"Changing Faces:" The Short Story and the Crisis of Selfhood

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June 2007

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-38457-2
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-38457-2

Abstract

As a relatively "new" genre, the short story has received little attention compared to other forms like the novel. Some attempts to define the genre approach it comparatively and systematically—an effort to distinguish the short story from other forms, or to distinguish between different kinds of short fiction. This essay instead proposes a "cluster" of elements that tend to characterize the short story, as derived from the romantic, impressionist, realist, modern, and postmodern traditions. Edgar Allan Poe's notion of "unity of effect" provides a critical standpoint to discuss these features. Poe's concept of unity also partakes in the essay's discussion of the self and the text. Questions of the self are often present in the short story, and the fragmentation of identity often parallels the short story's formal and stylistic fragmentation. The stories in this collection present characters in varying states of crisis, as they negotiate the boundaries of the self, or otherwise question what the "self" means.

Précis

En tant que relativement nouveau genre, la nouvelle a suscité peu d'attention comparée à d'autres formes comme le roman. Les tentatives de définir le genre tendent à l'approcher comparativement et systématiquement, en essayant de distinguer la nouvelle du roman, ou de distinguer différentes formes de nouvelle. Cet essai propose à la place un « peloton » d'éléments qui tendent à caractériser la nouvelle, tel que dérivé des traditions romantiques, impressionnistes, réalistes, modernes, et post-modern. La notion d'Edgar Allan Poe de « l'unité de l'effet » fournit un point de vue critique pour discuter de ces éléments. Le concept de Poe de l'unité participe également dans la discussion de l'essai du « moi » et du texte. Les questions d'identité sont souvent présent dans la nouvelle, et la fragmentation de l'identité est souvent parallèle avec la fragmentation formelle et stylistique de la nouvelle. Les histoires dans cette collection présentent des personnages en états variables de crise, pendant qu'ils négocient les frontières du « moi », ou se questionnent sur ce que signifie le « moi ».

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, William Thomas Heise, for his insightful guidance and support. I am also grateful to my friends and family for their encouragement, Yannick for his technical help and moral support, and my roommates for letting me monopolize the computer into the wee hours of the night.

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1. Introduction

Much like the characters in this collection of stories, the genre of the short story is experiencing a crisis of identity. There are more questions than answers, it seems, when it comes to defining the short story. That is not to say that this "crisis" is negative—it simply means that, on the whole, critics have not established a fixed definition for the short story. For example, what is "short?" The short story is deemed short in a relational sense, often through a contrast to the novel. Terms like "short-short story" and "novella" also indicate the attempt to prescribe a certain "appropriate" length to the short story, by which errant stories may be classified. There is also the question of what distinguishes the short story from a sketch, ballad, parable, tale, or fable. My interest, however, is not in categorizing but in developing a useful discussion in order to explore some of the dynamics of the form.

My sense of developing a discussion of the short story resembles that of Austin Wright and Mary Louise Pratt, who prefer to think of the genre in terms of a "cluster of characteristics" rather than a boxed-off, categorically bound entity. Wright favours such an approach because it emphasizes connections between stories and allows "borderline" or "original" works to have both a connection to and an independence from the tradition of the short story. This allows us to discuss how a particular work may "partake" in (rather than unequivocally demonstrate) the conventions of the genre (Wright in *SSTC* 48). Pratt also talks about "recognisable trends" rather than "normative models" in her discussion of the short story (Pratt in *NSST* 93, 99), an approach that I find useful in discussing elements like fragmentation, open-endedness, and epiphany in the short story. It would be unreasonable to say, for example, that every piece of modern short fiction contains all these elements.

The "genre" as we know it today is relatively young. Edgar Allan Poe's "Review of *Twice-Told Tales*" (1842) emerged as the first real analysis of the short story as a distinct genre.

Poe theorized that the short story, because of its length, could convey a "unity of effect" to the reader (Poe in *SST* 46). While he does not designate a specific number of pages to the short story, he emphasizes that it should be short enough to complete "at one sitting," the ideal length to convey and sustain the writer's "preconceived effect" (Poe in *SST* 46-8). Poe is more concerned with the effect on the reader than he is with definition. Thus, although he states that a short story should have "momentum" and should demonstrate "imagination" and "originality" (47, 49) it is more essential for Poe that all the elements of the story carry out a single and forceful impression on the reader, whatever this impression may be. In "The Philosophy of the Short-Story" (1901), Brander Matthews expands upon Poe's notion of "unified effect." Matthews attempts to further demarcate the short story from the novel, stating that the difference between the two forms is not simply a matter of length—that the short story "seeks one set of effects in its own way," and the novel in another. Like Poe, Matthews emphasizes the necessity of compression for a unified effect, although he places more importance on plot: "there must be something done, there must be an action" (Matthews in *SST* 56-7). Matthews expands upon the "criteria" of the short story in other ways—for example, stating that the short story is "self-contained" and that it involves a single character, event, or situation (52-3).

The definitions of Poe and Matthews provide a useful starting point for critical discussions of the short story. This is not to say that these definitions transfer unproblematically into current (especially postmodern) analyses. They do, however, partake in the tradition of the short story and its "cluster of characteristics." Thus, we can ask of the short story: "To what extent does this work demonstrate unity?," rather than "does this work demonstrate unity *or not*?"—the latter shifting the emphasis into a systematic, all-or-nothing framework in examining aesthetic or structural features. The modern/contemporary story in particular (which is the primary focus for this paper) asks that we revise the definition of the short story as "unified." For

example, a modern short story may be unified (more or less) in tone, but may demonstrate a high degree of fragmentation in other respects. On the other hand, there are some works with an inconsistent tone that may still be called successful short stories. Many of Chekhov's stories, for instance, create "a tensile balance between comedy and pathos" (Reid 55). They are poignant *and* inconsistent in tone; the emotional impact on the reader is not diminished because of this lack of single effect. The same could be said for many of the short stories of Lorrie Moore, whose work is "alternately hilarious and distressing" as she intertwines wit, sadness, cynicism, and tenderness throughout her stories (Werner in *RCSSE* 278). The overall suggestion here is that the definition for a short story is not like a box, but rather like a web. It may have a "center" or starting point but the strands branch out and interconnect at varying distances from the center.

Just as "unity" serves as this center of definition for Poe, fragmentation or "recalcitrance" is a central characteristic in many modern short stories. Many critics suggest that the fragmented form of the short story is reflective of the modern consciousness or experience of life—one that is fragile, restless, fleeting, or unstable, with sudden flashes of insight or meaning (Shaw 17, 228). My own analysis will suggest how (or to what extent) modern characteristics pervade the short story or the short story composite, as I draw on the analyses of genre critics and on the theories of different authors like Henry James and Frank O'Connor. I will then go on to suggest the ways in which selfhood or identity often mirrors the destabilization of the form. This destabilization, or "crisis" of identity, is a concern in many modern/contemporary short stories, including my own.

2. Unity and Incoherence

The modern short story often resists the principles of unity (consciously or unconsciously), and this resistance is evident in the disconnectedness of the form. Stylistically, the writing in short fiction may seem disconnected. Rolf Lundén asserts that the short story often

displays a "partitioning" of the scenes or of the narrative in general. In Hemingway's short fiction, for example, the sentences are terse and often omit connectives and conjunctions (Lundén 92). Thus, while the sentences may follow each other sequentially, the overall effect of this style is that the various thoughts, feelings, or events in the story seem to lack explicit connections.

Wright uses the term *recalcitrance* to describe the "discontinuity or disruption" in the short story. Recalcitrance is not simply a rejection of coherence, but a negotiation, a tension between "the vision of a potential and eventual unity and the obstructions to that vision" (Wright in *SSTC* 117). Many elements in the short story, according to Wright, can display recalcitrance:[1] ambiguous character motivation, an ending of unexplained epiphany, a failure of resolution or explanation of possible outcomes, unexplained symbolic meaning, or incoherence of the fictional world (124-7). Of course, many of these elements are not unique to the short story per se. Wright maintains, however, that the shortness of the work intensifies recalcitrance because of its compression of details and "significant point[s]" (120).

Henry James also describes the process of writing fiction as an interplay of unity and incoherence. For James, the writer's "developments" of a work deliver life and form to a writer's original idea, but not without a certain tension: "they impose on him, through the principle of continuity that rides them, a proportionate anxiety" (James, *AN* 4-5). James speaks of the difficulty, first of all, of delimiting "relations" in a work that directly contribute to the "total effect": "Where, for the complete expression of one's subject, does a particular relation stop—giving way to some other not concerned in that expression?" (5). The principle of continuity looming over the writer, suggests James, is a source of anxiety, and "to do anything at all, [the writer] has at once intensely to consult and intensely to ignore it" (5). Thus, the act of writing is a

[1] Many of these characteristics will be discussed in the upcoming sections of this essay. Although these elements may be found in many short stories, no single element can be said to "define" the short story.

negotiation between the demands of unity and the more spontaneous flux of creation. According to one Jamesian scholar, this tension reflects the inevitable gap between the writer's original design and actual creation. In response to this gap, the writer must constantly improvise in an attempt to substitute this original vision (Posnock 132). In this way, a writer's inconclusiveness or deviation is "a force at odds with the totalizing impulses of mastery, harmony, and unity." But rather than "repressing or resolving the crisis of art's inherent nonidentity," James regards it as a source of possibility—as lending complexity and dynamism to the process of creation and to the art itself (Posnock 133). James' description of the artistic process suggests that from its inception, a work of fiction is engaged with the principles of unity and incoherence, struggling to create and re-create its artistic ideals.

3. Absence and Space

The process of writing according to James also involves to some extent an "artful compromise" between economy and expansiveness. On one hand, says James, expansiveness allows the work to be fleshed out and animated. He notes, however, that a "rich effect" is also achieved through a forceful "spareness." In a sense, this absence functions in an expansive way through its suggestive space: "even in the short piece," says James, the "surface [is] iridescent...by what is beneath it and what throbs and gleams through" (James, *AN* 278). What is not said in the short story is often just as important, if not more important, than what *is* said by the character or the author. Thus, the absence of grammatical or other elements in a short story is not necessarily correlated with an absence of meaning.

This sense of absence in a short story can involve a silence between characters, suggesting an implicit understanding between them—or, alternately, their lack of understanding and their inability to bridge the gap of communication between them. Many of Raymond

Carver's stories contain such silences. "Nobody Said Anything," for example, is a story involving an adolescent boy divided between his fantasies and his troubled home life. He goes fishing and catches a giant fish with the help of another boy; the two "split" the fish. Upon returning home, his parents are arguing and his father yells at him to throw the fish "in the goddamn garbage" (Carver 46). Both the boy and the reader "are left to dwell silently" on the closing image of the boy's half-fish (Siebert in *RCSSE* 98). The story leaves us with an image rather than a sense of resolution or communication between the characters. The story's title, "Nobody Said Anything," reflects the lack of communication between characters, while the story's "syntax of silence" lets readers "momentarily 'glimpse' and feel the implications of these silences for the characters affected" (Meyer in Siebert 99). The underlying problems between the family members are left unstated, and the characters are instead engaged in an interaction of silence punctuated with verbal outbursts that tend to obscure, rather than clarify, their frustrations.

Another writer noted for his "syntax of silence" is Ernest Hemingway. His short stories often convey what Valerie Shaw would call "a sense of unwritten, or even unwritable things" (Shaw 264). "Hills Like White Elephants," for example, is a story that never "names" the emotional conflict of the story (the woman's proposed abortion). This story enacts silences not only between the characters, but between the author and the reader. The terse dialogue is charged with implication, and the "brevity of the story and the absence of tonal markers (adverbs, for instance) make for an active participation by the reader" (Scofield 146-7). Although Hemingway's language is often direct and simple, we have a sense of something untold, of something lying beneath the surface. This is not a dead space but one that elicits our participation as readers.

As a sense of meaning tends to lie beneath the surface of the narrative, the short story often foregrounds issues of epistemology. This questioning of an external reality, says one critic, is associated with the literary movement of impressionism. The deletion of certain elements of plot, a limited point of view, economy of form and style, and the emphasis on inner experience are some of the impressionistic characteristics, as Ferguson describes them, of the modern short story (Ferguson in *NSST* 219). As such, the short story emphasizes the subjectivity of reality—for example, describing how things "feel" or "seem" to characters rather than presenting an undisputed "reality" (220). This subjectivity suggests that there are gaps in both the characters' and readers' ability to discern what is "real," and that reality itself is a space of negotiation. For this reason, the reality or meaning of a short story is often open-ended rather than overt.

4. Open-endedness

In Poe's terms, in order to achieve "unity of effect" in a story a writer must carefully construct a "preestablished design," with every word contributing towards a "preconceived effect," so that "[d]uring the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control" (Poe in *SST* 47-8). By modern standards, however, such preemptive measures seem unessential, if not impossible. The modern short story tends to favor ambiguity and relativity of meaning, and the open-endedness of the work would suggest that "control" of the text is shared between the author and reader. In this sense, the work is not entirely "open" or "closed" to acts of interpretation. The short story also moves away from didacticism; its theme or moral, if there is one, is often complex, tentative, and unconfirmed by the author (Ferguson in *NSST* 228). In this way, short stories often succeed in raising questions rather than furnishing answers.

The short story's relation to reality, argues one critic, derives from the conventions of the realistic and Romantic tradition. According to May, the "early" short story writers (Irving,

Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville) began with the conventions of romance and then infused these conventions with elements of realistic motivation, or *vraisemblance* (May in *SSTC* 65). The characters are "driven by a realistic, albeit mysteriously motivated, psychological obsession," while the work "attempts to make us believe it conforms to reality rather than its own laws" (67). For example, in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," both the story and the characters seem to derive from an allegorical tradition (for example, the woman is named "Faith")—however, the character and the major event of the story (Brown's passage into the forest) also appear to be realistically motivated (May in *SSTC* 69). Thus the representation of character in the short story form seems to be a compromise between the self-assertion of the psychological being and the encompassing substructure of metaphor. The demands of story/myth/metaphor and the demands of realism as May describes them engender an aesthetic tension in the story, problematizing the reader's interpretation of meaning and reality in the text, and opening up the possibility of multiple interpretations.

