4-20-1993

A Collection of Short Stories

Charlotte Miller
Western Michigan University, camiller17@yahoo.com

THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE

CERTIFICATE OF ORAL EXAMINATION

Charlotte Miller, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in 1990, has satisfactorily completed the senior oral examination for the Lee Honors College on April 20, 1993.

The title of the paper is:

"A Collection of Short Stories"

Prof. Jaimy Gordon
English

Prof. Robert Haight
Kalamazoo Valley Community College

Prof. Michael Barrett
English

Contents

Char Miller

Syncopation

I can only stand to be in the living room because snow is starting to stick to the ground. I curl in one corner of the flowered sofa, reading the horoscope and drawing devil horns on Ann Landers. My mom knits a shawl and snowflakes make feathery piles on the windowsill. This fall I felt pale and sick sitting in here watching red and orange leaves spun bright tornadoes outside. I spent all my time in the basement, plunking at the piano, even though I quit taking lessons. Fall used to be a time for me to be outside all the time, especially when my dad raked leaf piles. I'd dive into them before he could stuff them into black garbage bags. The leaves covered our yard this year. Snow gives me a good reason to stay inside.

Brutus is leaning on my mom's legs. He watches her needles click back and forth. A strand of yarn brushes his nose and his paw darts out to snag it. My mom tugs it away from him, then pushes him off the couch.

"Here, Brutus," I call, snapping my fingers. "Come sit by me. Why'd you push him, Mom?"

"I didn't push him," she says."My leg was cramping from him leaning on it."

Brutus ignores my snapping and shakes himself before walking out of the room. I draw a moustache on Miss Manners, listening to the TV in the next room where Ned is watching Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Every few minutes he yells "Awesome!"

"Are we still going to get a Christmas tree, Mom?" I ask. She looks over at me, her needles still.

"Well, of course we are," she says. "There's no reason not to have Christmas." She smiles a little before starting to knit again. I stare at the pink plastic coffee mug on the table beside her. Since vacation started her coffee smells like cherries instead of the bourbon that made my eyes water. I take a deep breath, making the cherries tickle my nose.

The living room is pale yellow. I think that's why it felt so empty and dark in the fall. The winter light makes the yellow seem warm.

"Actually," my mom says, setting her knitting down. "Maybe we should do some shopping today. Ned needs some new boots. What do you think?" she looks at me, taking a long drink of her coffee. "Want to walk into town?"

"Can we get Christmas lights?" I ask, fiddling with a tassel on a throw pillow and watching her fold her knitting into a plastic Wal Mart bag.

"We'll see" she stands up."Help Ned get his coat on, would you?"

The three of us climb carefully down our icy front steps. Ned runs ahead of us on the sidewalk so he can slide on the ice. I grab branches of bushes heavy with snow and pump them up and down. White flies everywhere and some lands on my cheeks, stinging cold. Mom is wrapped in one of her shawls; a bright red one. Flakes cling to the yarn and she shakes them from her hair.

We have to walk through two blocks of houses before we get to the main street where the shops are. I look at the houses as we

walk by, seeing that every one of them has two cars parked in the driveway. Men are outside in a lot of the yards, dressed in bright ski jackets and turning red-faced from heaving snow out of their driveways with big shovels. I think about our unshoveled driveway with one scratched-up station wagon in it and dive into the snow, waving my legs and arms to make an angel.

"Amelia," mom sighs, without stopping. "Don't be silly. You're twelve-years old for God's sake."

For a minute I lie there, trying to catch snowflakes on my tongue, but they land near my eyes, making me flinch. After scrambling to my feet, I brush snow off my shoulders before catching up to my mom. She looks tired and her lips are chapped beneath the pink lipstick she wears.

The main street of town is crazy with red and green and lights. Red ribbons flap on the lampposts and gold lights twinkle in all the store windows. The giant snowman is in his usual place at one end of the street, smiling even though I can see he has a crack running down his middle. At the other end of the street is the Christmas tree, covered with tinsel and silver balls. The tree and snowman look like they're in a face-off.

We stop at the General Store. Bells jingle when we open the door, and the wooden floor is swirled with slush. "Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer" is on the radio, sung by a man who sounds like the notes are being punched out of his belly. Ned stamps his feet to get the snow off his boots. Mrs. Thomas comes out from the backroom, carrying a roll of scotch tape, and smiles when she sees

us. Her hair is fluffed and curly, like Mom's used to be.

"Oh, hello, Penny. It's good to see you," she says, watching Ned as he runs over to a model train that chugs around green plastic mountains. "Don't touch that, dear."

"Hello, Louise," Mom takes her gloves off and walks over to the counter. "Amelia, help Ned pick out some boots, will you?"

I nod, but Ned is busy pawing through the "Just $1.00" bin so I walk over to the shelves full of Christmas decorations, running my fingers through a package of icicles that someone had torn open and feeling them slide around my hand.

"I'm so sorry about you and Charles," I hear Mrs. Thomas say quietly to my mom. "It must be terrible to go through this during the holidays. How are you doing?"

"I'm managing," my mom says.

"When did you talk to him last?"

"I haven't talked to him at all."

"Oh," Mrs. Thomas says, her voice sounding surprised. I turn away from the shelf and look at them. "It's been a month. I'd have thought he'd at least let you know where he went."

"I'm trying not to think about it, Louise. I came to get Ned some boots. He's nearly barefoot."

"I'm so sorry," Mrs. Thomas shakes her head. My mom suddenly looks wrinkled and cold, leaning against the counter with her shawl hanging limply around her shoulders and her hair falling out of its barrette. I wrap my arms around my back, even though the heat is roaring, but even when I squeeze as hard as I can I don't feel

warmer. I feel numb.

My mom and Mrs. Thomas take Ned to the back of the store where the boots are and I walk over to the display of ornaments, thinking about the boxes of different colored balls sitting in our attic at home. We can't have tinsel or icicles because Brutus chews on them and gets sick. I stare at the row of silver stars, wondering how it would feel to stand on our creaky ladder and balance one on top of the tree like my dad did last year.

Ned clomps over to me in a pair of shiny green boots. He tries to karate chop my arm.

"Hiiii-Yaaaa!" he shouts. "You're dead, Shredder!"

"Those boots look stupid." I tell him.

We leave the General Store, a large brown bag under Mom's arm. The snow is packed on the sidewalk, and crunches under my feet. We walk past the Warren's toy store, and Ned stops,mashing his nose flat against the window.

"A train!" he shouts, seeing the model train in the toy store window. This one has an engine that spouts steam when it whistles."Can we go in?"

"Oh, all right," Mom says. "But we're only looking."

I hear Adam Warren playing his trumpet in the apartment above the store when we walk in. Mrs. Warren waves at us, offering my mom a cup of tea and offering Ned and me candy canes. I take a green candy cane, then stand still and listen. The sound of the trumpet dances into the store, then hits a wrong note and dies. I wait for it to start again. Adam plays in the high school orchestra; he was

first chair when he was a freshman. When our class went to the see school orchestra's fall concert, I saw Adam play a Vivaldi concerto. He stood on the wooden stage,dressed in black and red, and the yellow stage lights poured over him, making his trumpet shine. I closed my eyes the whole time he played. It was like being able to hold onto a flying dragonfly. When the melody fluttered curliques I could laugh and when it twisted dark angry spirals I could still touch the thin pale wings and feel them singing and vibrating.

When it was over, everyone around me dropped their feet down from the seats in front of them and started pulling their coats on. The dusty smell of the auditoruim reached my nose. As I looked at Adam standing on the stage with sweat on his forehead, the thought of walking back to the elementary school through the dry leaves and cold sunshine instead of climbing onstage to touch his soft sweater made me wrap my scarf tightly around my neck. I thought I was going to freeze to death.

The sound does not start again, and I look around the store. It is packed with dolls, stuffed animals,toy guns, puppets,and board games. Christmas lights line the walls and wink gold light. There is a piano in the far corner with a small Christmas tree on top of it, decorated with small gold ornaments shaped like musical instruments. I sit at the bench, thinking about my old piano teacher Mrs. Hoffman, who told me my fingers were too thin and weak to play. I touch the middle A key, the central note that the whole orchestra wound itself around while it tuned before the concert,

thinking how clear and steady it would sound.

"Amelia, don't play with that," Mom tells me, and I sigh and slide off the bench. Ned, chewing on the candy cane Mrs. Warren gave him from the bowl on the counter, is showing her all the toy guns he wants for Christmas. I start to walk over to the stuffed animals to see what kind of bears they have, then Adam walks in wearing a black hat with a purple feather in it. I step back close to the piano.

