quickly now to get away.

I am still in a dream, but soon, on the train today and through the night on the ferry to England, I will read the book that rests, now, in my pack, and it will be like a fire alarm to my spirit, a buzzer so loud it will shake my cells and I will lie like mush in a stranger's apartment in London during the three long days it takes to settle down enough that home can seem like a possible destination.

Winter, 2008.

I am trying to write an essay, a big essay, about what life feels like to me, a smart-enough, emotionally gifted, middle-aged feminist and homeschooling mom, who breast-fed babies continuously for seven years, who relishes family and community life but also finds these relationships confining to troublesome degree, who is scheduled to receive less than two hundred dollars each month in social security when she turns sixty-two, who aches to give her

children, to give all the children, a better, wiser world than what currently exists. I want to capture all that feels inevitable, in spite of the current, fashionable opinion that everything is the result of individual choice, and so, optional. I title my essay, which I hand out in what is to be the final workshop of my graduate program, "Of Necessity."

My classmates ask, "What does, 'Of Necessity,' mean?"

"What's so good about being an idealist?"

"Is the narrator depressed?"

They encourage me to focus my writing more about personal matters, and to reconsider the overly-ambitious and opinionated political portions. "She's blaming President Bush for these things, but I can't see how he's responsible," says one fellow student. I feel at a loss to answer this. I don't want to write a persuasive, cerebral argument; I want to create a convincing, gut-level reading experience. And I came of age under the proverb, "the personal is the political." Another classmate, a woman about my age, offers this comfort: "some things are just too big for us." At first, I am grateful for what seems like a bit of kind, wise guidance. After a few minutes, though, I think, that's just seductive passivity – exactly what I'm trying to wake up from. No.

My professor seems to concur with my classmates about over-reaching, focus, and dissatisfaction with the underdeveloped personal aspect of the essay. Still, he offers a holistic bit of guidance: *Follow your own title – what is necessary here?*

I revise. I move back and forth on my timeline, my parents' and grandparents' timelines, my generation's timeline.

I ask my husband to read the essay, to tell me what he thinks.

"It's about what you can do and what you have to do," he says. "Some things you don't have any choice about, and that's probably good to some extent. But too much is bad. It's about balance. You've given lots of examples. They're fun to read. You could give lots more. But what does it mean? It needs to say that, at the end."

What does it mean? Of Necessity. The title is a bit awkward off the tongue, but when I think or read those words, I ache in my throat and chest about all of the things I feel compelled to do and accept, the things that steal time and energy from what I know is truly necessary and of value. I am not blaming the President for my personal situation. I do think of him and his supporters as responsible for what they've done and not done during

these past seven-and-a-half years, but it's not like I'm doing much of anything about it myself. I don't have any time and energy left at the end of the day to be a good citizen in that way. So I keep confronting that question in my own personal, political life: what's necessary?

It's necessary that I wake up from passivity. That I change my behaviors, my choices. It's good to talk and write about it all, because I'm just one chubby middle-aged lady in a nation that's full of 'em and it's likely I'm not the only one who feels this way. But it's no good unless action results from reflection.

I wonder what might yet be done, if I and others like me would decide that it is important enough, that we have the abilities, the right and the responsibility, individually and collectively, to assess and opine, to speak and to write – what might change in the world if we, if I, decide to act?

WORKS CONSULTED

Booth, Wayne. "Distance and Point of View: An Essay in Classification." Essentials of the Theory of Fiction. Eds. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005. 83-100.

Burroway, Janet and Elizabeth Stuckey-French. Writing Fiction, Seventh Edition. Pearson/Longman, 2007.

---. Writing Fiction, Fifth Edition. New York: Pearson Publishing Group, 1999.

Butler, Robert Olen. From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction. New York: Grove Press, 2005.

Charters, Ann, ed. The Story and Its Writer. Boston: Bedford St. Martin's, 2003.

Delbanco, Nicholas. The Sincerest Form: Writing Fiction by Imitation. New York: McGraw Hill, 2004.

Jauss, David. "From Long Shots to X-Rays: Distance and Point of View in Fiction Writing." The Writer's Chronicle. September 2000. 74 paragraphs. Winter 2005. <http://www.awpwriter.org/magazine/writers/djauss01.htm>.

Johnson, Ronald L. Anton Chekhov: A Study of the Short Fiction. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993.

Talese, Gay and Barbara Loundsberry, eds. The Literature

of Reality. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.

Root, Robert L. and Michael Steinberg, eds. The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction, Second Edition. New York: Pearson, 2002.