Henry James, in discussing the role of realism in a work, asserts that while a semblance of "reality" in a story may engage or "touch" the reader, fundamentally speaking "the measure of reality is very difficult to fix." He adds that the reality of a story "is a very delicate shade; it is reality so colored by the author's vision that, vivid as it may be, one would hesitate to propose it as a model." In this way, realism does not necessarily transfer to an unproblematic understanding of "reality." Representation is subjective, and the definition of reality is complex, as "[h]umanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms" (James, "Fiction" in *CT* 440). Thus, the story contains a dynamic reality—one that, like a seismograph, traces the jumps of a writer's (and reader's) imagination, creating a more complex line of "reality." One of James' descriptions in "A Landscape Painter" probably offers us a more helpful image, however. In this story, the narrator describes the landscape as containing a "brilliancy" and "crudity" that nonetheless gives

each object a sense of individuality. The overall effect resembles "a picture which lacks its final process, its reduction to unity" (James qtd. in Bayley 43). In the same sense, a short story can derive its effects from its "uncomposed" elements or resistance to unity (Bayley 43). Just as James suggests that the attempt at unity can have a reductive effect on a work, elements that convey an "unfinished" effect (for example, the deletion of expected elements in the plot) can contribute to its open quality. James' landscape image also confers the balance between a work's self-assertion and its more vague or evocative aspects.

It should be noted as well that no text can be explicitly called "open" or "closed." As I have mentioned previously, a work can have both a unifying and fragmentary structure. Thus, it is more helpful to speak of the tendency of a work to be open or closed, based on certain open-ended elements in the story (or the lack thereof). As Lundén points out, however, this is not a definitive assessment, as it can be difficult to draw a categorical line between purely unifying or fragmenting elements in the text (52).

5. Endings and Anti-Closural Forces

The short story's ending is one often-examined feature of a work's possible "openness." Although the interpretive possibilities of a text do not lie solely in the end, some critics feel that due to the brevity of the form, the short story is often end-oriented, or otherwise self-conscious of the reader's anticipation of the ending. Such attention to the end of a story implies that it has a function beyond a simple conclusion of thematic or plot development. The story's ending, suggests Susan Lohafer, can "condition" the rest of the text and change our experience of reading it (Lohafer in *SSTC* 111). This retrospective glance, however, does not necessarily result in an impression of overall coherence. In fact, the closural strategies of some stories often anticipate and resist this conditioning. There are endings which thwart the patterns of unity (established by

the author or reader), and endings which resist the end-orientation that supposedly characterizes the form. There are, of course, endings that carry out both of these strategies.

The modern story's ending is often anti-teleological in nature. One critic, Thomas Leitch, posits that the form's anti-teleology makes use of a "debunking rhythm," or the use of antithesis. This rhythm interrupts "the reader's movement from bewilderment to authoritative revelation, from ignorance to knowledge" (Leitch in *SSTC* 132), obscuring rather than substantiating an "authoritative" vision. The gaps in the reader's knowledge are not substantially filled or substituted; such stories "constitute not a form of knowledge but a challenge to knowledge." Consequently, the short story's revelation at the end can simultaneously provide a sense of closure and displacement (133), and complicate a sense of coherence in the work. The conclusion possesses less of a sense of conclusion than it does a sense of ambiguity.

Many of James' stories, for example, have a pseudo-revelatory structure, where a mystery or riddle is often the focus of the story (for instance, in "The Turn of the Screw" or "The Beast in the Jungle"). To "solve" this mystery, however, is not the point of the narrative. As Bayley suggests, "[t]he appearance of revelation keeps the narrative going, and revelation is itself automatically effected by cessation of the narrative" (48). The structure fails to materialize conclusive answers to the story's "mystery." Thus, while the accumulation or sense of mystery in the story builds readers' expectations for an elucidating end, this expectation is thwarted by the absence of revelation in the ending, or a revelation that takes off in a different direction. In this way, despite the form's associations with end-orientation (or perhaps because of it), the structure of the short story often resists the impetus toward revelation or closure.

The short story may also reject the structure of enclosure altogether, moving away from Brander Matthew's insistence on plot and "symmetry of design." The story seems to be, in this case, "all middle," using a "state of in *medias res* [as] a structuring principle" (Lundén 86). A

work can not be (practically speaking) without an ending, of course, but stories that utilise an "all-middle" effect do tend to lack a totalizing ending. Often, the anti-teleological nature of the short story leads to a plot that is essentially static. This is not to say that nothing happens—rather, that the story does not move towards "points of culmination," and therefore resembles a "succession rather than a progression of events" (Meyer qtd. in Lundén 86-7). The reader has a sense of viewing a brief part of a continuous experience, and is denied a clear sense of beginning or ending. These anti-(en)closural strategies challenge expectations of plot, unity, and resolution in the short story.

6. Epiphany and Anti-Epiphany

Because of its necessary compactness, the short story's structure often favors an epiphanic rather than temporally organized structure (Ferguson in *NSST* 224-5), containing bursts of energy that may contrast the essentially static plot structure as discussed previously. With its slice-of-life or fragmented structure, the modern story often contains moments of crisis or sudden illumination—or the Joycian "epiphany." In the modern short story, however, this epiphany is not necessarily one of "universal" truth. Nadine Gordimer suggests that in the short story, "a discrete moment of truth is aimed at—not *the* moment of truth, because the short story doesn't deal in cumulatives." Thus, the short story has a sense of immediacy reflected in its epiphanic structure. It is oriented towards the "present moment," and tends to leave out what happened "before" as well as clear indications about what might happen beyond the story (Gordimer in *SST* 180). The story's scope conveys a sectional rather than a panoramic view of life.

Many stories engage with the form's shortness by using an epiphanic structure in a suggestive way. Julio Cortázar ascribes a photographic quality to the short story. This quality involves "an apparent paradox: that of cutting off a fragment of reality, giving it certain limits,

but in such a way that this segment acts like an explosion which fully opens a much more ample reality." This "dynamic vision" transcends the borders and spatial limitations of the short story (Cortázar in *NSST* 246). In the same way that a character's epiphany suggests a point of crisis and illumination—a rupturing of the character's world—the short story's epiphanic structure suggests a way in which the short story "bursts its own mould," as James would have it. This expansion happens beyond the text, opening up a suggestive space and sense of possibility.

The epiphanic structure may, however, partake in the same anti-revelatory strategies as the "debunking" rhythm described by Leitch. Instead of moving the character or the reader from a state of ignorance to revelation, the short story's epiphany is left unclear. The reader is not certain about the nature and extent of the epiphany—questioning, for example, if the character has fully apprehended its significance (Reid 58). Henry James' "The Beast in the Jungle" illustrates this subversion of the moment-of-crisis, according to Reid. The story is anti-climactic, resembling "a parody of the moment-of-crisis story" (Reid 58). The main character himself anticipates a moment of crisis in his life ("the Beast"), which fails to materialize as he had perhaps hoped. His understanding of his own self-fixation serves as an ironic or substitutive revelation, but as Reid notes, we are still left in doubt as to whether he is fully aware of his own nature and situation (59). The description of the character's "encounter" with the Beast at the end, for example, suggests the subjectivity of the experience: "[John's] eyes darkened—it was close; and, instinctively turning, in his hallucination, to avoid it, he flung himself, on his face, on the tomb" (James, *Tales* 340). The story closes with hallucination as he "avoids" the Beast, suggesting that he has not only constructed this crisis but has also, to some extent, eluded the confrontation.

Some of Raymond Carver's stories can also contain anti-epiphanic moments, especially at the end. The epiphany may build up but fail to materialize by the end of the story, or the

characters may strive for understanding but find themselves inarticulate or stripped of any sense of control (Scofield 228). In "One More Thing," for example, a man gets into an argument with his family and is seemingly struck with something important to say. The story ends: "He said: 'I just want to say one more thing.' But then he could not think what it could possibly be" (Carver in Scofield 228). Language fails in the attempt at self-assertion; any sense of real revelation collapses and the character instead encounters a void. Other times (as in James' "Beast") the reader is left uncertain as to the extent and result of the revelation. Carver's characters may approach a transforming moment, but the story ends without fully explaining the moment's implications for the future. Thus, both the insight of the character and the insight of the reader are left suspended, leaving the "truth" of the experience open to suggestion (Siebert in *RCSSE* 102). Other critics have commented on the virtual lack of epiphany in certain modern stories. For instance, "there is no moment of crisis in some of Hemingway's most memorable fiction," says Reid. "Virtually nothing happens in 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,' and indeed that nothing, *nada*, is precisely what the story is about" (57). In this way, the epiphanic structure does not necessarily define the modern story, but it would be fair to say that the short story tends to engage with the element of epiphany at some level.

7. The Short Story Composite

While the short story can be examined alone for its elements of absence, fragmentation, or openness, the way we approach a short story can change when it is a part of a single-author collection—or what critics often call a short story composite, cycle, or sequence.[2] The story within a collection alters the critical attention we give to it. Questions about a story's unity or

[2] Examples of short story composites include Joyce's *Dubliners*, Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples*, and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. As these examples suggest, the stories' formal or thematic "self-containment" can vary.

coherence obtain a new dimension; the reader now considers the integration or independence of the short story within the larger context.

Cortázar describes the composite as a "system of relations" drawing in the "many notions, glimpses, sentiments, and even ideas which virtually were floating in [the author's] memory or sensibility" (Cortázar in *NSST* 248), attributing both a random and unifying quality to the short story composite. This notion compares to Henry James' conception of the artistic imagination. In "The Art of Fiction," James describes this imagination as a "kind of huge spider-web...suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue" (James in *CT* 440). While the subject or idea of a work (what James calls the "*donnée*"), serves as a web to create a loose coherence, the separate "particles" dispersed in the web also suggest a certain disconnectedness between these elements. The stories within a composite resemble this model in that they encourage readers to consider the stories independently, but also to create associations within the web of stories.

Because it consists of connected yet independent stories, the composite evokes a tension between its possible unity and disjunction. This tension relates to the interpretive possibilities of the text as an open or closed work. Luscher maintains that each short story within the sequence "is not a completely closed formal experience," and the associations between stories leave room for the interpretive participation of the reader (Luscher in *SSTC* 148, 152). Although I disagree with Luscher's implication that it is the reader's task to "reconcile" the "apparent disunity" of the composite (158), I would say that each story's individuality can enrich the network of relations present in a collection.

In many respects, a discussion of the short story composite will echo that of the single story. The same sense of fragmentation and suggestive space that often characterizes the single story also applies to the composite. Discontinuity, marked by the spaces between stories, both

interrupts the "totality" of the collection and presents spaces for reader involvement. As Lundén states, "the gaps between composite stories are not to be regarded as passive states of absence, but rather as dynamic components of the composite's specific narrative structure" (91). Although some critics see the composite's effect as potentially accumulative and comprehensive,[3] Lundén emphasizes the form's resistance to plot and end orientation, maintaining that short story composites reveal "an incomplete world" (63). The ending of the composite, like the individual stories, may be open-ended in nature. Because of their multiplicity and resistance to "accumulation," the stories in the composite are "not ultimately subsumed under a totalizing ending" (Lundén 87). The multi-story structure also contributes to a plurality of voices, themes, and worlds, complicating this vision of total unity.

8. The Foregrounded Self

There is a strong sense in which the short story's formal features reflect its conception of character and identity. Its effect of "incompleteness," fragmentation, and subjectivity, for example, mirrors the modern sense of a destabilized selfhood. Modern short stories "commonly debunk a particular subject: the concept of a public identity, a self that acts in such a knowable, deliberate way as to assert a stable, discrete identity...constituted by an individual's determinate actions" (Leitch in *SSTC* 133-4). The concept of selfhood in the short story is linked to its challenge of epistemological knowledge and its forces of defamiliarization.

Frank O'Connor, in *The Lonely Voice* (1960), argues that the short story often deals with characters in a state of essential loneliness. While the novel presents characters acting and participating in the community, O'Connor argues, the short story often presents a "sense of

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[3] See Shaw's *The Short Story : A Critical Introduction*, p.12

outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society" (O'Connor in *SST* 87). In the modern short story, the world becomes *unheimliche*, to borrow Freud's term, and the character experiences a connection to society which is at once familiar and peripheral. O'Connor suggests, along the same lines, that characters in short stories are part of a "submerged population group," detached from (yet still a part of) society. The individual is not necessarily a free-floating agent in the story but is often presented against the "backdrop" of society. Scofield posits that "the strategy of putting together stories and sketches seems to be a way of setting private, individual experience (in the stories) against glimpses of the largely anonymous life of the public world" (141).[4] This emphasis on inward experience partakes in the subjective orientation of the short story. The individual voice often serves as an affirmation or a quest for identity within this context.

Problems with identification also extend to the reader, as the reader may have trouble identifying with the ("submerged population group") characters (O'Connor in *SST* 86). Because of the brevity of the form, characters are often not as "fleshed-out" as they might be in a novel. Hemingway's short stories, for example, "[do] not show a novelist's 'solid sense of character,'" but they are still strong works because "the point of the story does not lie in personalities, but in the emotion to which a situation gives rise" (Wilson qtd. in Scofield 146). Because of the de-emphasis of plot and action, character is associated less with overt action and more with states of consciousness. Charles May parallels this with Chekhov's conception of characters as "embodiments of mood." Although the character may partake in some action, the short story tends to emphasize the phenomenological experience involved in this action (May in *NSST* 200-1). In this way, the reader is to some extent marginalized because he or she is not able to

[4] This quote is a part of Scofield's discussion of Hemingway's *In Our Time*, but this statement can apply to the modern short story in a more general sense as well.

completely identify with the character. The short story's emphasis on "mood" and the lack of "fleshing out" of its characters suggests that one's understanding of the self may be opaque and that the self is (to some extent) even unknowable.

The short story's antithetical or "debunking" structure is analogous to its "unmaking" of a stable sense of selfhood. Leitch asserts that "stories of initiation," for example, involve lost illusions or false ideals about the self. These stories "render the hero's identity problematic without substituting an equally stable conception of the world or of one's public identity" (Leitch in *SSTC* 134). In this way, while the short story often raises questions about selfhood, its interest is not to resolve or answer these questions. These stories instead challenge the reader's ability to identify with the characters, as discussed previously, and to challenge the reader's own ability to "unify" the character's tentative markers of identity. Identity, then, is not a static conglomerate of terms. This notion is similar to the representative demands of art itself. Going back to Henry James' discussion about an inevitable transformation of the original idea, there is a sense in which "art cannot live up to its concept" (Adorno qtd. in Posnock 133)—and the self, along these same lines, cannot evade the transforming forces of "non-identity." The self, like art, will always "burst its mould," extending beyond its pre-conceived boundaries in a dynamic of experience and revision.