"Bye, Mom," he calls to Mrs. Warren. "I'm going to lunch."

"Don't eat too much," Mrs. Warren says. "We're having a big dinner."

Adam walks past the stuffed animal bin. My voice feels watery but I manage to yell "Wait!". He turns, looking around, and I take a step away from the piano.

"I heard you play at the fall concert," I say. He sees me and he smiles.

"Did you like it?" he asks. I nod, my mouth feeling too clumsy to say anything else. I think his coat looks smooth. He looks like a dark swan gliding calmly through the blur of toys and blinking lights.

"You look young for high school," he says, grinning.

"I'm in sixth grade," I explain. "Our class came over to see you. I used to play the piano. Can you play?"

"A little," he says. "Why'd you quit?"

"My teacher told me I couldn't play." I say. My voice is a whisper. It gets caught in my dry throat. "She'd only let me play

etudes and scales."

Adam leans against the stuffed animals, still smiling at me. I hang on to the edge of the piano with one hand.

"How long did you try?" he asked.

"It felt like forever. I quit this fall."

A group of guys walk into the store, in jeans and ski jackets. One of them yells at Adam to hurry up. Adam picks up a teddy bear that has fallen out of the bin.

"Maybe you should reconsider quitting," he says to me. "Have a good Christmas."

Mom and Ned have started for the door. I glance around, see nobody is looking, and quickly snatch the little gold trumpet ornament off the tree on the piano and shove it into my pocket, feeling the warm spots on the metal that were close to the lights.

We walk home, past all the neatly shoveled driveways. Our house is dark and Mom shivers as she opens the door. Brutus sits on the windowsill, twitching his tail, and Mom sets the General Store bag on the floor before grabbing a coffee mug from the cupboard. Ned runs into the den and I hear the TV clicked on.

"We didn't get Christmas lights or anything," I tell her, stomping snow off my boots on the rubber mat in the doorway.

"Well maybe tomorrow," she says. "I'm very tired, I need a nap. Would you please keep Ned quiet for a few hours?"

I scoop Brutus off the windowsill and carry him out of the room. He squirms and I feel his claw in my shoulder so I drop him. The microwave pings and Mom takes her coffee into the living room.

I peek in the door and see her take a long drink before stretching out on the couch. The smell of cherries pricks my nose.

I watch her mouth start to hang open and her breaths get deep and slow. The pale light dims her hair until I think I see it turn gray. The room feels hollow and old and I turn away fast, running into the kitchen. I plow through the shelves, looking for some cookies. All I can find is a sleeve of Saltines and I cram one into my mouth. It crumbles on my tongue and I spit it into the sink. There is a long, skinny brown bottle next to the microwave and I pick it up. The smell of cherries makes my eyes water now and when I take a sip my throat catches fire and I cough and gasp. Pushing the bottle back so that it wobbles around on the counter I rinse my mouth out over and over, but my throat still feels burned.

I run out of the kitchen and down the basement stairs, my feet muffled by the green carpet. At the bottom of the steps I stop to hang onto the bannister and look around at the room.

The dark brown piano is next to my father's workshop. The door is tightly closed. I can still smell the sawdust and grease. On weekends the house was filled with the groan of the power saw and the banging of a hammer.

I sit at the piano bench, my fingers lightly touching the keys. The book on the stand is propped open to an etude exercise. My hands almost start to play, but they cramp and the notes turn into a dizzying river of black. I try to keep my breathing even. The silence roars and the keys feel slippery under my fingers. I bang on the middle A; it sounds flat and stony. My hands are

starting to shake, longing to crush all the autumn leaves that were lying under the snow.

I crash my fists onto the piano. A black chord bangs out and the silence after it is worse than before. I strike the chord out again and again, hearing the notes blow up the silence. My fists are numb and my shoulders bunch into knots. Flats and sharps explode and slam together until I can't feel the piano under my fingertips anymore. My mother's voice comes tumbling downstairs:

"What're you making all that racket for? Cut it out."

My breathing is hard and shaky when I stand up and walk upstairs. The sun is going down and chilly sunlight fills the house. I go into the living room and Mom has fallen back into sleep her hair trailing in her mouth.

I push her shoulder, watching as the movement flops her back against a pillow. She shifts around a little, murmuring quietly.

"What're we eating for dinner?" I ask. "We're hungry."

She opens her eyes a little, then turns over on her side, sliding a hand under the pillow.

"There's money in my purse," she says. "Why don't you and Ned get a pizza? I'll have some later."

She closes her eyes again. I kick the shawl she's knitting under the couch before stalking out of the living room. My throat is dry and tight and I don't bother putting on a coat before plunging outside. The snow is slick, but I run.

Most of the stores are closed and the shoppers gone by the time I get to the main street. The Christmas tree's lights glow,

but in the dim light the silver balls look plastic and gray. The white paint on the General Store's sign looks dull. The Warren's toy store is dark, but I can see lights in the apartment. The sound of the trumpet trickles down to me and I crane my neck, trying to see which window is Adam's. I can't tell. For a few minutes I stand in the light cast from the windows, imagining that it feels warm. Fresh snow starts falling and I shout his name, cupping my hands around my mouth. His face appears at the far left window and I wave. He looks puzzled, but signals for me to wait. In a minute he opens the door and lets me inside. I stand there shivering. In the light from the street the toys make eerie shadows on the wall.

"Are you all right?" Adam asks, looking worried. "What's wrong? Where's your coat?"

"I forgot it," I tell him, and then I can't say anything else; the warm silence of the store overwhelms me. When I stop shivering, I start dragging my foot back and forth. "I stole something," I say,looking at the snow on my shoe starting to melt. "I'm sorry, I'll give it back."

"What was it?" Adam asks me.

"Just something I thought I wanted on our tree. The General Store didn't have anything." The edges of my ears are hot, like they always are after I come in from cold air. "Do you want to call my mother and tell her? My name's Amelia--"

"I know," Adam says. "And no, I don't think I'll need to call your mom. Wait here for a second and I'll at least get you a sweater."

He leaves for a few minutes and comes back with a large, thick, white sweater. He hands it to me and I hold it for a minute, running my finger over the pattern of diamonds on the sleeve. When I slide it over my head and my arms find their way into the sleeves, the smell of detergent and soap fills my nose. The sweater comes to my knees and the sleeves droop over my hands. I feel its thickness cover my shirt and I look up at Adam.

"Teach me to play," I say. "Can you teach me to play one song?"

He looks at me for a few minutes, then puts his hand on my shoulder and leads me over to the piano. I blow on my hands to warm them up; they're beginning to get chapped. He lifts the lid of the bench and pulls out a stack of books, then closes the lid and we sit down.

"Do you want a Christmas song?" he asks and I shake my head. He starts flipping through the books, frowining a little. Finally, he pauses and tugs a book out called Ragtime for Beginners, setting the rest of the pile on top of the piano.

"Ever heard of Joplin?" Adam asks, creasing the book open to a piece called "The Gladiolous Rag". It looks strange. The notes are sprayed all over the place instead of the neat and tidy sweeps the etude books had.

Adam plays through it once. I watch his fingers flow over the keys. The piece is rippling and sad-sounding, but the notes that seem scattered all over the page stream together.

"Try the top hand," Adam says. "Go as slowly as you need to.

I'll keep the bottom going."

I squint at the music and close my eyes for a minute before letting my fingers start exploring the keys. My rhythm is way off and the notes jumble together but I pick up enough of it so the melody can shakily feel its way through my hands.

We play through the piece a few times; the last time Adam not playing at all. It takes me a long time to get through the piece. When I get done I sit back and glance outside. It's nearly dark.

"You'll get it," Adam says. "Do you want to take this book home?" I nod and he folds the book and hands it to me.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asks. "Don't you need a coat?"

"I'm OK," I tell him, the Joplin singing in my hands."I need to get a pizza. Thank-you."

I tuck my book under my arm and walk to the door. It's black outside and snow whirls in the streetlights. Before I go out, I pause to touch the paw of a teddy bear.

Contents

Char Miller

The Color of Massasaguas

Ned Franklin's paper on William Sherman gets worse with each rewrite, I've noticed. I didn't know what good any more comments would do, but I wrote a list of them anyway. "Please don't keep Sherman in a vacuum," I wrote. "Consider the impact his actions had on the war's outcome, on the South's economy, and on Reconstruction". With each draft, Ned had lengthened his descriptions of looting, fire, and destruction. During the first class, I could tell this would be the sort of thing I'd get from him; he wouldn't stop talking about the atomic bombs used in World War II, although he didn't know the names of the cities they'd been dropped on.

I put his paper aside and stretched out on the floor. During the past few weeks, my apartment had become a jungle of newspapers and take-out containers from The Beirut, my favorite Lebanese restaurant. Dust had coated the shelves. The bathroom was the only thing I'd bothered scrubbing. I liked the smell of Comet. It did a fair job at keeping the silverfish from taking over the bathtub.

Gabriel used to smash them, and she looked wonderful doing it. She took a huge wad of toilet paper, bunched it in her hand, and pressed it over the insect in a smooth, cold motion. She held it there for a few minutes, her knuckles turning white, then wiped the body off the bathtub. She'd hang the toilet paper out of a window and shake it until the silverfish body dropped to the ground.

When she stopped coming over, I took a hard look at one silverfish. It was actually graceful. It moved so lightly and quickly it seemed to make a whispering noise. I touched one of its

antennae, and it slithered up the wall. I let it live.

I told myself it was a disgrace to keep an apartment like this, but it was comforting in a way. If I tried to clean up, it would be like pulling things out by their roots. Some of the newspapers on the floor had been there since the night Gabriel told me something had rekindled between her and her old boyfriend. She read them hard; a single letter didn't escape her eye. She said she was afraid of missing an important fact or story that might be buried under everything else.

The phone rang and I sat up. It was getting dark enough so that I should have felt like turning the lights on. It was Allison calling, and I felt embarrassed at the mess. I flicked a small light on.

"Are you coming to the party tonight?" she asked. "Nobody heard from you."

"I didn't know my plans earlier," I said. "I actually considered spending the evening writing lecture notes."

"Come to the party," Allison said. "You don't have to bring anything."

"I'm not bad at last-minute cooking," I told her. "Can I think about it?"

"Caroline," Allison's voice took on a decisive tone. "You probably hate this as much as anyone, but there's somebody you might like to meet. Her name's Terri and she works in the computer center. Have you been up there recently?"

"I don't use computers much," I told her. "I believe in yellow

legal pads. Did you tell her anything?"

"Should I?"

"No," I stood up. "I'll tell her myself if I make it to the party."

After I hung up, I stretched again. I thought about going. The party would have platters of cream-filled, frosted pastries, miniature sandwiches cut into triangles, and Allison's specialty, hot crabmeat and cheese dip. White wine would warm people and have them swaying and nodding like palm trees. Voices and laughter would swell the walls; perfume, cologne and sweat would rise to the ceiling. I could blend into this fog, feeling hands brush my arm and have my back and hips pressed against someone else's as we crowd together in the heat. Terri and I wouldn't be stumbling around square one in a coffee shop, where it would be too stark a reality that we were faced with one another.

I got up to get a drink. I was tired. I mixed red wine with seltzer water and took a long sip. Wine was the only drink I liked. Gabriel had insisted on whiskey and brandy, and she drank eggnog year-round. Last Christmas she was rarely without a glass of it in her hand.

"You don't drink enough," she'd told me last winter. We were decorating my Christmas tree. I was winding the tinsel around the highest branches and she was on her knees, ripping open boxes of icicles.

"I like a clear head," I said, tossing the end of the tinsel over a branch. She started separating the strands of silver. I

stepped away from the tree, to make sure the tinsel was wrapped in evenly-spaced coils. It looked like it was holding the tree together. The blown-glass star we'd bought from Mr. Benvoir was still nestled in tissue paper, waiting beside the boxes of candy-canes.

Gabriel and I spent a lot of time in Mr. Benvoir's Glass Factory. I'd discovered it when my wine glasses were broken during my move to Michigan and I'd had to buy replacements. A month after we started dating, I brought Gabriel to see the store. Mr. Benvoir had most of his equipment behind the counter, and he liked people to watch him when he made glass creations. Though the store was in a neon-filled mall, I felt peace in there. It came from watching Mr. Benvoir's cheeks puff with tension and excitement as he heated the glass to redness, and from listening to Gabriel's murmured "oh's", feeling her breathing quicken as Mr. Benvoir whipped the glass into a shape. It was a place where I felt surrounded with things I shouldn't be able to touch, but I could.

"It's a nice tree," I said. Gabriel sat back on her heels.

"Help me with the icicles," she said, holding a handful out to me. "I have no patience to hang these one by one."

"I'd like to call you on Christmas," I said. She looked down and began picking at pine needles that had fallen on the floor.

"I'll be with my family," she said. "I've promised to call you when I have some privacy."

"You don't want me to call?"

"They're nosy. I wouldn't know how to explain it."

"It's not hard. At some point it's not supposed to be a secret, either."

"I'm not at that point. At least not with my family. I'm the one who has to live with them for a week."

"I offered to let you stay here."

"I can't do that."

"So we can hang up the decorations, but we can't celebrate the holiday."

I grabbed some icicles and started tossing them at the tree, moving so that I was behind some branches. I didn't want her to see bitterness rushing down my face like a waterfall. I knew it would make her drip with tension and send her scuttling all over the place, grabbing for a sincere apology. It was a reaction that made me want to shelter her and impale her at the same time.

"Holidays are important to my parents," Gabriel said. "They aren't the time for bombshells."

"I thought this was more like good news. You're involved. Don't they want to know that? Do **you** want to know that?" I hung the last icicles in a clump and couldn't stand not looking at her anymore. I glared down at her body that was holding itself in a tight curl. Gabriel ran both hands through her hair, pulling at the roots. I'd pushed her, I knew, which left me cursing myself. I was embarrassed at clawing so hungrily for an answer.

"I'm sorry, Caroline," Gabriel said. "The time's not good for this to reach my family. When it isn't so crazy around there, I'll tell them."

We finished the tree in silence, awkwardly bumping around each other as we hung ornaments. She hooked candy canes over the branches while I settled the star on top. We turned off the lamps so the white light from the tree filled the room. Gabriel wrapped her hand around mine and led me to the couch. She pressed close to me, her lips on my neck. My fingers touched her hair, and I kissed her ear. The closeness was fragile, but it wasn't the soft, flowing timidity we'd had. I was rigid, almost mechanical. I stroked her thigh and lower back; places I knew she liked but that didn't bring me too close to her. She hugged me harder.

Since the first day I'd met her, Gabriel had been struggling with her final project for her masters degree. She wanted to shoot massasagua rattlesnakes, the only poisonous snake in the area.

"I think it's exciting, the way their curves are so striking when they crawl over leaves."

"Lizards are better," I told her. "They're interesting, but they don't bite you for noticing."

"They're cute," Gabriel said. "But I wouldn't want to shoot them."

She spent most of her time after Christmas in a marshy area looking for the rattlesnakes. She'd lie still on her stomach, her lens just out of the ground, waiting to hear the rustle of scales in the leaves.

It was around then that I couldn't get our first night together to stop haunting me. She started spending her time divided between watching for snakes and working in the darkroom. My

apartment got quiet, and it felt like there were things missing. I bought a kaleidoscope, an antique globe, and started collecting pipes to fill what seemed like miles of space on my shelves. I spun the globe a few times. It creaked in its holder, but I kept spinning it and holding my finger over its surface. The globe would usually stop with my finger in the Pacific Ocean.

When I asked Gabriel what was keeping her in the darkroom so long, she said it was her senior project. The pictures she had weren't working out and she was sure once she had the snakes on film it would be better. I knew the split was cracking wider.

The memory of our first night together was the crutch and curse that kept me hoping things would change. Gabriel let me into the darkroom with her, something she hadn't done before. It was empty, almost closing time.

"Don't watch," she said. "I get nervous when people watch me."

"I wouldn't know what you were doing anyway."

But I watched when she couldn't see. I watched her breathing take on a new rythem as she lifted prints from the trays and held them up. I watched the way she snipped bits of cardboard into odd shapes so she could keep the light off part of a negative. She would set the f-stop on the overhead, push the exposure button, and freeze while the camera beeped in a countdown. She moved like liquid in the darkroom.

"What do you think?" she showed me a print she was halfway happy with. It was a close-up of a donkey's head. The eye took up a quarter of the composition, and the rest was filled with fur.

"You made the eye sort of alarming," I told her.

"I was focused on the arch between the ears," she sighed. "I love that part of the donkey's body."

"I meant alarming in a good way."

"I hope so," she smiled at me. It was a mixture of suggestion and fear. I thought I should keep sitting on my chair and wait. We had come close to this before, but she backed off just as she got to the edge. "I can't," she'd say. "I don't think it's in me."