9. The Changing Self

William James (the brother of Henry James) also writes about the self in terms of a dynamic, a tension or negotiation between unity and fragmentation. James renounces what he calls the "logic of identity," averring that identity and reality itself is "non-rational" (James qtd. in Posnock 105). This renunciation is necessary in a dynamic world, where the terms of reality are changing: where the environment, the self, and meaning are all subject to transformation. In the

light of inevitable change, "the old terms can no longer be substituted nor the relations 'transferred,' because of so many new dimensions into which experience has opened." James compares this reality to a "zigzag" line, where "one must do violence to its spontaneous development" in order to keep it straight (James, *Writings* 301). The notion that there is a sense of violence underlying the attempt at sameness or coherence can also relate to the identity-forming efforts of some characters. In my story "The Queen of Hearts," for example, Angel's plastic surgery demonstrates her attempt to stay "forever" young, a process that requires a certain violence to the development (ageing) of her face. The act of changing her face is not just an aesthetic measure, but an act of selfhood, as the face is an important external "marker" of identity.

Characters in the modern story may feel displaced from a sense of stable identity, as though (to use O'Connor's terms) they are wandering about the fringes of their ideal "essential" selves. Scofield suggests that characters in the modern short story often try to counter a feeling of dislocation or fragmentation by building a sense of life from day-to-day particulars or small impressions—elements that are particularly explored in the short story (108). Characters, then, (much like readers with a text) often try to develop a "whole" from the scattered fragments of existence. In the attempt towards unity or understanding, language would seem to be a key tool, but words often fail for characters—for example, in the attempt to distil the essence of something and capture its meaning with a few select words.

The characters in my stories also tend to dwell on images and photographs. In "The Queen of Hearts," for instance, Angel often values photographs as a model for an unchanging self. The static reality of a picture, however, presents problems when it is seen as an ideal vision of reality. In dwelling on the static image, the characters seem unable to move beyond the space of the image and the psychological demands of this vision. A crisis necessarily follows as the

self "bursts its mould," unable to live up to its original conception. An "authentic" self can begin to emerge only when the character sees beyond the borders of this vision. This authentic self is not based on unity but on recognition of difference. Theodor Adorno's notion of "mimetic cognition" is helpful here: this type of cognition "attempts to use concepts non-conceptually, not as instruments that circumscribe but as tentative acts of expression that suggest rather than fix meaning" (Posnock 106). The pictures in these stories often represent such "fixed" concepts, suggesting the character's attempts at fixing meaning for the self. The crisis of selfhood, then, involves some ontological questions: What constitutes the identity of a person? And at what point does this self cease to be itself, as opposed to merely changing? These are issues that interested me *as questions* in the writing of my fiction—as I would hesitate to say that my own or any other fiction can pinpoint the margins of the self.

10. The Dialogical Self

The short story, in its problematizing of identity, debunks the conception of the self as autonomous and self-contained. Western culture, according to Norbert Elias, has traditionally seen the self as stored "neatly" inside, separated from the outside world. During the Renaissance, for example, the "image of man as *homo clausus*"—"the encapsulation of the self within itself"—was "self-evident, not open to discussion as a source of problems" (Elias in Posnock 169). The modern conception of self, on the other hand, raises questions about the boundaries of identity and the relation of the self and other. In his autobiographical writings, for example, Henry James considers the "boundary" of the self "less as a barrier and more as a locus of response and exchange" (Posnock 170), a notion that corresponds as well to his view that art "lives upon discussion" and the "exchange of views" (James, "Fiction" in *CT* 437). Identity in this sense is not inherent and unchanging; nor is it a *tabula rasa* assimilating the images of otherness. Charles

Taylor suggests that the while the "authentic" self is original, it is not "inwardly generated" in isolation. Instead, identity emerges through a dialogical relation with others, a negotiation which is both overt and internal (Taylor 47-48). Relationships, then, are key factors in identity-formation.[5]

These theories play out in many modern short stories in the relations between characters. In Raymond Carver's "Fat," for example, a waitress serves a man whose physical size becomes an "image of otherness" (Siebert in *RCSSE* 99). Although the waitress narrating the story seems to focus on the man's "alien" physical features, in the end of the story she experiences an awareness of her own body, which feels (whether this is real or imagined) suddenly "fat" (Carver 4). Through this recognition, the waitress is able to experience moments of "otherness" in herself (Siebert in *RCSSE* 99). The nature of her interaction demonstrates that while her identity is not "founded" on otherness, it is still engaged in a form of exchange whereby the borders of the self are not clearly and permanently drawn. In this sense, the self is not unified and singular but can contain a dynamic of "multitudes." In "Fat," the man's referral to himself as "we" rather than "I" suggests this quality of multiplicity. The absence of quotation marks throughout the story also conveys a certain fluidity among the speakers and their identities.

In my own stories, the dividing boundaries of self also often come into question. Eddie in "The Abortion" and Amber in "Continental Drift," for example, both grapple (to varying degrees) with family legacy or resemblance and the implications these have for their own identities. The perception of "otherness" in the self can also translate into a feeling of *unheimliche* displacement. A crisis of this sort, along the lines of Adorno, is engendered by a "systemizing impulse" that is

[5] Taylor is careful to point out, however, that having "merely instrumental relationships" is "self-stultifying." This would be "illusory," according to Taylor, because this notion presupposes that "one can choose oneself without recognizing a horizon of significance beyond choice" (52-3).

intolerant of difference. This totalizing desire views otherness as extraneous or alien, as a threat to selfhood. "The slightest remnant of non-identity sufficed to deny an identity conceived as total," Adorno asserts (qtd. in Posnock 124), and although he is criticizing systematic philosophy, it is easy to see how his critique of the demands of unity can pertain to a discussion of selfhood. In the spuriously "unified" self, the permeable boundaries of identity are sites of trauma, whereas the "authentic" self sees these tentative boundaries as affirmations of difference and possibility.

In my collection of stories, the words, texts, or images surrounding the characters often represent this "otherness." The characters hold these elements inside themselves, sometimes bound to the ideals that these images represent. In this way, they are not empty vessels carrying around the images of otherness—but rather beings which must negotiate these multiple elements of their identity. For example, Angel in "Queen" gets cosmetic surgery based on pictures of other women from magazines. The resulting "self" that emerges, however, is not a conglomerate of these pictures but a "new" Angel—not a coherent, ideal self as she hoped, but a "collage" of original, new, and "found" elements. Structurally, some aspects of my stories resemble this notion of "collage" as well. The semblance of other "texts" within the stories—excerpts of books, fragments of song, lines from cards—suggests a way in which the story itself is not completely sovereign. The permeability of the text, then, also speaks to the permeability of the self.

11. Conclusion

Although not all short stories (including my own) demonstrate all the "elements" of the modern short story as outlined in my discussion, the aim of this essay was to explore the possible features of the short story as they relate to the principles of "unity" introduced by Poe. His notion of a "unity of effect" shifted the emphasis away from simple plot to how the aesthetic features of

the story can affect the reader's interaction with the text. Poe's attempt to articulate the short story as a separate genre was in part an alternative conception of the experience of the reader.

The short story as a genre demonstrates, in many ways, an acute awareness of this "interaction." It attempts to utilize its shortness as a feature of possibility rather than regarding it as a limitation. Through its structural and grammatical "use" of absence (rather than simple "deletion"), the short story often opens a suggestive space whereby the reader can participate in the creation of meaning. The tension between coherence and fragmentation implicates not only issues of aesthetics, but issues concerning the degree of "openness" in the work. The modern story often provokes the question: "What is left out?" The concern for what the author has "left out" goes beyond mere plot exposition; it hints at an underlying dimension of meaning, one that we can glimpse at through the breaks of the text.

The short story's brevity and suggestive absence also foreground issues of "knowing," both for the character and reader. This epistemological concern often extends to questions of identity: How do we understand ourselves? What forces shape our identities, and where does the border of the self begin or end? The questions are, in many respects, the questions concerning the identity of the short story. But to fix a definition would be to miss the dynamic and multiple characteristics of the short story. If there is an "essential quality" of the short story, as Cortázar suggests, it would resemble a "planetary system" of sorts, a structure of movement: "and when all is said and done, isn't this a proposal of life, a dynamic which urges us to get outside ourselves and enter a more complex and more beautiful system of relations?" (Cortázar in *NSST* 248). The short story, then, addresses not only the aspects of selfhood in the characters, but the selfhood of the short story reader in his or her interaction with the text.

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Key to Parenthetical Documentation

AN: James, Henry. *The Art of the Novel*

CT: Richter, David H. *The Critical Tradition*

NSST: May, Charles E. *The New Short Story Theories*

RCSSE: Werner, Robin. *A Reader's Companion to the Short Story in English*

SST: May, Charles E. *Short Story Theories*

SSTC: Lohafer, Susan and Jo Ellyn Clarey. *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*

Blueprints

"Reece? Why aren't you unpacking?"

Hanna had already cut the tape of her boxes and unpacked all the belongings from her small apartment.

"Yeah, hon," Reece said. He was on his laptop again, studying the real estate market.

"We still have the rest of our bedroom, and the living room." It still pleased Hanna to be speaking about everyday things in *their* home. The sound of their voices in the empty rooms seemed to bring intimacy and ownership.

Hanna began flipping through one of her landscaping books.

"What do you think I should do with the backyard?" she said. "Do you like this one?"

It was a photograph of a garden. There was a stone path, a pond, flowers everywhere.

Reece looked at the photo, distracted. "You can do something like that?"

"I've designed things like this," she said. Now, she thought, it would be for them, not for clients. Reece continued to work on his laptop, examining charts and graphs that always looked to Hanna like bolts of lightning.

"Well," he said, "in Newport, they say, the weather's always perfect."

Hanna smiled. She looked at the photo, the leaves and flowers bathed in light. She imagined it always like that.

***

Hanna had met Reece Donovan for the first time in the backyard of an empty house. She was taking measurements of the garden. Reece was the real estate agent. He was a man who introduced himself to clients in a quick and friendly way, eyes darting around. He learned her name right away and used it often.

"So what do you think, Hanna?" he asked, approaching her in the garden. He snapped off a little twig and twirled it between his fingers. "Do I have a chance?"

"For what?" She was still an intern. She clutched her clipboard and the measurements in her brain disappeared.

"Selling this house," he said. He was tall—about six feet two inches (Hanna couldn't help but estimate). He stood there smiling with a hand in his pocket.

"The house is a bit of a dump," she said, pulling open the measuring tape. "But the garden can be improved with a little work."

"The house, too," Reece said. "With the right words."

Hanna brushed the dirt from her hands and knees and wondered about this.

When they first started dating it was a whirlwind of restaurants, movies, museums, beaches, parks, shops, cafés, and art galleries. She met his family. They invited her over for their patio lunches and barbeques, pouring her drinks, taking her in on their side with affectionate winks as they made jokes about Reece, "the greatest 31-year-old teenager you'll ever meet."

"So what do you do in life?" one of his aunts asked her.

"I'm a landscape designer," Hanna said.

"Well, Reece, you got yourself a good one this time!" his aunt said. "She's pretty *and* she knows where she's going in life."

Hanna smiled uncomfortably, thinking of her dead-end job taking measurements, and the apartment she could barely afford. She worked for a large company, consulting with homeowners and coming up with a blueprint for their desired garden. She spent her days measuring backyards, flipping through pictures with clients, creating draft after draft. Her life, she thought, seemed based on other peoples' dreams.

Reece ignored the winks and hints from his family, yet he liked to embellish the future in his own way. "Our kids would be smart and good-looking, as you obviously have good genes," he said one day as they sped along the freeway.

"Is that right?"

"My family has five doctors," he added. "Those are some good genetics, right there."

He often fabricated different versions of their future. At one point they had four houses, eight cars, and one island.

When he gave her an engagement ring a year later she was startled and fascinated. She often touched it, or held it at a distance and watched it glitter on her finger. It was as if the stone had developed on its own, secretly; its pristine, solid beauty suddenly revealed.

They bought a house in Newport Beach.

"You're going to love living there," Reece said. "And the real estate is great."

***

Hanna found another job at a landscaping company in Newport, and Reece worked in real estate. Little by little, they filled their house with furniture: black leather couches and chairs, a glass coffee table, sleek and shiny things.

"Imported," Reece often said proudly. Hanna wasn't sure how this made it better, but she pretended to look over the furniture in a new, discerning way.

Reece also hired a maid service, which Hanna discovered one day when she came back from work. She opened the door to the bathroom and screamed. A woman, bent over the bathtub, also screamed, clutching her sponge. They stared at each other.

Reece later explained that "of course" they would have a maid service. It's a big house, who else would do all the cleaning?

This was a new concept for Hanna. *Don't* do your dishes, she had to tell herself. *Don't* do the laundry. Other times she didn't recognize her old belongings. She would open a cabinet and all the towels would be folded and stacked fastidiously, like in a hotel.

She found it intolerable to stay inside. The house often smelled of detergent. She spent long hours working on the garden, pulling weeds and digging up the old lawn that had dried out. She measured the spaces for her flower beds and began to install the borders.

Often, beyond the tall, ivy-covered fence, she could hear voices, the distant sounds of talking and laughing. She thought of barbeques, friends, sipping wine.

"Sometimes I wish my friends were here in Newport," she said to Reece one evening. She talked to her friends and family on the phone, but she still felt worlds away.

"Why don't you make friends with the neighbors?" he suggested.

Their neighbors consisted of a couple with teenagers on one side, and a single, elderly woman on the other.

"They're nice," Reece said. "You could go with Joanne next door to one of her tanning sessions."

"No thanks."

"Hanna," he said, "you gotta try."

Hanna twiddled with the hair at the end of her braid. "I get enough sun working outside anyway."

But she knew that Reece was right. She had not made an effort; she had not often even left the house. Only, how could she "try"? How could she pretend to be at ease in the company of the rich—tanning, sipping cocktails, and whatever else they do?

Reece had no problem with this. He was both rich and pretending to be rich. He could fit in anywhere, she thought, into any situation. Somehow, he could bring himself off-center,

throwing himself into the wind of the conversation. It didn't matter that he couldn't pronounce any of the French names—he was still a connoisseur of wine. It didn't matter that he had never canoed in his life—he would still name three rivers that were *great* for canoeing.

What was she good at? Her thoughts always came back to their house.

Maybe she could plan a party for the weekend, and invite the neighbors.

***

Hanna sat in the living room of her neighbor's large house. The maid had answered the door, inviting her in, explaining that her employers should be back shortly. The maid left and returned with a bowl of mixed nuts, and excused herself.

So who were these neighbors? Hanna reached for a nut slowly, looking around. The ceilings were high and white; the furniture was probably expensive.

There were photos in the living room: a black-and-white wedding photo; a somber looking teenage boy wearing a soccer uniform, another in a graduation robe; a woman's thin face under a large-rimmed hat. Hanna probed these faces for their secrets. How did you manage it? How did this all become such a part of you that you can stare out calmly from the shadow of your hat?

The maid returned. Hanna realized it must have been a long time since she first arrived.

"I'm sorry," the maid said. "I didn't think they'd be this long." She stood there and waited in a way that made Hanna feel she should leave.

"Thank you anyway," Hanna said. "Would you pass them the message?"

She wrote the invitation out on a piece of paper.

"Yes, ma'am."

Hanna did the same for the neighbors on the other side, who were not home.

She kept her plans secret from Reece. She wanted him to *see* the result of this effort—that she could succeed at things her way. She walked to the market and bought some red wine, crackers, and cheese. It was a sunny day. The faces of houses looked bright and pleasant. At home, Hanna arranged the seats in the living room, stood back, and arranged them again. Reece had some extra work today; he would probably return home after everyone had arrived.

Everything was ready. She tried to occupy herself. She sat down with some of her books on landscape planning. It's five o'clock, she thought. That was stupid to plan for five o'clock, what if people are just getting off work? She continued reading. Do people around here work?

Outside, the sunlight lost its vigor and the houses cast dark triangles across the ground. 6:00 pm...6:14 pm. Reece might be coming home soon. She got up and poured herself a glass of red wine. Suddenly, the doorbell rang. The wine burned in her throat.

It was a woman at the door, looking at her expectantly. She was about fifty, with bronze skin and a leopard-print blouse. "I'm Joanne."

Hanna recognized her, vaguely, perhaps from one of the photos.

"I'm Hanna," she said, feeling her throat pounding. "Come in, please!"

Joanna entered the living room, and looked around, surprised. Hanna blushed. After a few moments Hanna realized that Joanne's eyebrows were re-drawn high on her forehead, giving her a constant expression of surprise. She felt a little better.

"Can I offer you some cheese and crackers?" Hanna returned with the platter, sat down, and quickly took a cracker to fill her mouth.

"I suppose it's still early," Joanne said, looking at all the chairs.

"Yes..."

"My husband would have come, but he's busy passing a kidney stone."

Joanne paused and Hanna realized this was a kind of joke; she gave a late laugh.

"I met your husband once before, I believe" Joanne said. It pleased Hanna to hear her say *husband*. "He's quite nice."

"Oh yes...quite."

"He's in real estate, is that it?"

"The real estate in Newport is great," Hanna said, borrowing one of Reece's statements.

"Oh, certainly," said Joanne. "My husband's doing some investing. How's your portfolio?"

"Not bad, I guess," said Hanna. "I've got some sketches, some designs—I like to add a little color to some of them. Standard stuff."

Hanna wasn't sure, but one of Joanne's eyebrows may have risen. Joanne patted her hair in an uncertain way, boosting the waves on the side of her head.

"I see. So—you've just moved in, have you?"

"About two months ago."

They talked a bit longer, and Hanna wondered if anyone else would be arriving. As Joanne talked, Hanna tried to see the image she saw in the photo, but it didn't match. She tried to see her without those eyebrows to bring back the vision of that calm, impervious look. She was sure it was her—yet somehow, it was not.

There was a pause. "Can I get you a glass of wine?" Hanna said.

"That would be lovely."

Hanna jumped up to retrieve the bottle. She read the label carefully, returning to the living room.

"It's a *cabaret sauvignon*." As Hanna pronounced these words the wine poured too quickly out of the bottle and splashed onto Joanne's blouse.

"Oh!"

"Oh!"

Joanne stood up, fingers splayed in the air, with an even greater look of shock on her face.

"I'm so sorry!" Hanna said. "Let me get you a napkin!"

She rushed to the kitchen.

"I'm sorry, I must go," Joanne said, pulling at her blouse. "I have to get this to the cleaners right away."

Hanna offered her a napkin as she left, but Joanne did not see her.

"I'm sorry..."

After a few moments, she closed the door and dropped onto the couch.

It was leopard-print, Hanna thought. It wouldn't have shown. She could have stayed.

***

"I want to go somewhere together," Hanna said to Reece. "Let's go out to dinner."

"If you want," Reece said. "Sure."

Her mood brightened. "I'll make reservations."

They went to a fancy place with dim candle lighting, and accordion music playing from far-off speakers.

The waiter brought them the wine menu at their table.

"Any wine, Hanna?" Reece asked.

"No!" she said. "No wine for me."

Reece shrugged.

Hanna watched him as he read the menu. His well-formed jaw and straight nose gave him a confident face. She smiled at the way he surveyed the menu with quick glances—even for the first time—as if searching for a favorite dish.

"What are you taking, hon?" He had already decided.

They both ordered pasta dishes, which the waiter brought to them on large plates. Reece stared at his food.

"Is this the *rosée* sauce I ordered?" Reece asked the waiter.

"Yes, sir."

"I don't think so. *Rosée* is pink," Reece said, poking around the pasta with his fork. "Not all red, like this. This is like marinara."

Hanna fixed her eyes on the candle, watching the small flame writhe on the wick.

"I apologize," the waiter said. "If you permit me to take your plate, I'll have it changed at once."

"Thank you."

They waited in silence for a few moments, sipping water.

"You didn't even taste it," Hanna said.

"Doesn't matter," Reece said. "It's not what I ordered."

Hanna stared at the candle and watched the flame flicker as one of the waiters sped by. "I'm going to the restroom."

At the sink, she washed her hands and splashed some water on her face. She looked at herself in the mirror, catching sight of her ring, its hundred faces glittering. She put her hand up to her face. A *Mrs*., she thought to herself. The wife of Reece. She tried to picture him, to come up with one word or image that she could hold inside her mind, one that said undeniably: *Reece.* But the word never came.

She vowed that when she returned to the table, she would find this something. She would catch something in the way that he ate his pasta, or the way he took her hand, that would suddenly reveal this thing to her.

When Hanna returned there was a woman that she had never seen, sitting in her place.

"Hanna, this is Kristin," Reece said as the woman rose from the seat. "We went to the same college here."

"Well, not *here*, in the restaurant," the woman laughed, swinging her hip to one side.

"And Kristin, this is Hanna, my fiancée."

"Wow, *fiancée*!" She gave Reece a little slap on his shoulder. "I never would have thought!"

"Nice to meet you." Hanna shook the woman's hand, which was slender and displayed a set of shiny, manicured fingernails. She realized that her own fingernails were embedded with dirt from working in the garden. Hanna sat down and watched the woman as she and Reece conversed: the delicate balance of her weight shifting from one high heel to the other, the way her hair was one amber, styled mass that stayed in place even when she laughed. Hanna watched the fingernails like groups of birds as they landed and flew away together.

"What do you think?"

They were both looking at her.

"About staying for drinks later," Reece said.

"Oh...I really can't," Hanna said. "I have to finish some blueprints for work tomorrow."

"Well, another time, maybe." She said goodbye to both of them. The waiter arrived with Reece's new dish.

"Wow, what are the chances?" Reece said, digging into his pasta.

***

Hanna worked in the garden. She pulled out some dead plants that hadn't survived the transplant to her garden. Had she watered them too much? Not enough? Plants have fragile, tricky lives. Hanna reviewed her blueprint. The perennials *had* to grow there, otherwise they wouldn't provide a contrast to her shade plants along the fence. A fly landed on her blueprint. It

sat on one of the shapes of her garden, and started rubbing its legs and head. Then it jumped back into the air.

It reminded her of bees, their brief intense humming by your ear. There were bees at her grandparents' old farm, where she stayed when she was six. Her grandfather called them "yellowjackets." There was an apple orchard in the back, and Hanna would always climb the apple trees to have a closer look at them. She was looking for their little yellow jackets. This was before she was afraid of anything. Hanna remembered the warm smell of the trees in the sunlight, and the bright apples spotting the branches here and there. She thought her grandparents must have been rich because there were apples everywhere, even on the ground.

Hanna sighed. It was almost evening; the sky was overcast. Reece was somewhere, finalizing a contract. Why was he so late? She went inside to wash up, scrubbing the dirt from her fingernails. She prepared a sandwich and ate it on the couch, watching the sky. It was splashed with pink, indelicately, like a careless painting. These splashes deepened into purple; then black. She listened as cars approached and continued down the street. She thought of a woman somewhere across town, laughing and tossing her styled mass of hair.

She awoke suddenly from sleep and found herself still on the couch, with a blanket on top of her.

Reece was in the bedroom, sleeping. The green numbers of the clock glowed harshly in the dim room. It was five in the morning, a strange time between night and day. Outside, the streets were empty and calm. The light looked cool and blue, almost sacred.

She lay down next to Reece and watched his side rise and fall with his breath. She was afraid of discovering something foreign about him, like some fragrance she did not recognize. She wanted to wake him and tell him in a few select words that she loved him, but she could not. She could have written, "I love you Reece" on a cake; that's how ridiculous her words would

have been if she woke him up to tell him that. She wanted to find some different words: something to encapsulate not only her feelings and the sight of him sleeping but the pristine and silent blue outside. But these special words did not exist, or if they did, she could not find them.

But more than this, more than everything, she realized, she wanted to wake him and have him say these words.

When she awoke in the morning Reece had already gone to work. She looked for traces of him—a bowl with leftover bits of cereal, or a newspaper left unfolded—but everything was clean and replaced. She went to take a shower but the maid was in the bathroom, cleaning the sink.

"You don't need to clean the bathroom everyday," Hanna said. "Just get out. Please."

The maid was a short and quiet woman. She turned to leave quickly; her expression was blank.

They ate dinner together. Hanna sat quietly, and Reece, unable to sit in silence, filled the spaces with chatter.

"How's the garden coming?"

"Good," Hanna said.

"I can't really see from the blueprint," he said, "but it looks like when things start growing out there, it should be great."

"It should." Hanna delivered a spoonful of mashed potatoes to her mouth. He wasn't going to sell her any enthusiasm.

"It brings up the value of the house, too," he said. "You'd be shocked."

"Brings it up for what?"

"Come on—for when we sell it."

"What?"

"Hon, you're about to pour gravy on the table."

"I thought—"

"We should call the maid for a rag," he said. "Nina!"

Hanna threw her napkin onto the spill.

"We're selling our house?"

"Not right away," he said. He lifted a forkful of food to his mouth, hesitating. "But you have to understand, these numbers look pretty good in a year or two."

"You never told me about these plans," Hanna said.

Reece was exaggeratedly looking beyond her for the maid. "You said before you don't like to hear about numbers."

"These aren't just numbers, this is our life together," she said. "We're also getting married, did you forget about that too?"

"That's not—"

"Instead you want to stay out with that slut..."

There was a strong silence. She felt so empty with rage that the tears she was certain were coming burnt up inside of her.

"Are you talking about Kristin?" Reece said. "I didn't."

Hanna realized that she believed him, but that this did not make her feel better. In all her visions of the future...her projects to make things better...their future moments of happiness...the house was always there.

"We had plans," Hanna said.

In the back of her mind she thought of the maid, out of earshot, routinely cleaning the windows.

***

The next day was Saturday; they had spent most of the day apart. They were both quiet.

Hanna wandered in the garden. It was a strange patchwork of barren parts and plants. The partly dug-up dried lawn extended out from one half; it looked like a wave that had folded and exhausted itself onto the shore. Hanna heard Reece inside. He had just come home with the groceries. She could sense his contemplation in the small sounds from the house. In a few moments he would come out to the backyard, with whatever words he was holding quietly inside his head.

Hanna wasn't sure what words she herself would have. It was calm outside; she could hear birds in the distance. She brought a hand to the ground and raked it through the soil. It was damp and cool, and she could understand its mysterious richness.

Once when she was a girl she had planted some seeds in a clay pot of soil, watering them every day. She waited days and days but nothing broke through the soil. She was sure that the seeds didn't work. After a few more days, she became so impatient and angry that she dug them up. She found them—white and beginning to sprout, curled like tiny embryos.

The Queen of Hearts

My name is Angel.

When I was seven I decided that I'd better live up to my name, and become an angel. I don't mean the ones with feathery wings that you put on top of your Christmas tree. I mean the real kind. I asked about them in Sunday school. I had an obvious interest in them, because of the name and all. They said that angels are beautiful and perfect beings, but most of the time they are invisible. They live with God in heaven.

We had career day at my elementary school. I was supposed to talk about what one of my parents did, and then say what I wanted to be when I grew up. My mom worked at a beauty salon, doing makeup and nails. I talked about how she painted people's nails, and I showed the class my own fingernails that my mom had painted for me. I said that I wanted to be a beauty salon woman also, but this wasn't really true. Really, I wanted to start a career in being an angel. Sure, I knew this was something that happens after death, but I was thinking way ahead of the other kids.

I didn't know exactly what kind of things I would have to do to appeal to heaven and become a real angel. I also knew I had a few strikes against me already. For example, once I stole one of my mom's lipsticks because I heard, while eating lunch behind a group of fifth grade girls, that boys like girls with shiny lips.

Also, I had once found a deck of playing cards with naked women on the backs of them. I had found the cards scattered on the sidewalk walking on my way home from school; for some reason, it seemed, someone had thrown them there. I picked up one of them. It was the first time I had seen a naked woman. I thought: I should toss it down. Instead, I picked up another card, and another one. When I saw that the street was empty, I went around and collected all the little

pictures, the small bodies scattered along the sidewalk. I didn't know why I wanted them, but somehow it was like finding a secret treasure. As I bent to pick them all up, I thought that certainly, God could see this. I felt their secret weight in my coat pocket, tapping against my side as I stepped home.

I studied them like my dad studied diagrams to assemble furniture—and often with the same confusion. These women were like none I had ever seen before, with breasts that exceeded the shapes of my imagination. They were strangely large and cone-shaped, or shiny and balloon-shaped. Their faces had a lot of eyeliner and mascara (I knew what these were), and their hair was often blond and feathery. They looked at me with a strange expression. I didn't know exactly if they were mad or happy; often they looked like both at the same time. When I knew my parents were busy, watching *Columbo* reruns, I would take out these cards and study them one by one.

So I knew this was a strike against me. Certainly I had to be even more angelic in the future to make up for these things. But I did not give up these cards. They were knowledge to me, a knowledge that somehow existed outside what they taught about God and the Devil in Sunday school.