We left the darkroom and walked outside. It was getting dark and the fall air made it seem cold. We started to walk to our cars, but I stopped when we were near the woods. She stopped, hunching her shoulders and not looking up.

"Do you want to go home?" I asked her. She stared at the yellow lines marking parking spaces. I braced myself.

"Do you?" she asked.

"I'd like to walk around."

"We could do that."

"You don't have to."

"I'd like to walk."

We didn't touch until we were on the edge of the woods. Her foot buckled and she stumbled against me. She caught herself, but I held onto her anyway. Her arms went completely around my shoulders. I let my hands travel into her hair, grabbing it in my fists.

We broke apart, as if to make sure of our balance. Then we started to laugh a little. Our laughs rose into the woods like

feathery shadows.

Her hand was soft and a little sweaty and she blushed pink when I kissed her ear, her hair swinging in a gentle sweep against my nose. She pressed close to me. I rippled with her fingers stroking up and down my arm. Fear shook me when I realized how tightly I was grabbing her, as I was breathing in her shampoo and warm breath.

I decided to try baking raspberry oat squares. After turning on the oven, I started measuring the flour and soda into a bowl. The phone rang again.

"It's a lot of fun here," Allison said. "What're you doing?"

"I might come," I said. "I don't know yet. Are there lots of people?"

"It's a huge party."

"Let me think," I said. "Give me directions, though."

I kept measuring the dry ingredients together. By the time I realized I was out of vanilla, it was too late to save them. I dumped the mixture in the garbage.

By late spring, I stopped hoping for a final confrontation that would clear out any ambiguity between me and Gabriel. In one of our final phone conversations, she told me how her final project turned out.

"I saw a massasauga," Gabriel said flatly.

"Did you get its picture?" I asked.

"It was giving birth," she said. "I couldn't believe it. I

went to the woods very early this morning, and waited by a tree. I guess I dozed off because when I woke up, I looked across from me at these two boulders and right in the crack between them I saw the snake. She was twitching and pushing and her head almost hit the rock a few times. Then a little snake squeezed out, in a sticky membrane so it had to chew its way out. Every ten minutes or so another little snake came out. Eight of them made it. "

"That'll be quite a picture." I said.

"I didn't take one," she said. There was a long pause. "The weirdest thing happened. I sat there watching all the little snakes come out and the mother bumping her head on the rock and then I watched while they all curled up and rested. They looked like part of the woods. If she hadn't moved I wouldn't have seen them at all. God, I was so disappointed."

"Is that all you felt?" I asked, the image of a squirming massasauga giving birth in the leaves sticking in my mind. I could see Gabriel dozing against a tree, her camera fallen to the side and her breathing as smooth and even as the breeze in the woods. I could have really shaken her then.

"I couldn't make a picture with them," Gabriel said. "All that would have turned out is a mass of brown."

I left the apartment empty-handed. I decided that I couldn't plan a lecture on scalawags and carpetbaggers right then. The woods where Gabriel looked for massasaugas is only a short drive, and I made it quickly. Leaving my car by the curb, I stepped onto the

trail that led like a long earthy ribbon back into the woods and walk in.

I walked for a long time, my breath clouding in front of me and my feet feeling solid on the cold, packed dirt. The woods were still. I found a large grey rock that had pieces of quartz sparkling off it, and sat.

The sunset smeared the sky purple and pink and the trees stretched their black, naked branches up towards the color. Leaves were massed beneath the trees, breezes sometimes blowing them onto the path.

I felt too high sitting on the rock so I got off and lay on the ground instead. I closed my eyes and listened to the wind, the same sound Gabriel must have heard while she waited. I tried to listen for other things, but wind was all I could understand. I pressed my body into the ground, my back adjusting to the rocks. Lying on my back, I could feel the sunset above me, the leaves scratching around me, and rattling coming from somewhere underground.

Contents

Char Miller

Minnows' Inlet

Aunt Nella's gift shop has been torn down. In its place a gas station has erected its round, neon red sign which flashes off and on like a mechanical eye. Joseph brightens, knowing this is a place for candy and soda. He pulls on my sleeve and points, asking for a strawberry taffy bar. He says his mother lets him eat them.

"We'll stop later," I tell him. The car ride has made him cranky, and he crashes against the seat, glaring. "Don't sulk," I say. "Look at the lake. See if you find a ship. They're way out on the water, so look hard."

Joseph thinks about this, then sits up. His seatbelt strains to hold him as he presses his hands to the window. Beyond his head, I see Lake Superior. It's the same color I remember it to be; a royal shade of blue, not warm. I think about Lake Michigan, where Victoria is spending the weekend. Lake Michigan seems shallow and crowded. Lake Superior feels coldly noble to me. The rocky cliffs and stretches of stone beach don't restrain it well. They are sculpted and drowned little by little from the icy water's white spray.

"Look at the waves," Joseph says. "I want to swim."

"It's too cold."

"**I** don't get cold," Joseph throws this remark at me over his shoulder. "I swim good."

"I know you do. We'll see about going to Eagle Harbor. That's a better beach. At least it has sand."

It hits me again that Joseph will start kindergarten this fall. I worry that he isn't tall enough. He bounces around enough to make up for his height, but I have images that cloud my mind: my son shadowed and grounded by tall, straight-backed golden children, their toothless grins gleaming in sunlight. I want to see the first time Joseph runs for the jungle gym. I want to see his face beam and turn red while his body twists vicious knots over the bars. What will he feel when his hands touch the red dodgeball--will he feel like smacking it against the school to hear its hollow bounce, or will he want to hold onto it, running his fingers in a stream over the textured rubber?

When I picked him up this morning, he showed me his sleep-upon. It was red, with blue zig-zag patterns, and he insisted on bringing it. He was eager to try to sleep on it.

"Make sure he sleeps in a bed," Victoria had said to me, while I was loading Joseph's suitcase into the car. "I don't think it has enough padding, but he liked it so much I got it anyway."

"There are plenty of beds in the cottage," I told her. She reached into the car and straightened Joseph's suitcase, which was tipped at an awkward angle over the spare tire. The smell of tanning lotion reached my nose. It was a foreign smell, since Victoria usually preferred wearing cover-ups to smearing oil on her body. It made me look at her again, and she looked different to me. Her nose appeared too sharp. Her hair was straighter. She became a stranger I might see lying on the beach of Lake Michigan, an unknown body glistening in the sand. Since the papers, I had

certainly felt distance, but I thought there was the thinnest, most rickety bridge that could still be crossed. The smell of the lotion cracked open a permanent, yawning gap.

The car turns along curves that cause Joseph to make exaggerated leaning motions. I notice that the yellow dividing lines are still clear and bright. There aren't many cars up here, which was why my mother would let me walk near the street, alone. I would walk in the gravel, kicking my feet through scruffs of grass and thimbleberries.

Briana would come with me; she liked eating the thimbleberries. She'd balance one on her fingertip, making it look like a red mushroom cap, before sucking it off and chewing. Then she'd pick one and hand it to me.

"They're good," she'd say. "They're better than raspberries."

"I don't like fruit," I'd tell her.

"Mom's going to make thimbleberry jam again. She says we'll have enough of it to last until Christmas. Come on, Tim, try one," she held the berry out to me again.

"She's making grape jelly, too," I took the berry from her hand and shoved it in my mouth. Its tartness shot over my tongue and the seeds crunched in my teeth. I spit it onto the road. It landed with a wet smack. "Those are gross." She picked another one and ate it.

I'm not sure why I've brought Joseph up here for the weekend. There will be things he'll like. I can take him to the top of Brockway Mountain, where he can look at a carpet of green trees

spread under his feet and play with the telescopes. He'd like the old colonial fort where the employees dress in costume and there are deer to feed. He can scramble onto the cannon statue and pretend to explode some imaginary evil into the air.

I have shown Victoria pictures of the cottage, but that's all she knows of my memories from here. She met Briana once, before the wedding. Briana was adjusting to new medication, so she stared at an ant crawling up the wall while Victoria and I talked to her. Occasionally she'd nod or blink when Victoria asked her a question, but I could see she was following the ant's path more intently than listening to Victoria. I tried to get Briana to talk, but her eyes were glazing. Her breathing was deep. I looked at Victoria sitting stiffly on the edge her chair, glancing around the small room that caged us in white.

"What should I ask her?" Victoria whispered at me. Her leg was tapping up and down. In the light of the hospital, her make-up looked harsh and her lipstick seemed to slap me.

"Nothing," I said, pulling the sheet up around Briana's shoulders. "We can leave."

"I felt like an intruder," Victoria said afterwards.

"She's usually more responsive," I told her. "You should see her play Monopoly or poker."

"Maybe we'll play sometime," Victoria said. I could tell from the way she walked too briskly and held her purse too tightly that the remark was a shell of politeness, nothing more. She gave me a little smile as we headed outdoors. When we were in the car, she

put a hand on my arm and told me I was wonderfully loyal, and she admired that. I snapped my seatbelt buckle shut and looked up at Briana's window once more before starting the car.

"A ship!" Joseph shouts. When I look out the window, I see a grey silhouette near the horizon. Its shape is clear and distinct against the sky. Joseph turns his head south.

"Another one!" he shouts again. His mouth hangs in an open grin as he plays this game. He is pressed against the door so hard I think if I open it he will fly over the lake to the ships. I rub my hand in his hair.

"We have binoculars in the cottage," I tell him. "If you look hard enough you might see the names of the boats."

"I named them already," Joseph tells me. "Bigfoot and Viking."

I know he would have liked the bears. They quit coming to the garbage dumps a few years ago. I don't know if they started to dislike people watching them eat or if people didn't drop the right garbage anymore, but I hadn't seen the black bears since I was young. My parents would take me and Briana to the garbage dump every night. We'd throw our brown paper sacks out of the window and wait.

Two bears came close to our car a few times. Briana and I decided they were ours. Thor was mine. He had something wrong with his eye; it oozed clear pus that caked around the lid. He plunged into the biggest trash piles. His huge paw bashed through the middle, sending up a storm of flies. Briana's bear, Walnuts, was small and ate the garbage that got scattered in the road. Orange

peels were his favorites.

"They're really hungry, aren't they?" Briana asked, pressing her fingers on the window.

"Hungry?" my mother laughed, aiming her camera at Thor as he flung a pizza box into the road. "Those bears are spoiled rotten. Pretty soon they'll be knocking on our door asking to sit at the supper table."

"I want to see the lake," Joseph says.

"Put your coat on," I tell him, deciding that stretching my legs would be a good idea. I pull onto the side of the road, and before I get my seatbelt off, Joseph is bounding through the grass, heading for the cliffs. I stretch out slowly, tasting the cold, pine air.

Joseph's feet are awkward on the rocks. His run becomes a series of halting, timid poses, each one tested for its steadiness. Each step renders him innocent and naked on top of the roughly pitted cliff.

"Wait for me," I call to him. He turns and faces me, standing impatiently.

"Hurry, Dad," he calls back.

I pick a thimbleberry on the way. Indian paintbrush plants start to appear in bunches as I get closer to the rock. The small yellow buds are pinched together. They don't bloom into flowers. The arch of my foot bends over crevices and cracks to keep my body steady on the cliff. It is something I've learned and remembered like riding a bicycle. I look at Joseph, remembering how many times

I had to run on the rocks before they felt as smooth as the road.

"Try this," I hold the thimbleberry out to him. He picks it up and examines it, pushing one finger into its hole. When he puts it into his mouth, he frowns, then chews hard. He swallows with difficulty.

"Why does it have so many seeds?" he asks, running a finger along the inside of his lip.

"You don't like it?"

"I like cherries. Are there any cherries up here?"

I walk beside him as we head along the cliff. It starts to slope down, leading to a stretch of stone beach. Joseph does not let me hold his arm for support. We brace ourselves against the urge to tumble downhill, until the stones are tumbling and clanking beneath our feet.

"Did you bring your paints?" I ask him. He nods. "These rocks are fun to paint. My Aunt Nella used to paint them and sell them in her souvenir shop."

"This one's sparkly," Joseph holds up a pink rock that glitters with quartz. "Could we get money for it?"

"I don't think so."

His face has the cool appraisal of a jeweler's, and I leave him to assessing the values of the stones. Aunt Nella would have liked him. She talked to my parents about finding copper in the quarries. She'd spend hours wandering around the rock piles, hitting open with a hammer the ones she found promising. In her workshop, there was a pile of copper shreds. She said she was

saving those for her sculpture.

"Do we have to stay long?" my mother would ask, when we'd get in the car to visit Aunt Nella. "She gets worse each year."

"I brought some aspirin," my father told her. "She sounded good over the phone."

Briana and I would be in the backseat. Briana would draw elephants in her sketch pad, and I tossed a Nerf ball around until my father told me to stop. As soon as our car turned into her drive, Aunt Nella came flying out of the house, squealing bits of sentences while we parked.

"Oh, goody! You're here! Don't park on my wild strawberries, John, those are my pride and joy. I didn't have time to clean, but dust is good for you, I think. Come on, get out of that car. You look cramped. Don't be shy, come give Nella a hug!"

When we got out of the car, we each got grabbed and clasped into her flabby middle. The smell of sweat and syrupy perfume was strong. Aunt Nella gripped Briana and I around the waist and said sternly to my parents,

"I'm going to take the twins downstairs, to show them some of my new things. You two stay up here. Don't touch anything."

"Just for a minute, Nella," my dad said. "I think Brie and Tim would rather play outside."

"Really?" Aunt Nella would peer down at us, her eyes squinting into slits. She turned back to my parents. "I have Cheetos in the cupboard you can eat while you wait, but don't eat the ones in the blue bag. Those are for my midnight snack," she ordered.

We went down to the basement, down a flight of narrow wooden stairs that shook every time we lifted our feet. The basement had one room for Aunt Nella to work in; it was cold and damp, there wasn't carpet on the cement floor. Aunt Nella seemed to take up the entire room. Her face was pasty in the yellow light. We could see dirt around her pants cuffs and the hole in the seam of her shirt sleeve. Her hair was mashed around her head and she twisted her silver necklace around her finger as she talked.

In the middle of the room was a table covered with piles of rocks. Cans of paint and crusty paintbrushes were lying on the floor, next to scratched up hammers and pickaxes. She grinned at us from behind the table and picked up a paintbrush.

"Who wants to paint?" she asked. "Or better yet, who wants to see if there's any copper in these rocks?" she put the brush down and offered us hammers. The excitement of hunting something valuable out of a random pile of rocks electrified me.

"Me!" I grabbed the tool from her. As I plowed through the rocks, which Aunt Nella collected in grocery sacks, I noticed Briana still huddled in the doorway. "Come on," I said. "Bet I find more than you do."

Briana kept her eyes on Aunt Nella. She looked wary, as if looking for a hidden trap. Aunt Nella held out a paintbrush for her.

"You like to paint, don't you, Brie?" she asked.

"She draws," I said.

"Oh, I think the poor thing's cold. It's very cold in here,

isn't it?" Aunt Nella asked us. "I'm used to it, actually. It feels comfortable to me. Would you like a sweater?"

Briana nodded, and Aunt Nella went upstairs. When she was gone, Briana scuttled around like a mouse. She picked up a paintbrush and opened a jar of green paint. From the grocery bag she got a flat, grey rock. Setting it on the table, she cocked her head to one side and looked at it.

"You should check for copper," I said, gripping the hammer in my hand. She shook her head.

"You don't find too much," she said. "I like coloring the rocks."

She bent her head over the rock and began smoothing it with green. I turned mt attention to swinging the hammer. Aunt Nella came in quietly. I watched as she laid a sweater over Briana's shoulders. Briana paused, her paintbrush in the air, until Aunt Nella moved away. Then she painted faster.

Joseph has stopped examining the rocks and is throwing them in the lake. He laughs when the heavier ones make a plunking noise. He scoops a handful of fine pebbles into his hand, waits until a wave looms ahead of him, then hurls the pebbles into its curve. His hair is full of wind.

I walk over to an inlet that has been cut into a low part of the cliff. The water is clear and calm, until the inlet widens and Lake Superior reins it in. I squat beside the calm part.

The minnows Briana and I found here once are gone. We found a whole school of them one day. They hung suspended in the water,

their fins swishing furiously so they didn't get sucked back into the lake.

"Yeeeeehaaahhhh!" I'd shouted when I saw them, and leaped into the water, splashing it everywhere. Briana gasped.

"Stop that!" she cried."You'll hurt them."

I paused and watched as the water went back to normal. The minnows darted around my feet and under the rock.

"Stupid fish," I snorted."Don't they know they're supposed to live in a lake?"

"This lake's cold," Briana said. "Why don't we catch them and take them somewhere else?"

"Catch them with what?" I asked. "You know how to fish? You don't have bait or a line or anything."

"We'll figure it out," Briana said.