Over the years, of course, I got rid of them, mostly by selling them to the boys at school. I was afraid of somebody finding the cards; I wouldn't know what to say. But I kept one of them. She was the only one who was dressed, or dressed in a sort of way. She had a semi-sheer sheet draped over her. Her chin was tilted up in a proud, pleasurable kind of way, as if she had just had the best milkshake ever and she was going to keep it all to herself. The sheet fell across the curves of her body. It seemed to both reveal and hide her.

Her card was the Queen of Hearts.

***

The first time I met Gary, I was naked.

In fact, I was naked and talking glumly about my recent divorce. He was the massage therapist at my local spa. As I talked, he smoothed the oil over my back and worked his hands over my muscles. Throughout the hour massage, he hardly spoke.

"What a jerk," I was saying. "I was so good to him—three years while he played at bars and cafes—"

"Mm-hmm."

"And the second he becomes slightly famous he drops me."

"Hmm."

"As if now that he's surrounded by women he can upgrade."

"Mmm…"

In the most unusual way, Gary and I were having a conversation. I didn't understand it at first, his language. He spoke with his touch. As the hour passed, I began to notice that instead of answering me with words, he would reply by working on a particularly tight muscle in my shoulder. He smoothed his hands across my back with the same earnestness a friend leans in to listen more intently. As he walked his thumbs along my spine his mind seemed to be strolling, saying perhaps, "Yes, I have felt that way as well, this one time..."

When the massage was over, I got dressed and asked him out to coffee. He seemed taken aback. I liked his face. It was round, but not pale or blimpy. It was round and slightly muscular. His body seemed, in a strange way, both solid and round as well. It embarrassed me to think that he had already seen me naked, or at least the back of me. He had seen my bare contours. He'd seen my butt. I joked about it, saying that people usually see me naked *after* the first date. His eyes were small but they glimmered with his thoughts, which made them special to look at. They were dark and always gently glimmering. This too was his silent way of speaking.

***

I was looking at faces, and maybe the way I flipped through the magazine told him something. Gary and I had been living together for two years.

"You still thinking about plastic surgery?"

I didn't look up.

"Angie, you're only thirty-seven," he said, in his shy, half-challenging voice.

I was studying, it was true. I had begun to notice that more and more these faces looked foreign to me.

"I'm giving it some thought."

The truth was I was always thinking about plastic surgery, for as long as I can remember. Maybe not the actual surgery, with its scalpels and doctors, but with my mind I was always giving myself plastic surgery. A magical, instant kind. Look at those eyes, I would tell myself in the mirror. They droop at the corners. I have the eyes of my mother, but she used to draw herself fantastic cat eyes. They make me look sad, even when I smile. My face betrays me. It makes me a sad person.

If they could just be a little bit...

I monitored my face over the years like I used to watch my mother's bread. I would stare through the oven window, the heat on my face, and watch the dough rise—slowly, almost undetectably—until it developed a crack on top. This is the way lines, now, seemed to appear on my face.

The problem was, the faces in the magazines—these ads for skin creams, jewelry, or yogurt (it didn't matter what)—these faces never changed. They were different women from page to page, and yet the same. None seemed to stay around and grow older over the years, like I did.

What was to keep Gary by my side through the years? My aging body? Which, I might add, he was touching less and less.

It's not like I flipped through these pictures with wide, naïve eyes. I was a part of the empire, in a marketing firm for cosmetics. I debated whether "hot lilac" or "shimmering orchid" would sell better; whether glossy or matte was "in." I was one of the people behind these brands and faces in magazines.

When I made a consultation appointment Gary looked shocked.

"Haven't I been talking about it?" I said.

"I thought it might be a passing trend," he said. "Like quiche."

"What?"

"One week you were crazy about quiche, and then nothing."

"That's because quiche is fatty," I said.

I was too embarrassed to tell him that I've had secret dreams, plans, or more like: a secret image of myself, always lingering behind who I "really" was. This other person was more like me, I thought—it was who I would be if I could peel off my outer self. If I could "create" faces for companies and magazines, why not my own?

"Does that mean you won't take care of me?" I said.

"I didn't say—I..." Words didn't come easily to Gary.

Whereas I collected words and images. I knew the words *blepharoplasty* and *rhytidectomy.* I knew I wanted the forehead of the woman on page 26 and the eyes of the woman on page 7. I found myself—my "real" self—scattered amongst the pages.

I took two weeks off work. The day of the surgery I was in a pale blue hospital gown, lying next to a table of surgical instruments. The nurse beside me was writing something down.

"It really is like a hospital," I said.

The nurse took my blood pressure. The band clenched my arm and I could feel my blood pounding. She wrote some more in the folder.

"I didn't know I would be here, awake, with all those things ready," I said.

She glanced at the table of instruments and continued writing. I searched her face for the same fear of these instruments. Didn't she glance at them from time to time—so metal and hard, meticulously lined up in the order they would be used?

"The surgeon will be right with you," she said. The nurse smiled politely and left.

There were tweezers, long scissors, scalpels, and clamps. These were the things that would snip, pierce, and cut into my face. I took deep breaths, lying voluntarily next to these instruments. I thought of Gary, reading a book in a nearby café, waiting for me. I thought of the employee dinner I would be attending, in a few weeks, with my new face. It would all be worth it, I told myself. There was nothing about these instruments that should be new to me. What violence could they do that I hadn't done to my own body, over and over, in my mind?

The doctor and the anesthesiologist came. Was I ready? they asked. Yes. Was I excited? Yes.

They washed my hair with a disinfectant. They were both wearing light blue masks and gowns. We were all matching.

The anesthesiologist put an I.V. into the skin of my hand.

"Don't worry," he said, "you will be kept asleep through the whole procedure."

The doctor began to draw lines on my face with a purple pencil. I started to feel relaxed, my brain like white static. I imagined my face was blank and they were drawing me.

***

I spent a couple days in my bed, with bandages around my face. My upper body had to stay elevated with pillows, even through the night; I was constantly between a state of rest and unrest. Gary brought me soups to sip through a straw. I was blindfolded, but I could perceive him looking cautiously at my bandages.

I couldn't read the newspaper, which I used to do every morning, so Gary read it to me. As he read monotonously the world events, my mind wandered. I wanted to unpeel the bandages from my head and get back into the world. What would I look like in a few days, when all the swelling goes down?

I wore a big hat and sunglasses to my follow-up appointment. The doctor unwrapped me. As the gauze circled my head, unpeeling, I could feel my face getting lighter, coming closer and closer to the coolness of the air. This was it. He looked over my face, evaluated it.

"It's coming along," he said.

I got up from the paper-covered table and saw myself in a mirror.

"That can't be it..." I'm not sure if I said this aloud or not.

My eyelids were red and puffy. There were stitches on my face around my forehead and eyes. My skin looked tight and swollen, like a too-full water balloon. Tears appeared suddenly in my eyes, and I did not recognize the person in the mirror. She looked battered, and sewn together like a doll. She looked like someone who had been in a car wreck, whose face you see on TV, lying in the hospital bed.

"You really shouldn't judge the results right now," the doctor said, moving in behind me. "This is normal, considering you just had plastic surgery."

I sniffed, searching my face, some part to recognize. I could hardly believe the movements in the mirror were done by me. I searched the image and the image searched me.

"How long?" I said.

"It's hard to say," he said. "Everyone heals at their own pace."

The doctor gave me bandages and sleeping pills. I put more bandages around my face before going back to Gary in the waiting room.

"Still the mummy?" Gary said, continuing a joke we had started earlier.

"Yeah," I said, trying to give a laugh.

I was now the undead. I had to heal back into a human being. I ate soups and vegetables, and took vitamins, trying to help my new self emerge. I stayed home all day and by night I was not tired, so I took the sleeping pills. These came down on my brain like a black wall. In my sleep I was neither my old self or new self, a nonspecific me, which gave me peace until the morning.

I had my stitches removed. My face still felt tight, my eyes pulled up unnaturally high. The doctor said that over time this will "fall" and look more natural. I asked how long, exactly.

"It depends," he said vaguely.

"A month? A year?"

"It could be."

As the days passed, the redness and the swelling subsided. I studied my face in the mirror. Was I healing? I still had wide, pink scars, like auto routes on my face. I felt like a map. Most of all I hated the tightness in my face, the exaggerated angle of my eyes, as if stretched, adhered there. I examined my skin for signs of life. Where were the pores along my cheeks? Where did the gentleness in my skin go? For the first time in my life I wished my eyes would fall a little. I could use some smile lines.

Gary seemed suddenly timid around me, peering at me from the corner of his eyes.

"I feel weird," I would say. I didn't like his silence.

Gary said that he was waiting until I was completely healed before he told me what he thought.

"Why don't you just tell me I look horrible?" I said one night in the bedroom. I flung the bottle of sleeping pills across the room. It hit the wall and the pills scattered across the carpet. Gary frowned, looking a little bit afraid. He seemed to struggle with the desire to look at me and not look at me.

"No," he said. "I won't."

When he left the room I knelt down on the carpet to pick up each of the pills. I put three of them in my mouth to make sure I would sleep that night.

I searched through my closet for my box of old things. These were things that I had acquired over the years.

There were pictures. There I was, baby me, with rosy cheeks and soft little curls. Adults in the picture towered lovingly over me as if to say, *What an angel...*I looked at the camera matter-of-factly, untroubled. This was when the mirror was just a toy. Another picture of me, elementary school. My hair was straight, short, with a ribbon on the side. I was smiling. Was I smiling because I was happy or because they were telling me to smile? I couldn't tell. My smile was tricky like that. Another photo: my first makeover by mom. I looked part beauty queen and part clown. There were other photos, some of my ex and I, which I skipped over quickly. I found one of his notebooks, and flipped through it. What did he have to say? I found one page at the end, an ending maybe for one of his songs.

Hard to hear you dear,

Strange to feel you here

Cause you're not the beat

But the in-between

Most of it was just scribble and pages of chords, things I couldn't read or understand.

There were also clippings of my favorite magazine models. These I had collected over the years, and some were quite old. One face (advertising eye shadow) had a worn line across it, from where I had folded the page. And yet, she was fresh as a daisy! Still smiling! The colors, although they were no longer trendy by current standards, were still vibrant. Couldn't I age like that? When I was younger this woman struck me as some sort of timeless goddess. She was beautiful to me, but now I could estimate her age. About twenty, I thought.

I touched my face. Lately it had started to feel itchy everywhere. The surgeon said that this was a part of the normal process of healing. My new face felt like an irritant to my head.

I finally started leaving the house, which made Gary happy. He had been my nurse, helping to change the bandages around my eyes. He didn't like seeing things like wounds and stitches. He was awkward around me, at times; with the same awkwardness that he handled the blood-stained gauze. I promised myself not to blow up at Gary anymore. I would be nice. With big sunglasses on my face, I went out and took care of my own errands. I was afraid I'd run into people I knew; then I wondered if it would matter anyway. Would they even recognize me?

My time off work was almost up. I called my plastic surgeon, telling him that I was concerned about the tightness in my face and the angle of my eyes. He told me again that this would take more time.

"It's still too early to tell what the final results will be," he said.

"Is there any way to know what it will look like?" My voice sounded tight and small. I was not used to asking someone else what *my* face will be. I felt like a girl looking through the window of a tailor shop as they made her dress.

"It shouldn't be too different from how you looked when you were younger," he said.

I had a feeling this is what he told all his patients, that they would still be themselves, but younger. I hung up and wondered how he would even know what I looked like when I was younger. It's not like I brought a picture of myself. In fact, I brought a picture of someone else—someone from a magazine.

I wondered who I was healing into. It was not quite the girl from page seven. It was not quite me.

***

"Almost ready?"

Gary was already dressed and waiting. I was in the bathroom, which I had been for at least an hour.

"Almost," I called back, in an automatic way. I was staring with a wide eye at the mirror and applying mascara. I stepped back. I put concealer over the traces of scars, and eyeliner in an attempt to shape my eyes and counterbalance their upward angle. I had washed my face and re-started the whole thing several times.

I was trying to look more like myself. This was strange. I had a picture of my "old" face for reference, because seeing my new one so often had caused me to forget the details of my pre-surgery face.

We were going to the employee dinner. It was the first time my co-workers would see me since the surgery.

I stashed my bag of makeup in my purse for any last-minute touches I might have to do at the restaurant. We arrived late, which I didn't want—I wanted to avoid making an entrance.

As it turns out, this would have been impossible anyway. When Gary and I worked our way through the noisy restaurant and approached the table, everyone was talking amongst

themselves. There were about five tables lined up together. There were people I didn't recognize, which made me feel better. At one end, the waiter was trying to take drink orders.

I slipped into a seat. I was padded comfortably by strangers. I enjoyed their neutral gaze and their neutral conversation. I knew it was ridiculous to hide, that everyone would see eventually anyway—but I certainly did not want to take the initiative.

The woman from HR smiled at me. The recognition came when she asked me if I could please pass the basket of bread.

"Angie?" She stared at me. "Is that really you?"

Luckily, she was distracted by the waiter, who was trying to take her order. But this caused several other people to lift their heads.

"Wow," they said. "You look...really different."

This was the polite way out of any complement that would not be true. My face was itching and burning. I wanted to peel it off. I kept saying to myself: *Healing. Healing.* But I wasn't sure I believed in healing anymore.

More faces peered up from their plates. Eyes curiously looking over my new features, trying to recognize me.

I sat there. What I really wanted was to start over. Not only from before the surgery, but from the beginning. I went over photographs in my mind. Which one? I saw baby Angel. But what had I done to warrant that name? As a child, I had failed, I was sure, at becoming a real angel. Each picture that entered my mind was wrong. A girl smiling on cue. A girl with stolen lipstick. With the Queen of Hearts secretly in her pocket. With a man that would eventually leave her. With a business suit, standing below the company slogan: "*The Beauty You Deserve...*" I went through each of these images in my mind, sorting through them like a massive deck of cards. Only one could be me. Surely, I had to have my own version of the Queen of

Hearts. I just needed a vision, a deed, even a gesture, to say *yes*, here is me, half-hidden, perhaps, but I can see Angel beaming out...

I looked at Gary beside me and smiled. There was Gary. You just looked at him and thought, Yes—Gary. The dark, glimmering eyes. The round shape of his back as he sat. The way he paused to deliberate the best way to cut into his fish. Diagonal, or straight across?, you can almost hear him think. And then the quiet way he looks around, chewing his fish.

"Angie?" His eyes searched mine for something wrong. But I didn't want him to look at the eyes on my face.

And then, the worst happened.

I had my purse on the table, ready to do a "makeup check" in the bathroom. At that moment, somebody down the table asked me for the bread. Some treacherous part of my body, perhaps an elbow, knocked over my purse. My entire stash of makeup fell and scattered across the floor.