We spent the day with pickle jars and sieves. We tried using a bit of macaroni we found caught in one of the sieves as bait, but the minnows didn't want it. They kept swimming under the rock. We tried swishing the jar at a cluster of them, but they always managed to swim right under the rim. We sighed and held our chins in our hands, not understanding how it could look so easy and yet only being able to catch two fish. Finally we sat on the rock and watched them swim up and down the inlet, knowing just how far down they could swim before the current got too strong.

I didn't bring Victoria up here because I knew she would be impatient with it. She would take pictures from the top of Brockway Mountain, and would be charmed by the costumes of the old fort, but

she couldn't stand being near a lake like Superior for long. It would only make her cold. I think about her on the beach of Lake Michigan now, feeding seagulls with leftover ricecakes. If I thought I could recognize her, I would like to be there with her, listening to the seagulls squawking as they circled around us.

"What's in here?" Joseph asks. He is standing beside me, resting himself by leaning on my back.

"There used to be fish. They aren't here anymore."

"Big fish?"

"Nothing you could catch."

"Why aren't there more ships?" Joseph narrowed his eyes at the skyline. He looks strong when he is annoyed and I'm glad about that. "I'm hungry," he says.

I stand up, my knees cracking a little. Joseph runs ahead of me, slipping as the stones slide under his feet. I walk slowly, feeling the solid ground that lies under the layers of loose rock. Joseph reaches the cliff. Indian paintbrush plants are trampled as he makes his staggered hike to the top. I don't look at them. I look at Joseph's feet. They are a strange morse code. Steady for a long time, then stumbling. It doesn't bother him; he periodically glances out at the water to ensure he isn't missing ships. As I start my climb, I think about the shell I saw crystallize around Victoria the day in the hospital. I cannot tell if one is forming around me, or if I hear the sound of one cracking.

Contents

Char Miller

A Seahorse Made of Wire

The Blue Star theater had three thick volumes of procedures and rules employees were supposed to follow. Matthew knew Aaron had the books stacked neatly in one corner of the office. A film of dust had collected on them.

"I have enough regulars to make a livable profit," Aaron told Matthew when Matthew was hired. "If you don't scare them away, you can work here."

Aaron had replaced the bright white lights that had been in the theater lobby with soft orange bulbs. Saul had covered the tile floor with a dark blue rug. The plastic green, company-issued benches had been tossed into the garbage and a couple of blue and purple print chairs had been set in front of the window. Aaron added some tear-shaped wall lamps and hung a map of the world above the movie poster display. He hung one of Saul's charcoal sketches above the aquarium in the far corner.

As he studied the swoops of grey in the sketch, Matthew thought again that he should tell Aaron he'd seen Saul last night. It had been a simple encounter; it should have rolled off his tongue the minute he walked into work, light as a ping-pong ball. Matthew had been sitting in the park in the early evening, trying to memorize some basic German. Tulips budded along the walkways and the sounds of stroller wheels and dog paws clicking on the pavement filled his ears. He was relaxed against a tree, moving only when

the grass started to scratch the exposed skin between his sock and jeans. The phrases were not sticking in his memory. He kept wanting to speak French, the only foreign language he'd studied.

Resting his head against the trunk, he put the book down. A patch of dandelions was growing next to him, and he picked one. He ran the head over his arm. The center felt firm; it left a yellow streak on his skin. He didn't recognize Saul when he saw him. Saul was dressed in a gray suit, his long hair tame in a ponytail. There was no cigarette in his hand and his billowing black coat was missing. It wasn't until later Matthew realized that the thought of saying hello hadn't crossed his mind. His thoughts were scattering as he tried to come up with a greeting that would get Saul to stop instead of waving and walking on. Saul noticed him and said hello.

"Where are you going?" Matthew asked.

"Court," Saul said. "I'm fighting a speeding ticket. My car hasn't been able to speed in years. What're you reading?"

"It's not reading. It's memorizing," Matthew said. "This is a German phrasebook."

"You're a good tourist," Saul reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "I could teach you about the language if you want." He offered a cigarette to Matthew. Matthew shook his head, although he liked how neatly the cigarettes lay in their box, resting in Saul's hand.

"I won't be there for too long," he said. "If I have basic phrases I should survive."

"Austrians speak a dialect," Saul told him. "You should learn

more." He checked his watch. "I have to go."

Matthew watched the tall gray figure weave around other pedestrians on the walkway. He thought he watched too closely, like a voyeur. After Saul was gone he tried to read again. French language filled his head.

Matthew leaned against the concession counter. The only movie making money was the cartoon. It was ninety minutes of cotton candy silliness, but Matthew preferred watching it to the other one; a low-budget B movie from an independent film maker in Nevada. Watching it was like trying to open a heavy drapery. Matthew felt exhausted when he tried sitting through it, thinking the end wouldn't ever come.

It was the story of an oboe player who traveled through Arizona. He hadn't been able to join the major symphonies. The stage lights blinded him when he auditioned. He spent the time squinting at the music and was unable to string the melody together. There were not enough students for him to find work as an teacher. He had to take a job at a gun store, as a cashier. He made money selling rifles and revolvers. When it wasn't busy and when he was alone, he practiced his oboe. He stopped playing the solos he knew from memory and began making his own. The cement floor and the dim light seemed to flatten the notes. They poured out frazzled and thin, but the oboe player didn't realize it. He played with as much determination as he had when he was auditioning. It was something Matthew couldn't stand to watch.

The aquarium bubbled. Matthew looked over and made sure the

filter was working. The tank's bottom was layered with bright gravel and plastic stalks of seaweed. Black and yellow angelfish swam around the leaves, their scaly stripes glinting in the light of the tank. Matthew took a napkin and began to sketch the fins of the smallest fish. He frowned. The lines were distorted. They were too sharp and reached their point too soon. The graceful triangle of the fin turned heavy, like an airplane wing. He went back to watching the fish.

He started to get dizzy watching their unblinking eyes swim in circles, so he straightened and filled a cup with soda. After taking a long drink, he eyed his homework in the cubbyhole beneath the cash register. His art project was in a plastic bag. He picked up the bag and took out a box-shape he'd twisted together with aluminum wire. At the beginning of the project he'd imagined stringing a long line of aluminum wire cars together to make a train. He'd spent hours on this one car, gripping the pliers until his knuckles turned white, only to feel the wire jerk and bend clumsily under his hands.

Matthew took out a coil of telephone wire, which was small and bent as easily as string. He tied one end of the telephone wire to a corner of the aluminum, and twisted it around the box.

"Wie geht es Ihnen?" he heard Aaron say. Matthew quickly covered the wire with the plastic bag and put it in the cubbyhole. Aaron walked across the lobby. As he walked behind the concession stand, he asked Matthew, "Spreche Sie Duetch?"

"I'm not going to have to learn the language. I have my

phrasebook." Matthew said.

"You'll be lost," Aaron said. "It won't kill you to practice a little. Does anyone in this group know German?"

"The leader knows enough to get around. How much German do you know, anyway?"

"I can say 'hello', 'I'm sick', and 'I love you'," Aaron told him. "Saul handled most of the conversations while we were there. Has he brought you his pictures yet? It's a good place for an art student. You could learn a lot over there. Saul won't stop talking about how much he learned."

"I haven't had a chance to look at the pictures." Matthew said. He swallowed another sip of pop. The safety of learning some German and studying some pictures of Salzburg appealed to him, but when he tried, he became overwhelmed. The pictures his parents had given him were of churches, mountains, and castles that defied being captured in snapshots. They were taken from enough of a distance that Matthew couldn't get close enough to see any intricate detail, yet they looked caged in their frames. If he imagined being in Salzburg, where the scenes would be loose from their boundaries, he felt drowned in all that he wanted and needed to grasp. The image of his mangled wire train stabbed at his mind.

"Can I have some licorice?" he asked Aaron.

"It's probably stale." Aaron said.

Matthew took a bag of Twizzlers and ripped it open. The edges of the licorice sticks were hard. He started to pull them off.

"The store has a sale on catfish," Aaron said, beginning to

fill out an inventory sheet. "Maybe I'll get some. The tank's too big for those angelfish."

"They look fine to me." Matthew said. "You shouldn't crowd them."

Aaron paused and looked over at the tank. He watched the fish for a minute, then shrugged.

"Saul knows more about aquariums then I do." he said. "Ich verstande nicht," he added, grinning. Matthew bit into a Twizzler.

"You're nervous, aren't you?" Aaron asked him.

"I'll be with a tour group." Matthew said. "How nervous should I be?"