Every face at the table turned toward the noise. Conversations stopped. Several people seemed astonished at the quantity of makeup littering the floor from my purse. I rushed down to the floor and began collecting everything. My face was burning. Gary came beside me to help.

"No, go back, go back," I said. I started to hear my name spoken here and there across the table, like bubbles in water popping up to the surface.

"...Angie..."

"...Angel..."

"...looks so different..."

My name traveled along the current, further and further away from me.

I collected all the mascaras, powders, lipsticks, and pencils. I gathered up the brushes that had fallen out of their cases. I could feel the eyes on my back.

When I returned to the table my face felt clammy and raw, like an open wound. Everyone could stare now. I sat silently.

I had the pile of makeup in my lap. I gave a nervous laugh.

Then I started laughing for real. It was suddenly hilarious to me. All the makeup on the ground! The waiter stepping over my compact powder, trying to get an armload of dinner plates over to a table. Hilarious! I looked at the bunch of makeup.

"So much," I said. "What was I thinking?"

Gary gave an uneasy laugh, perhaps not sure *what* I was thinking.

A few people laughed as well and returned their attention to their meals. My meal was still waiting for me on the table. I took a bite of salmon. It was delicious! Why hadn't I noticed before?

I felt like I could be anybody.

"This is great salmon," I said. "Do you want to try it?" I looked around, suddenly wanting everyone to taste my dish. I passed it to Gary, who took it with some confusion.

"It's a good salmon," he said, chewing and passing it back to me.

We all left the restaurant together. The questions came.

"Did it hurt?"

"How do you feel now?"

I answered them calmly. My face felt tight, but behind it, I was laughing and crying.

"I feel beautiful!" I said. My eyes watered and stung for a moment, because I was lying. And Gary, beside me, squeezed my hand and knew I was lying. But somehow, in ways that I was not quite sure, I believed in the possibility of these words.

I thought of the Queen of Hearts as we drove home from the restaurant. For the first time I imagined her after the flash of the camera—she puts on clothes, puts a purse on her shoulder, goes home, washes off her makeup, eats dinner, maybe makes love, or maybe not.

I thought about what she might be doing nowadays. She must be about ten years older than me. Maybe I would see her one day. Hell, she could have been anyone in the restaurant, eating pasta, sipping water.

Would I recognize her?

The Abortion

"Sir?"

"Yes," said Eddie, "I'm still here."

"Thank you for holding. It'll just be another few minutes."

Eddie sat back in his chair, listening to the "easy jazz." He picked up a postcard on his desk and stared at it. Someone had accidentally mailed the postcard to his address:

Hey Chris!

It's amazing here. Next time you definitely got to come along. I'll drink a margarita for you.

Later,

Mel

The picture was an island beach, palm trees arching gracefully into the picture, like dolphins jumping out of the water. Everything was sunny and clear. The sand was smooth; it looked warm. In the bottom right corner in red letters it said FIJI. The on-hold music was pressed to his ear, but it sounded distant.

"Thank you for holding, Mr. Sabrosa," said the operator. "Can you still confirm your workplace as...Shoe Village?"

"Yes. Full time."

"Unfortunately, at this time, we cannot process your request for a credit limit increase."

"Is there a problem? I've been holding a job for three years now. Full time," Eddie said again.

"I'm showing some problems with your credit," said the operator. "Some bills—not paid in a timely manner."

"I paid every single bill I've ever received," said Eddie, "the second I was able to."

"Well, unfortunately, this did not correspond to the due dates on your bills," said the operator. She might have sounded snappy, except that she sounded too bored.

"Everything's unfortunate."

"Unfortunately, sir."

"Thank you."

"Have a good day, sir."

Eddie hung up. He looked at the picture some more, and tilted the card against the lamp on his desk. He imagined the sun on his face. The traffic from a distant freeway almost sounded like gentle waves crashing. The on-hold music still played in his head—a distant, piped-in noise.

***

His sister Annabel drove down from Seattle for the memorial. It was the 14th anniversary of their father's death.

They sat together in a café.

She looked thin, Eddie thought, although it may have been the contrast of the big sunglasses she wore. She had olive skin and dark hair, like himself.

"How've you been?" she asked, rubbing the side of the saucer. She hadn't yet touched the coffee.

"Not bad," said Eddie.

"Still working at the same place?"

He wanted to tell her about the vacation he had in mind; he wished he had the postcard to show her. But he felt it wasn't the right time—and anyway, he hadn't saved the money yet or made any concrete plans.

"Seems like you should be manager by now," she said.

"It doesn't work like that," Eddie said, although he wasn't exactly sure how it worked.

She tilted her head and stared at the table with her big eyes. It was hard to tell what made Annabel stare suddenly at things. He would always wonder if it was something that he had said, or something that she remembered, or if she was just letting the words NON-DAIRY CREAMER run repeatedly through her head.

"Do you think Mom will be all right this year?" Annabel asked.

"You know—as much as always."

Annabel gazed out into the street, without seeming to hear him. Whatever was on her mind, she wasn't telling him.

Eddie knew that Annabel didn't much remember their father. She was three, and Eddie seven when he died. He was shot on duty as a policeman. His mother never explained it in detail; when he was a child she said he was killed by some "bad people." He was a hero. At the funeral, there must have been hundreds of people. Eddie remembered wondering how so many people could know his father. He must have done some very good things. His mother always said so.

Every year, on the anniversary of his death, the family would come together for a memorial in their home. They would talk and have dinner together, and their mother would take out a giant framed photo of their father and place it on an easel in the living room. It was a picture of him, chest up, in his uniform. For the past few years, Eddie had started to notice how

young his father was in this photo. Eddie resembled him fairly closely. Probably he would look something like the face in this photo when he reached his thirties.

Eddie wondered what Annabel remembered when she saw the big photo of their father. Did it spark any memories? If not, did she feel guilty for not having any? Eddie had seen her one year, staring at the photo while the rest of the family and guests where sniffling into their handkerchiefs, into their private memories.

Eddie himself had select memories: learning how to fish, and learning how to shoot a gun. In each instance he had learned the proper way to do things. How to remove the hook without ripping the fish; how to measure it, and release the ones that were too small. At the shooting range, he listened to his father give directions (shouting and pointing, because they both had ear plugs) about how to stabilize yourself when the gun goes off.

"Like this," his father showed him. "One hand supports the other."

It was such a powerful explosion in his hand that he couldn't imagine any precision resulting from this gun. He saw later that he had made some holes in the target paper, but he couldn't make the connection that they were his.

Eddie watched Annabel at the table. She was rubbing the side of the saucer again with her thumb.

"So you're staying at Mom's until Sunday?" Eddie asked.

She nodded. Her long hair fell flatly on either side of her face, her hoop earrings poking through.

"What's wrong? Annabel?"

"I have a problem," she said, tilting her face down. "But I'm not sure you can help me."

Her lips and eyes were squeezed shut. She brought a hand uncertainly to her face.

"What is it?" he said. He half stood up, trying to lean over the table towards her. "Is it about the memorial?"

She shook her head. He knew that it wasn't, but he was bad at consoling people. He saw her wilted face and wished he knew the words that made people feel better. Whatever the problem was, he was going to do something about it. He would find a solution.

"I got pregnant," she said. She lifted her head finally to look at him. "I think I need to get an abortion."

Eddie fell back in his seat. She squirmed under his stare and he knew she didn't want him to look at her but he couldn't believe it.

She covered her face with her hands. "It happened last month," she said. "I need to do it soon. I need money."

They had sat for an hour longer in the café, talking about what happened, discussing the possibilities, only pausing when the waiter came by their table. Who was it? She didn't know really, just someone she met at a party. Couldn't she contact him, tell him, ask for money? She never saw him again.

"It's not possible to have this baby," Eddie said. It was half question, half statement.

She gave a defeated laugh. "You think, with Mom..."

"No."

She looked at him with searching eyes.

"I don't have the money yet," he said. "I'll find a way."

He sat planted in his chair while his thoughts flew around his head like frenzied moths.

"People can go anywhere to buy shoes," said Lyle. "They come to Shoe Village for the quality."

Lyle gave Jake, the new employee, a single pat on the shoulder, as if giving him time to absorb this statement.

"Right, sir!" Jake said. Jake was tall, with a pale face and red hair. Eddie had gathered over the past week that Jake enjoyed this kind of overstated enthusiasm; it was a kind of game to him, especially given that the boss believed it.

"So right now," said Lyle, "why don't you join Eddie and he'll show you the three most important measurements for the customer's perfect shoe."

Eddie looked up. His boss had already made Eddie train Jake at the cash register and with the inventory.

Lyle went to the back. The new employee stood beside Eddie. "Well," said Jake, "are you going to take your shoe off, or am I?"

Eddie looked around. There were no customers. "I don't care," he said.

Jake slapped his bare foot onto the bench beside Eddie. "Here," Jake said. "You can measure *my* foot."

Jake's foot was pale with a thin tuft hair on each knuckle. Eddie showed him the three "Golden" measurements for the perfect fit. Jake stared down at Eddie's face, saying "Uh-huh" to each of his points.

All Eddie could think about was Annabel's situation. What could he do? He had to make more money somehow. This would be more difficult now that Lyle added a second salesperson at all times to the floor. It cut into his commission. Lyle called it "teamwork."

He kept seeing the picture of Annabel sitting across from him. A frightening loneliness, almost like electricity, surrounded her.

He remembered one time—she was six and he was ten—when he was asked to look after his sister at the mall. This was about the time that his mother had started to give him "tasks," like walking to the market to buy a few groceries, or taking messages from phone calls.

"You're the man of the house now," she said. She often said that.

On this particular day his mother was going to a department store ("At the end of the mall, just there," she pointed), and she let Eddie take Annabel to the toy store.

The entrance had a normal door and a little door. Annabel laughed as she went through the little door, but Eddie was now tall enough to go through the big door, which he did. He had five dollars in his pocket, saved from his allowance. He wanted to buy a robot that he had seen on TV. This robot could "fold and morph into over twenty cool shapes!" He played with the store model for some time, but he could only find two shapes. The robot came in a plastic casing with the booklet of instructions inside. Once he bought it he could read through the book and figure out all twenty cool shapes!

Eddie brought it to the counter and paid for it with his five dollar bill. He received a receipt and several coins, which the clerk handed him routinely. He folded the coins carefully into his receipt.

He left the store, carrying a "Cosmos Toys" plastic bag with his purchase inside. He hurried to find his mother. He went right—but after a minute or so he realized he was making his way towards the wrong department store. He returned, heading straight. But that did not look right either. He found one of the mall directory maps and stared at the incomprehensible color-coded squares and numbers. Where were they supposed to go?

He realized suddenly that he had left Annabel.

He ran back, past all the stores, until he reached Cosmos Toys. His hand was sweating against the plastic of the bag. He searched the aisles and found her crying in the back of the

store, surrounded by three employees. One was crouched down beside her, and turned to look at him.

"Are you her brother?" she asked. They all stared at him.

Annabel would not look at Eddie. She was sobbing, sucking in little breaths of air, which made her head and shoulders jump, *one-two, one-two.* The hairs of her eyelashes were moist and clumped together.

She walked slowly with Eddie through the mall. Annabel wiped her eyes with her sleeve before meeting their mom in the department store. She never told their mother.

***

Money.

Money.

It was like a hunger, an instinctual panic in Eddie as he looked around his apartment. How could he get money? He surveyed his possessions. There wasn't much: basic furniture, a five-year-old desktop computer, an acoustic guitar (he was trying to learn). He went through faces in his mind, one by one. Friends. Family. No one to ask for one hundred, much less six hundred dollars.

His father once said, "Think about the resources you already have." This was when they were fishing, and had run out of bait. His father took a red handkerchief, the one they had been wiping their hands on, and cut off a thin, short strip. He tied it to the hook. It looked like a strip of flesh.

What resources did Eddie have? He had a job. But it wasn't enough. It didn't pay enough. What if he asked for a raise?

He had done this only once before, at the shoe store. There was a different manager, then. Eddie had asked: "Do you think I could get a raise?" The manager flipped through a couple pages on his desk and said, "Sure."

With Lyle, it was different. He enforced a dress code. Ties at all times. Dress shoes purchased from Shoe Village (twenty-five percent discount for employees). He assembled a thick binder of company policies. He invented slogans, or—as Eddie suspected—simply quoted lines from the company binder.

There was a right way to win with Lyle. Jake seemed to do it. But Eddie lacked the words. Where do you find words? Books.

He drove to a bookstore and found the "Careers and Success" section. He tilted his head and scanned for titles. "You: The Key to Success." "What Your Rich Neighbor Isn't Telling You." "Unlock Your Earning Potential." Eddie picked out "How to Ask for a Raise and Get Ahead!" He flipped through it. Lots of exclamation points, bold chapter titles, lots of lists. He stood in the aisle, took a deep breath, and started to read.

Eddie approached Lyle after his shift was over. He straightened his tie before entering the back office.

"Hi, Lyle? I was wondering if I could talk to you for a moment."

Lyle looked up at him from his desk with his tautly raised brow, motioning for Eddie to sit down.

Eddie sat, and tried to calm his mind.

Chapter 1. Highlight Your History.

"Well, as you know I've been working here for about three years, which I've really enjoyed so far."

Chapter 2. Formulate Your Request to Coincide with Company Goals.

"I really feel that a raise would better reflect my performance and help me stay motivated."

Chapter 3. Emphasize Your Accomplishments.

"My attendance record's been very strong, and I've also been helping more recently with training the new employees."

Lyle crossed his arms across his chest, and sat back in his chair. "Well, I'm not sure I would call it *training*," Lyle said. "You're helping out the team, like we all do."

"Well—sure, okay." Eddie dropped the point he was going to make, that training was above and beyond the duties of his job description.

"The thing is, Eddie," Lyle sighed. "I'm just not sure you're ready for a raise quite yet."

"Not ready?"

Lyle opened a binder on his desk and flipped to one of the pages. "To be honest, Eddie, your sales are just not that great. I mean, Jake just started a few weeks ago, and he's got almost double the amount of sales."

A flash of red struck Eddie's mind. He had seen Jake ring up customers as his own sales, after Eddie had done all the work. This happened on busy days, mostly, when Eddie was running to and from the back room or attending several customers. He thought that maybe, being new, Jake hadn't understood the sales etiquette between employees. But Eddie quickly started to realize that Jake was a little too calculating—he was doing it on purpose.

"I think maybe there's some misunderstanding, sometimes, about who had made what sales," Eddie said.

"It's not just about sales," said Lyle. "I'm not just looking on the page, but what's out there, on the sales floor. It's about being a part of the team, Eddie."

Lyle's eyes always seemed to bulge out of his face when he talked. He had a thin face with half-moon circles under his eyes. Something about his moustache and the way he talked made Eddie feel momentarily sorry for him.

"I'm still not seeing the team attitude," continued Lyle.

Eddie remembered words like "team player," "winning," and "goals" from the employee manual. It sounded like a sport, coming to work and selling shoes. They made it sound like a game where there are no losers.

"I'm sorry," said Eddie. "I'll really try." Eddie's hands clenched his thighs. Rule #5 in "How to Ask for a Raise and Get Ahead!" stated, "Whatever you do, avoid giving your reasons for wanting a raise—these are not relevant to your employer."

"Good," said Lyle. "For example, when customers come in, you're supposed to say, 'Welcome to Shoe Village.' Just try that, right now."

"Welcome to Shoe Village."

"Hi, welcome to Shoe Village!"

"Hi," said Eddie, "welcome to Shoe Village!"

"That's the kind of attitude that helps you earn a raise."

Teenagers came in, with giant Pepsis or bags of chips. Often they were passing time before a movie, since the new theater opened at the corner. These were the worst customers. They never bought anything. Eddie seemed to get stuck with all these customers—the ones that wanted to try three sizes of six different models, where he would have to take out all the shoe stuffing and thread the laces through all the holes, and then fit the shoe onto their foot.

This didn't bother him, normally, but it annoyed him now like hitting a series of red lights when he was late. Lyle was now putting two and sometimes three employees on the floor. Lyle

would pass by at times, surveying the floor, or sometimes he would just stand at the back. He always had one or two pens in his shirt pocket, ready to monitor and document. Eddie could feel his surveillance on him, and when this happened he would always be sure to say "Hi, welcome to Shoe Village!" to every customer. He even helped out Jake by going to the back for him to find some different shoe models. He was a Team Player. He would get a raise.

Would that be enough?

He strategized every day. He could picture Annabel going through her day, a secret worry in her eyes.

He had met with her again, to go over the possibilities.

"How are you?" he asked.

"I'm so mad," she said. "I'm so mad at myself."

Annabel's knuckles were pressed to her lips; she had dark circles under her eyes. He asked her if there were any other resources she had. No money? No insurance?

"You're the only person I can come to," she said.

"Please, just hang in there," Eddie said. "I'm going to help you."

Eddie had started to monitor Jake more closely, observe how exactly he managed to make over twice as many sales as him. He worked with the customers, it was true. "Can I get you another size in this?" Jake would say. "*Great!*" He had an enthusiasm that bordered on sarcasm, but he stopped just short of that line. But he did other things, too. One trick Jake had was to "interest" the customer in a pair of socks or one of the wallets they sold at the front counter. Then he would ring up the customer, Eddie's customer, with their box of shoes in hand, as his own sale.

Not today, Eddie thought, tightening the laces of a customer's shoe. But what was he thinking, anyway? The raise would be miniscule compared to how much was needed. Besides, it

accumulated slowly, hour by hour, one paycheck every two weeks. They didn't have weeks and weeks to spare.

"There you go, ma'am," said Eddie. "Take a walk around the store and see how that feels."

But maybe, thought Eddie, once he got the raise, he could call the credit card company and re-negotiate for a higher credit limit. He had a new, higher wage, he could argue.

"They fit great," said his customer, modeling them in the mirror. "I think I'll take them."

A man behind him asked him for a model in size nine.

"No problem," said Eddie. He sped to the back. "Nine nine nine nine..." None of the shoes were organized properly. What was so hard about putting the sizes back where they belonged? He snatched the model from the shelf and returned to the floor.

He looked around. It was a fairly busy day. He saw the woman he had helped walking out of the store, bag and purchase in hand.

Anger fumed in Eddie's chest. Another commission lost. Another point on his scorecard, lost.

"Did you find my nine?" the man said.

Eddie peered through the shoe display at Jake. He was by the counter, chatting with some customers.

"Sir...?"

Eddie walked over to the counter, the shoebox still in hand.

"Jake," said Eddie. "I think you've been ringing up some of my sales."

Jake and the two customers stopped and looked at him.

"Uh...no, bro. I don't think I have."

"Yes, Jake, you did. When I went to the back room."

"I don't remember ringing up any sales that weren't mine." Jake straightened his back and tipped his head to the customers as if to say, "Isn't *he* the asshole."

Eddie didn't care that there were customers. Jake grinned, his big teeth lined up like bowling pins that Eddie wanted to punch out.

"You did," Eddie said, "and that's not the only time."

Eddie's customer came up behind him. "Excuse me," he said, pointing to the shoebox in Eddie's hands. "I would like to try those on."

"Eddie," said Jake, "he wants to try those on."

Eddie gripped the shoebox.

"Eddie—"

Jake reached for the shoebox, trying to take it from him.

"Don't touch me!" said Eddie. "You can't just ignore all the rules. You're not going to mess up everything I'm working for."

Jake was looking over Eddie's shoulder at something. "Hey," he said, "I'm just trying to work as a team."

Eddie threw the box to the floor. "Like hell you are!"

Everyone was frozen, staring at Eddie. He was breathing hard; his fists were clenched; he wanted to do something with his hands.

Eddie turned his head. Lyle was standing there, staring at Eddie, arms crossed tightly across his chest.

Eddie felt it then. In this game there are losers and he had just lost.

Lyle asked Eddie to see him in his office. He looked hard at him and waited until the door was closed.

"That was unacceptable," said Lyle.

***

Eddie sat at his desk, at home, staring at the phone. It seemed the only connection to the outside world. Who could help? There had to be something, someone he could turn to.

How could he tell Annabel that she was on her own?

Eddie looked at the family photo. It was taken at one of the memorials, about ten years ago. His sister and cousins looked so young. He looked so serious, staring at the camera. Their mother was taller, bending over, trying to look at the camera, trying to stretch her arms and hold everyone. They scrunched their shoulders in, but she could not hold everyone.

The Fiji postcard was still propped up against his lamp, with its bright colors. He read the back again. *I'll drink a margarita for you.* These were voices from far away. He used to wonder who Mel was, who Chris was; why Chris didn't go, while the others did. But now he looked more often at the family photo. He looked at all the faces, one by one. They seemed to be huddled together, staring at him in the frame as though estranged on his desk. Even the serious eleven-year-old Eddie stared at him: *What are you going to do?*

The phone rang. It was his mother.

"Are you ready for the family dinner on Sunday?" she asked.

"Sure," Eddie said. "I'm ready."

"Is everything all right?"

"Yeah," Eddie said. He hesitated, wondering if he should tell her about being fired. "Everything's fine. How about you?"

"Good," she said. "I'm calling because your father's brothers are coming all the way from Pennsylvania this year, and I was thinking you could present them with something from the box of your father's things."

"Alright," Eddie said. He opened the drawer and looked carefully through the box. "What should I bring?"

"Anything you think is right," said his mother.

There were some pictures, a tie, some of the old police things—a badge, some certificates and awards, and his gun, which was now registered under Eddie's name, to be legal.

"Maybe I could bring the badge."

"Good," said his mother. "It will be nice to have everyone together. It's nice to see Annabel, isn't it?"

"Yes..." said Eddie. He had placed the badge aside on his desk and his stare was fixed onto the gun.

"Are you still there?"

"Yeah, Mom."

The gun was always in his drawer—a memorial, a relic. Now it meant something different to him. It struck him with solemn clarity that he would use it.

***

Eddie sped along the freeway and watched the dark hills on the side of the road pass by. He wanted anonymity. He drove until he believed that the people he passed (thinking about God knows what—maybe their plans for dinner) couldn't possibly be people he knew. The chunk of metal lodged in his belt made his stomach feel sick. Beside him on the seat was a ski cap, with two eyes that he had measured and carefully cut out. It seemed like a strange face and Eddie couldn't believe that he would be putting it on.

The black freeway rushed towards him. Sign after sign floated overhead. The names of the exits became foreign to him. Which one would he choose? There was something random and cruel, he felt, about this choice.

He was not so stupid as to go back to the shoe store and start anything. The whole thing was a thin paper memory in his mind; he did not care anymore. He thought about his mother and about Annabel, but even these thoughts were silent and dark in his mind, like the hills. Something propelled him; he was not sure what. He felt he was falling or flying into something new.

Eddie took an exit and brought his car slowly around the turn. He continued down a vacant stretch of road, lit by a few streetlights. He saw a florescent square sign ahead—a chain liquor store. There were hardly any cars in the area. Eddie parked across the street and turned off the engine. The car cut off with a sudden silence and seemed to wait for him, like a horse pulled to a stop, wondering what Eddie would do next.

Eddie grabbed the ski mask and gripped the door handle for a moment. Let's make this fast, he thought. A simple in and out.

His heart pounded as he crossed the street and he wondered if his legs would support him. The ski mask enveloped his head. He entered and the candy and rows of sodas looked bright and small.

"Money," Eddie said to the clerk. He did not want to talk much and it pleased him that the gun could do all the talking.

The clerk put his hands up and looked at Eddie with wide eyes. He had skinny arms that came out of his polo shirt in right angles.

"Let's go, in a bag," said Eddie.

The clerk fumbled for a paper bag and for the button that opened the register. It slid open with a cheerful *ding!* The clerk had a thin black moustache that looked carefully grown and out of place on his young face. He flipped up the plastic holders and collected the bills into the bag. In the next instant he was holding out the paper bag to Eddie. It was almost like fast food.

The mask began to warm Eddie's face and remind him of his anonymity. He opened the bag and did a quick visual count of the money. There couldn't have been more than fifty dollars—a couple twenties and smaller bills; the clerk had even thrown in some quarters. Fifty dollars wasn't enough.

Eddie lifted his gun. "Where's the safe?"

The clerk's face seemed to crumple with despair. "I don't know the combination," he said. "Please."

Then, in a fearful, automatic way, the clerk glanced towards the back room.

"Who's back there?" said Eddie.

The clerk looked at him, shocked. He swallowed. "My boss," the clerk said.

Eddie signaled with his gun and then both went back. The clerk scanned the room, confused. Eddie found a man crouched behind a tower of soda bottles.

"My arms are in the air," said the man. "See."

The man stood up with some difficulty. He was tall, in his forties; he wore a button-up shirt tucked into khaki pants.

"Is there a phone in here?" Eddie asked. "Did you make any phone calls?"

The man shook his head. Eddie frisked his pockets for a cell phone. "You're going to open the safe," he said. "Go."

"Listen," said the man. "I'm not going to argue with you here. But I just wanted to let you know that there's not that much in that safe."

The man brought his hands in front of him, using them like a team, trying to negotiate. Eddie, out of some habit, noticed the man's shoes. They were some kind of faux snake skin.

"All I'm saying is," the man continued, "you can leave right now, we won't call the police. We can forget everything happened."

"Shut up," said Eddie, pointing the gun at the man's chest. "All you have to do is open the safe."

The man was protecting his money, Eddie thought. His eyes had some sort of dimpled quality to them, as though they were always smiling. He looked like a man in a commercial. Eddie backed away to check on the store. No one was there. This was still taking too long. Eddie gripped the gun tighter. He didn't like the feel of his sweat on the metal.

"You've already got what, fifty, sixty dollars? That will get you what you need, won't it?" The man took a slow step towards Eddie. "I mean, that's a pretty decent amount of crack or meth, or whatever you do."

The clerk's eyes moved back and forth between Eddie and the man. The man brought his hands forward, trying to calm him, stepping towards Eddie.

"I mean—"

"Stop," said Eddie. His face was hot behind the mask. He pointed the gun towards the ground in front of the man.

One hand supports the other...

"Don't get yourself in trouble—"

"Stop," said Eddie. He prepared to shoot a warning shot in the man's path.

The man continued to move towards Eddie, seeming not to hear him. "Why don't you just live with what you've got?"

The man took another step and Eddie pressed the trigger, the sound exploding through his brain. The man yelled and his body crumpled, one foot coming up. Eddie saw snake skin and blood.

He ran. He hurdled through the doors and into his car. He peeled out and sped away, away, eating up the road ahead of him. Eddie drove without even knowing the right direction.

He pressed on the gas; he was sweating, especially his face. Eddie managed to get back on the freeway. He checked his mirrors for cars, but it was nearly deserted. It was late. The poles along the freeway passed rhythmically. The lights spotlighted him overhead, one by one.

The paper bag of money was beside him on the seat. Somehow, he had kept it with him, although he did not remember this. It seemed unreal, this bag. It was so small and pathetic, like a lunch bag, but it filled his car with crime, with kidnapping.

He knew he would not give this money to Annabel. He couldn't imagine giving her the contents of this bag, or even presenting himself in front of Annabel. Eddie imagined the memorial and all of his family on the coming Sunday. It seemed like a far-away picture.

His head felt muffled and he realized that he was still wearing the mask. He pulled it off his head. His hair was damp and sticking to his neck and face. The air of the car was cool on his skin. He had the strange feeling that he had just died, and had just been born, both at once.

Continental Drift

I bring my poster board to the kitchen, where my mom is chopping onions.

"Mom," I say, putting the poster board across the table. "I have to do a family tree for school."

She stops chopping and looks at me; her eyes are watery from the onions. "Oh?"

"Will you help me?" I say. "I get extra credit if I include pictures."

I smooth the poster board with my hand. I started the tree this morning. I'm at the bottom, with a picture that I cut out from my old high school I.D. card. Above my small head is a huge white sky of page. I imagine the faces that will fill this space. I want a giant tree where I can follow the lines between people with my finger. It makes me think of a game we used to play in elementary school: *Can you draw this picture without lifting your pencil?*

My mother is looking down again, chopping the onions. She's not chopping them so much as throwing the knife on top of them.

"Amber, I'm not sure I can be much of a help," she says. "You know the family doesn't keep in touch."

It's true that our relatives live all over the country, but I don't understand why no one ever talks, or even writes—aside from a signature at the bottom of a Christmas card.

"Sending you warm thoughts and holiday wishes

For this special time of year!"