"Tour groups would make me nervous. Have you ever been in a museum with one? Saul and I got caught behind a group when we went. The guide actually liked his job, which made it worse. He didn't seem to regret having to summarize the paintings in a few paragraphs or having to move people along as quickly as possible. Saul and I tried not to listen to him, but he was too good at speaking loudly."

"I'm a little scared of flying. But that's only because I can't stand leg cramps."

"You're lucky, I guess." Aaron looked at him. "Or have you been overseas a lot?"

"I haven't traveled much. I don't see what there is to be concerned about."

"It's a good place for an art student. You could learn a lot there. You should look at Saul's pictures. He won't stop talking

about what he learned over there."

The door opened and the first customer came in, a regular. She was an older lady who wore her hair in pink foam curlers and carried a large flowered purse. She blinked when she entered and shuffled up to the candy counter.

"Hello, dear," she said to Aaron. "Did you read the paper? A new theater is opening on the other side of town. Sixteen screens. I'm worried for you. Maybe you should add another auditorium."

"We'll be fine," Aaron said. "We're the only theater that sells chocolate cherries and fruit snakes. Our popcorn is cheap, too."

"I hope you're right," the lady said. "It's lovely in here. I don't know if I should see the cartoon again." she said, fumbling in her purse for her wallet. "It's a lovely cartoon. Have you seen it?"

"The animation's good." Aaron said.

"What about that one?" she pointed to the other movie. "I haven't heard a thing about it."

"The cartoon's better." Matthew said. She tapped her finger on the glass countertop.

"Do you like music?" Aaron asked her. "There's a lot of oboe music in that movie."

"I don't listen to much classical. There aren't subtitles, are there?"

Aaron shook his head and she thought for a minute. Slowly, she pulled a bill from her wallet. Handing it to Matthew, she said,

"I guess I'll have a look at it. And a box of Jujyfruits, too, dear."

Matthew gave her change and a box of candy. She tucked both into her purse and walked to the door of the auditorium, looking up at the lighted title again before going inside.

"Do you like that one?" Matthew asked Aaron.

"I liked the character." Aaron said. "He's painful to watch, though. What about you?"

"I can't sit through the whole thing. I guess it's a little much for me."

"Saul didn't really like it either. He could't stand all the desert shots."

"I didn't see those."

A middle-aged couple wandered in, looking like they'd stepped into a cave swarming with bats. The man squared his shoulders and strode up to the counter. His wife clung to his arm.

"Strangest theater I've ever seen," the man said loudly. "I haven't heard of any of these movies. You the manager?"

"Aaron Daniels," Aaron introduced himself. "Bringing alternative entertainment for minds on the edge."

"Honey, I think we're in the wrong place," the wife whispered.

"Well, since we're here, we might as well see something. Give us two for that...is that a cartoon?" the man asked, pointing at the title. Aaron nodded.

"It's a good one." Matthew said. The man glared.

"Is it regular price?" he asked.

"Yes," Aaron said. He brought one of his hands to his neck to hold his top shirt button closed. The man tossed two bills at Matthew.

"We'll see the other one. I'm not paying all that money for a cartoon. That's it. No popcorn."

They moved slowly to their auditorium, huddled close together and whispering. More customers filed in: a group of lackadaisical teenagers in t-shirts, mothers trying to keep knots of children close together, couples who clung together and hung over each other, sticking two straws in one cup and licking popcorn from the other's hand.

"Not bad for a weekday." Aaron said, writing down ticket numbers. Matthew began filling the spaces in the candy shelf. He had finished the Jujyfruits when the door opened. Saul came in, his black coat flapping around his legs. His left hand held a brown sack. He dug a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. The plastic crackled as he unwrapped it. Matthew kept shoving boxes of candy into the case. He tried not to smell the smoke, or listen to the rustle of Saul's coat. The counter was not enough of a barrier between him and Saul.

"You're quitting tomorrow, right?" Aaron asked. He filled a cup of pop and set it on the counter. Saul closed his eyes and held a silver lighter to his cigarette. Smoke trailed in front of his face.

"I told you I'm not going cold turkey," he said. "That'll kill me. I brought some dinner. Are you hungry?" he asked Matthew,

taking a drink of soda. "I have extra."

Matthew shook his head. The licorice was bloating in his stomach like a red dust storm. Saul reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a pack of photographs. He put them on the counter.

"Are you tired of looking at pictures yet?" he asked.

"I'm tired," Matthew told him. Saul exhaled and Matthew waved his hand to clear his nose of the smoke.

"Can you wait until we're upstairs?" Aaron asked Saul, who shrugged and went back outside. Matthew watched him smash the cigarette with his boot heel. The sun was dropping and the clouds were pale, delicately pink. Saul looked dark and shapeless outside the theater. He gave the butt one more smear then came back inside.

"Would some catfish be all right in the aquarium?" Aaron asked him. "The fish are too small."

"Catfish would be spoiled rotten in there," Saul said.

Aaron finished his inventory and leaned against the counter. He let his head rest on his hand as he studied the aquarium.

"Actually," he said slowly, "I think I saw seahorses in the back of the store."

"Those are hard to take care of," Saul told him.

"They'll die," Matthew said. His voice came out loudly and shrilled the last word. He focused on wiping the counter. Images of the delicate, scalloped creatures poured into his mind. He could see their bodies writhing in a tortured rock before their tails stopped curling and stiffened, hardened. He could see them lying motionless in the net, water dripping from their snouts, their eyes

peeled. They looked naked.

"Are you all right?" Aaron asked him.

"I had seahorses once," Matthew said. He didn't stop wiping the counter. "The store said they should be all right since I had an aquarium set up for exotic fish. It was supposed to be like the ocean for them. I bought two. When I put them in, they couldn't take it. I don't know what happened. It took them a few minutes to die, but there was nothing I could do."

"What was wrong with the water?" Aaron asked. Matthew felt a hand on his shoulder and he stopped cleaning the counter.

"The seahorses were too smart for it," he said. "They knew it wasn't the ocean. They didn't belong there."

The sound of the bubbling aquarium pulsed the theater. Saul lit another cigarette. Matthew felt limp leaning against the counter with the weight of Aaron's hand on his shoulder. He was tired. When he closed his eyes, he thought he could smell salt.

"What's this?" Aaron asked. Matthew opened his eyes and saw Aaron holding up the wire box. He pushed himself off the counter.

"Nothing," he said, snatching the box away. He coughed as smoke wafted down his throat. Aaron looked at Saul, who had been staring hard at the wire. Saul sighed and walked back outside.

"Could I have some popcorn?" Matthew asked Aaron.

"Aren't you sick of movie food?"

"I'm hungry."

Aaron handed him a cardboard tub. While Matthew filled it, Aaron walked into the lobby. Matthew watched him stop in front of

the aquarium. Aaron cupped his hand over his eyes while he peered into the tank. The angelfish darted in circles. Aaron uncapped the bottle of food and tapped some into his palm. Matthew watched him sprinkle the flakes into the water. As Aaron closed the top, the fish dove upwards, their mouths snapping at the food.

"They're eating a lot," Aaron said, looking outside at Saul. Saul was still smoking. "Would you tell him to come up to the office when he's done?" Aaron asked Matthew. Matthew nodded, and Aaron went upstairs.

Matthew watched as the smoke clouded around Saul's head, then drifted skyward. In a few minutes, the air was clear, and Saul tossed the butt on the ground. He came back inside.

"What was that?" he asked. "Can I see it again?"

"It's an art project," Matthew told him. The popcorn was wet and heavy in his mouth. He backed away from the counter. Saul looked tall, clear and strong. Matthew felt himself shrinking against the ice bin. Saul held out his hand, pink and broad, with chewed nails and skin beginning to crack from dryness. With the same plunging motion as a shot bird, Matthew swiped up the bag and threw it at Saul. He wrapped his arms around himself as Saul picked it up.

Saul opened the bag and took the wire out. He held it in the air. The telephone wire had come loose and dangled from the aluminum. Even in the soft light of the theater lobby, the gnarled wire was sharply crippled. Saul frowned.

"I don't get it," he said.

"It's going to be a train," Matthew explained, his fingers digging in the ice to feel solid, sure cold.

"How painful," Saul said, pulling at the loose telephone wire. "You have no interest in trains, do you?"

"It's my first time working with wire," Matthew tried to shield himself with the excuse. He wanted the wire back, safe in its bag, but he didn't move.

"It's almost broken here," Saul pointed to a corner. "Why did you pull so hard?"

"I can't get it to bend right," Matthew's hand was numb from the ice. "When I bend hard, the shape gets lost. If I don't bend hard enough, there is no shape."