Hallmark always had such nice things to say. I would look at the signature and wonder if whoever had sent it read the card and meant any of these things. I would ask my mom, "Who is this from?" and she would usually have a one or two-word answer, like "an uncle." Most people put cards somewhere, posting them on the wall or standing them on the table. But my mother

placed these cards wherever she had opened them, in a stack with the ripped envelope. She would keep them in this stack for some time, not displaying them, not throwing them out. Nothing seemed to happen with this pile of cards. So one year I took them and started a kind of collection. I looked at their signatures and at the addresses, handwritten on the envelopes, as if one day I could collect enough to understand the senders of these cards. I'm pretty sure my mom doesn't know about this collection. I have a feeling she shouldn't find out. She would give me a sceptical look, like she's doing now.

"But you *know* them, like their names and their numbers, right?" I say, leaning onto the counter with my arms.

Nothing.

"My assignment is due next week." I sigh, casting my eyes down.

"Alright," she says slowly. "You know your grandma Marge, and your grandpa Howard..." She goes through a few more names, which I write down in my notebook. It's a good start. I can see my tree growing already. We probably have pictures of them, which I can copy and paste onto my board.

I go through some of the Christmas cards in my head. Whose signatures do I remember? "What about Rose?"

"That's the wife of your great uncle," she says. She wipes her eyes with her sleeve. "She's not related to us."

In my room I file through the pictures of Christmas trees and winter scenes, checking the signatures. Rose. Every year. What I discover is that when the years go back further another name appears beside hers on the card: Harold. He must be my great-uncle. The address shows that Harold and Rose live in Belview, just an hour or so away by car. Maybe I could stop by.

I sneak into my mom's room and flip through her agenda for phone numbers. Where's the "Distant Relatives" section?

I grab a pen and take down the number. When I stand up my mother is in the doorway. She still has her apron on; there is a small piece of onion stuck to it.

"What are you doing?"

"I just wanted one phone number," I say. "I wanted to ask Harold and Rose if I could visit. Just for my project." I expect a lecture about being considerate, asking before going through people's personal belongings, blah blah blah…

My mom eyes the paper in my hand.

"Let me talk to her first," she says. She wipes her hands over her apron. "Just to let her know. It's been so long since we last talked."

"Okay," I shrug. "Do Rose and Harold know a lot about the family history?"

"I wouldn't say so," she says. "Harold is dead."

"Oh."

She leaves and I know I won't get her to tell me any more. I wait until I hear some chopping in the kitchen start up again, and then I call my grandparents.

I ask them how they are, they ask me how I am, and my, it's been a while, hasn't it...I tell them that I'm doing a project for school.

"What kind of project?" my grandmother asks.

"A family tree."

I get the names and dates of their parents and go back as far as I can. She corrects some of her dates and apologizes.

"I'm not sure how much help I can be," she says.

"So Harold is your husband's brother?" I say. "Can I ask how he passed away?"

"Oh, dear," said my grandma. "Well, Harold passed away...of cancer. It was very hard on all of us."

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"Drive safely," says my mom. "And Amber...don't push Rose too hard. She's getting old. You know how you can be."

"What?"

"You know, with all the questions," she says. "Just take it easy."

I sigh. She shouts "I love you!" as I close the door of the car. My mom seems to toss me these words, nervously, when I never expect it.

I didn't really inherit the nervousness of my mother. Or my father. When my parents divorced, my father jumped from city to city, sometimes living in other countries, as if each place was like a pan on the stove that slowly heated up, and one day became too hot.

I reach Belview in a little under one hour. It's a hilly, tree-lined area with houses sitting patiently in the shade.

Something about the delicacy of the name "Rose" does not prepare me for the large-framed woman who answers the door, squinting at me through a cloud of cigarette smoke. "Amber?"

"Yes, that's me."

She gives a grunt or some kind of ironic laugh, looking me over through the dissipating cloud.

"Your mother called me," she says, leading me through the house. It has floors and ceilings of wood, which reminds me of camp when I was younger. It even feels quiet and dim like the camp cabins, when they are not filled with children.

We enter the living room and she gets us glasses of water from the kitchen. Now that we are seated she asks me what brings me here.

"Information," I say. The direct method seems best here. "I have a class project."

"What are you studying?"

"Anthropology," I say. "Kinship and Genetics."

"And what do you want to become with that?"

"I don't know what I want to become."

The pictures on the mantelpiece stare at me from across the room.

"Who are all those people?" I ask, as Rose puts out her cigarette in the ashtray.

Her gaze is drawn to the pictures with a sudden tenderness. She pushes herself off the couch and walks over to them. I follow with my notebook.

Rose is surprisingly helpful. She goes through them one by one, tilting her chin towards each photograph to study them.

"This one is your great-uncle Harold," she says. "My husband. Your grandfather's brother."

It's a photo from when he was younger. He has a neatly centered part and circle glasses. Everything looks neat and smooth in this black-and-white photo. I remember the picture of my grandfather and try to find similarities between them. They have the same smart-looking eyes.

"What did Harold do for a living?" I ask.

"He was a geologist," she says. "We were both geologists."

The next picture is an older Harold. He has thick, grey hair (the part is long gone), and he is smiling, like he had just been playing around. This makes sense because there's a little girl in the picture as well, about four years old.

"Who's that?" I ask, pointing to the girl.

Rose's face looks heavy. "Just a child."

"Your child?"

"No, not my child. We didn't have children," she says. She does not say why and I do not ask. I look at the girl some more. She has blond hair and is wearing a light blue sweater with a pattern of little flowers. She's also laughing like she'd just played a game. I clutch my notebook, wanting to write something. There's something about her that seems familiar, but I can't say what.

Rose seems to perceive my frustration. "Come," she says.

We go downstairs into a dusty room with shelves of rocks. The rocks are evenly spaced out and each have their own label. She tells me this was their geological collection.

"To understand the story of your family, first understand the story of rocks," she says, picking out a book from one of the shelves.

"Rocks?"

She sits me at the small wooden desk and puts the book in front of me. GEOLOGY. She opens the book to page one.

"If you want to know about your origin," Rose continues, "start from the beginning."

She gives a coarse laugh and I wonder if she is playing some kind of joke on me. She signals me to read.

Page one.

GEOLOGY examines the history underlying the present. Consider the continents of the earth. Wegener's theory of Continental Drift (1912) proposed that the continents have not always been fixed in their present locations. Wegener was intrigued by the similarities of fossil species found on the coastlines of South America and Africa, now separated by the Atlantic

Ocean. He contended that these distant lands were once one continent, "Pangaea" (Fig. A). As Pangaea broke up, certain species became isolated, and as a result the plants and animals evolved in separate ways. The land masses continued to drift apart from each other over thousands of years. At one point volcanic eruption reunited South America with the North American continent in a land bridge. Other geological forces shaped, and continue to shape, the land masses as we know them today.

The page ends there. There is a "Fig. A" below, a picture showing how the continents may have fit together. This blob of land seems strange and impossible to me.

Rose is peering at the rocks along the shelves, her hands clasped behind her back. "Rocks are part of a story," she says. "It's just a very long one."

I peek at my watch. I'm not sure I'll have time for this very long story of rocks. I should be home for dinner soon. Rose picks one out and lets me look at it. It's pretty much an ordinary rock—grey, coarse, hard.

"It's nice." I don't know what else to say. Rose stands beside me and I feel like I should have a more insightful comment. But how can I understand the "story" of a rock? It doesn't tell me anything.

"Lithic sandstone," she says. She leans against the window sill and rubs her forehead like a genie lamp, coaxing out memory. "Many rocks are actually fragments of other rocks. This specimen is roughly 100 million years old."

"What?" I place it gently on the desk. "I feel like I shouldn't even be touching this."

"When we talk about rocks, we often talk billions." Rose picks it up, putting on the glasses hanging from her neck. "Sometimes I like to think about its story. Can you imagine a

rock in a 13-million-year cycle, being buried sixty kilometers deep, being forced to the surface again?"

Her eyes seem magnified now that she has her glasses on. I want to say that I can imagine these things, but I can't. I can't understand a million years. It's like when my mom throws a pencil suddenly across the room and holds her head in her hands. I never know exactly where her mind is. That's what it's like to hear the word "billion."

"This was Harold's favorite rock," Rose says. She dusts off the place on the shelf and gives a deep, raspy cough. "So, there's your family history for today."

We go back upstairs. I ask if it would be possible to borrow a photo. Rose has lit another cigarette, letting the smoke drift out of her mouth. I want the picture with Harold and the little girl.

"You can't take that one," Rose says, guessing my thoughts. "Or, at least—you have to be very careful."

Perhaps it was the last photo taken of Harold. I thank Rose for the visit and promise to return the photo. "And...I'm really sorry about Harold," I say. "What kind of cancer was it?"

"He had stomach cancer," says Rose. "But he didn't die of stomach cancer."

"Then...what?"

Rose has one arm crossed tightly under her chest, and the other propped up, holding her cigarette.

"Suicide," she says.

"Really?" I say. "I mean—I'm sorry. Did the other family members also know this?"

"Of course," says Rose, brushing some ash from her dress. "Unless they were sleeping through the service."

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As I drive home my brain feels like a soup of information, with things floating around that don't quite make sense. My trip back is about sixty kilometres. The houses rush past me on either side. They could be rocks; I could be going underground, deeper and deeper into the earth.

At home I check the backs of my mom's pictures, trying to find some that correspond to the date of the Harold-and-girl photo, about six years before I was born. But there are virtually no photos during these six years.

In fact, there is only one: a picture of my mother, sitting on a swing set. It's a shot from behind; she does not seem to know that her picture's being taken. The swings on either side of her are hanging silently. She is stooped over, and her face is turned so we can almost see her profile. Perhaps a few moments later she turns fully and sees the picture-taker.

So where are all the other pictures? Were there any to begin with? I have so many other questions, but I know my mom won't answer them. She'll say, "I don't know, honey," like some parents do when their kids ask too many math questions.

I flip through the rest of the pictures. I find pictures of me when I was a little kid. I have the Felps' jaw, a little bit long. There you can see the small ears of my father's side, and the long, smooth hair of my grandmother.

I keep flipping, and at one point I stop, and turn the page back. There I am, about five years old, sitting at the table. I am looking at the camera, a bit sheepish and unsure, as if suspecting that my mom wants me to eat my vegetables. But the sweater I'm wearing is the same sweater that the little girl is wearing in Rose's photo.

Rose gives me tea, as if to get me to sit down, and stop looking at the picture.

"It's the same sweater," I say. "Look, light blue, with the same pattern of little flowers."

Rose does not seem to share the same sense of discovery. She sighs and lowers herself onto the couch, leaning heavily onto the armrest.

"I know it's the same sweater," she says.

"Well, then—she's related, right? How is she related?"

Rose coughs for a minute, a dry chronic smoker's cough, but I can't stop my own questions.

"Whose child is it?" I ask, moving over to the couch. "Who gave me the sweater?"

"Your parents," she says. Rose is weary from coughing.

"My parents gave me this girl's sweater?"

"No," says Rose, looking up at me. Her face has curving lines that drop in some sort of pattern from her eyes. "The child belongs to your parents."

My body freezes, my mind freezes.

"That picture, over there. That's your sister," Rose says. "Or was your sister. She was hit by a car before you were born."

"What...?" I say. "My mother never—"

"Oh, no, your mother would have never."

I turn suddenly on the couch. No! That's not real, that's not possible.

My parents had a child…?

I see the small face in the photo, and I feel a strange empty sick feeling like something inside me has been amputated. As if someone had just taken out my liver or kidney, and put it on the mantelpiece, and now I can see it across the room.

"Your great-uncle was very fond of her, especially since we did not have any children," Rose says. "He was devastated when Lena died. Only four years old."

Rose refills my tea—I don't remember drinking all of it. She begins telling me how my mother was traumatized by Lena's death, and how she refused to move anything in the house or discard any of little Lena's things. Then, a year later, she discovered she was pregnant. She had another baby girl.

"And then," says Rose, "it was like she never had the first child. But she still dressed you in Lena's clothes, and you played with Lena's toys. You even looked like her, with soft blonde hair. Only no one would say so. At Christmas-time, your great-uncle Harold said so, and your mother couldn't take it. She almost ripped her hair out saying there never was any Lena, to stop saying so...she struck out, like a cornered animal. But that was the only time. Later she was calm. She was normal."

"Normal?"

"I should say 'quiet,'" Rose says. "The whole family became quiet. Hushed."

"What about Harold?"

"Harold was already dying," Rose says. She takes her glasses off and rubs her eyes. "So one day, he cut his own throat."

"What?" It's hard to think that the young Harold, with the neatly centered part and round glasses, will grow older and do a thing like that.

"He didn't want anyone to sniffle about how he was old and what a shame," says Rose. "After Lena died, he became worse and worse. He found it impossible to talk to your mother anymore."

"But didn't he have you? Why would he cut his throat?"

"He wanted to mark himself in a way that no one could cover up."

"Impossible," I mutter. I don't even know what particular thing I find impossible anymore. I touch my face, automatically, as if it weren't real.

"I'm sorry," says Rose. "I hope you can still do your homework assignment."

I laugh, despite everything, and I hear my own voice like in a strange dream.

***

I sit at my desk and look over the faces in my family tree. We are all in this web, connected by lines, but I wonder if it changes anything that these lines are there between people. At the same time they seem like arrows, pointing across history.

Am I a designation?

There seems to be something missing, invisible lines that would jump around, maybe, telling a different story. I know that it will be impossible for me to show this story. So for the meantime I take my ruler, pencil and glue stick and put together what would be called a family tree. I cut out the picture of Lena from a copy of Rose's picture. I paste it beside mine, and draw a line between us.

Somewhere in that brain of Lena's were all the moments of a life before I was born. Do we share any of the same memories? Did she eat mashed potatoes the way my mother makes them, with the gravy mashed into them? Did she peek through the same hole in the garden fence, feeling like she could see into another world? Did she learn how to comb her hair "bottom to top," to avoid tangles?

And did I repeat all these things, just as my sister had done? When I wore Lena's sweater and laughed just the way she did, was my mom pleased?

I discover that my mother is standing behind me.

She isn't horrified or angry like I expected. Instead she studies the face of Lena, her knuckles to her lips.

"I just wanted a nice life for all of us," she says after a moment.

"I know." I look over all the circle-pictures of faces. We all look like fruit hanging in the tree. "Mom, was I ever like her?"

She puts a hand on the back of my chair, holding it tight. "You were sometimes like her, but always like you."

On my desk is a rock that Rose let me take home. I didn't choose the sandstone, because I knew that it was Harold's favorite and she should keep it. I picked a different rock. It looks ordinary enough, which I like, because I like to imagine its story. It's a very long one.

If I were a rock, I think I would be a big rock by the sea, on the edge of the land. I would feel the water toss and flow around me, and it would remind me of something distant, something familiar across the ocean.