"This is too static," Saul said. "The shape is there, but it doesn't look capable of motion. Did you try making the wheels for this?"

"I've tried not to think of how many wheels I'll have to make."

"It'll be difficult. Why don't you make something easier?"

"I can't," Matthew said. Saul put the wire down and looked at him expectantly. "When I saw the wire," Matthew continued, his breathing not coming easily, "I saw a train. I could see silver cars and copper wheels and that's all I could see. It's what the wire has to do."

"You should start over," Saul said. "It won't go anywhere like that."

Matthew grabbed the wire and threw it into the cubbyhole, not

bothering to cover it. The theater was full of Saul's breathing.

"I'm sorry," Saul said. "I have a habit of giving a critique when it isn't asked for."

"I guess it's good for me," Matthew said. "Did you win in court?"

"No. Their radars are irrefutable," Saul tapped his fingers on the counter. "Do you want to practice some German?" he asked.

"I don't know. I keep thinking in French every time I try."

"If you want, stick around after work. Aaron and I can help. He's got a terrible accent, but he's more patient than I am."

When Saul went upstairs, Matthew realized how drained he was. He hadn't been prepared to see the wire in the hands of an artist who would know how to bend it. The stack of photos was still on the counter and Matthew pushed them away, but he couldn't help but seeing the top one. It was inside a cathedral. Saul had taken it out of focus, so that sunlight, stained glass, and candlelight all blurred in arcs around the priest, whose face was blurry, too.

Matthew paced the length of the stand like it was a cage, feeling burned when he looked at the wire. Then he stopped and picked it up. The theater was quiet. Matthew glanced at the charcoal sketch on the wall. It appeared full of shadows. Matthew gripped the wire in both hands and squeezed as hard as he could. The wire resisted, but Matthew pressed harder. All at once, the box caved in; so fast Matthew's knuckles cracked together. While his breathing slowed, he studied the new shape. It was jarred from the raw impact of his hands; the angles were shameful.

He put the wire on top of the counter and walked out from behind the stand. He carefully opened the door of the auditorium, so light wouldn't bother the audience. For a minute, he stood in the back, letting his eyes adjust.

The lady with the curlers was in the last row. She was chewing on her candy. She looked around when Matthew came in and motioned for him to sit beside her. He fumbled past her knees and sat down.

"Thank-you, dear" she whispered. "I didn't feel like sitting alone."

"Do you like this?" Matthew asked.

"I like the music," she said. "But it's hard to listen to."

The oboe player was in the desert. It was nighttime. The camera didn't do a close up of his face, but stood back so he was a small white dot in the spread of desert sand. Matthew heard the music from far away. With no ceilings or walls, it floated in the air, letting the wind take it in every direction.

Matthew relaxed in his seat. He breathed easier when he became another silhouette illuminated by the screen.

Contents

Char Miller

Cleaning

Jacob began his shift on the executive floor of Thompson Chemical. He poured wastebaskets into the large, heavy, cloth trash bag. Lipstick-dotted Kleenexes and computer paper piled high. The smell of apple cores and orange peels hit him, and he thought again that he should start school somewhere.

Working the night janitorial shift made him feel like he walked into a place where the party had ended. The halls were pregnant with silence. There were no voices, no laughter. The printers, telephones, and labs were mute, as if holding their breath waiting for morning. The building looked deserted and exposed. Jacob almost felt sneaky as he walked around, as if cleaning someone's office was like reading their diary. The labs were the worst temptation. Jacob spent a period of time gazing at the bottles of chemicals, the beakers, and the scales. His hands ached to uncap a bottle of orange copper sulfite, or to feel the power of pouring a little of the sulfuric acid into a small beaker.

Tonight, he wanted the shift to stretch as long as possible. He still had his father's lithium in his pocket. His father wouldn't need it. They would give him something at the hospital to hold him over until tomorrow, when he had his hearing. Natalie, his father's social worker, told Jacob that without Jacob telling the judge what he'd seen that day, his father wouldn't be admitted for long term care.

Jacob walked into a bathroom. There was a large Pepsi spill under the sink; the can had rolled into a stall. Jacob automatically recited the cleaning procedure to himself: Hot water

(with soap) VeriSheen, (diluted--one cap per gallon), fresh mop (use the one with the green handle, it's for bathrooms).

Jacob followed the ritual. The spill wasn't hard. It wasn't like coffee on the carpet or mud prints. Other janitors said cleaning bathrooms was a job worth more than the president's salary, but Jacob didn't mind the bathrooms. They involved many trips to the maintenance closet for water, and he was usually in a sweat by the time he'd finished scrubbing the sinks. The bathrooms were the only rooms showing proof that he'd worked hard.

Dr. Feldman's office was next, because Jacob knew he had to spend extra time on the windows. He'd skipped them while Dr. Feldman was on vacation. There would be a week's worth of dust to wipe off. Dr. Feldman was fierce about clean windows. He'd called Jacob in one day when Jacob had done the job with paper towels.

"You've obviously never appreciated looking out of a clean window," Dr. Feldman had said, leaning back in his chair while Jacob had stood awkwardly in the center of the room, pinned down by the overhead lights.

"Rob told me to use paper towels and VeriKlear," he'd said, hearing his words nosedive before they reached the desk.

"Rob doesn't do what he should do," Dr. Feldman sighed. "Can you see the view I get from here?"

Jacob had looked outside. The window overlooked the back parking lot. Behind the parking lot were a few stores and then a row of houses. A train chugged near the horizon. Jacob could see its smoke.

"It's nice," Jacob had said.

"It's not nice when I have to look at it from behind streaks like that one," Dr. Feldman pointed a long finger at the right corner, where a the paper towels had smudged. "I can't work without my view. In the future, make sure I'll be able to work."

Jacob squirted a mist of VeriKlear on the window. He wiped the squeegee with a cloth to get the extra dust off, and pressed it hard against the glass. It made a clean cut in the mist as he dragged it through. He stepped back, squinting his eyes, and didn't see any streaks. Then he sat in Dr. Feldman's maroon leather chair, tilting it back and looking at the window again. It still looked clear. He started to get up to start on another section, but sat back instead and turned to face the desk. He ran his fingers over the heavy wood, touched the pen in its marble holder, flipped the pack of Post-It notes through his fingers, and tentatively pushed the buttons on the phone.

Jacob thought about the first time he'd seen his father drowning in his own thoughts. He'd been ten, his father still owned his own butcher shop, the Meat Feast, and his parents were going to take him Trick-or-Treating. His father said they should all get dressed up, since Halloween wasn't only for kids.

His mother had spent the month of October stitching Halloween costumes for herself, Jacob, and his father. They were going to be the King, Queen and Jack of Diamonds. Jacob could hear the sewing machine roaring and spinning late at night and in the dark blue of early morning. In the afternoon, after school, she'd make him stand

stiff and motionless in the kitchen while she wrapped measuring tape around his waist, a row of pins fanning her lips. On the day before Halloween they'd sat in the den, newspapers covering the red carpet, and decorated their crowns with plastic jewels and red glitter.

Jacob had been like a delirious sandpiper that Halloween afternoon. He spent the day running around the house trying on bits and pieces of his costume, trying not to look at the clock, and sneaking glances outside every few minutes to see if any rain clouds were creeping in. He forced himself to eat the fish and rice his mother had made in an effort to balance all the sugar he'd eat that night. His father had been loud and laughing for the day, grabbing Jacob at random to spin him around and smacking kisses on Jacob's mother's cheek.

His mother had let him get dressed after he'd eaten, and Jacob had spent a few minutes tracing his fingers over his costume, smiling and shivering at the same time as he touched what felt like satin and velvet. He'd buttoned the ruffled shirt and smoothed it into his red pants which rustled when he walked. The red robe was heavy and warm on his shoulders and he'd wriggled to feel it rub on his back. He'd grabbed his crown off his dresser and placed it over his head as if afraid it would break. It felt light.

"Oh, that fits you perfectly," his mother had cried, clapping her hands together when he'd pounded downstairs. Jacob had twirled in the hall and made his robe flare. His mother had beamed from under a plastic diamond tiara and fluffed her red dress.

"Can we stay out late?" Jacob had asked.

"I think it'll be too cold for you to want to stay out that late," his mother had straightened the bow which held his robe.

Jacob's father had swept into the hall, raising his arms high and flapping them like a giant red bat. He'd danced around the hall in a lumbering jig, asking them if they'd heard any spirits, because he had. Jacob stood against the wall. His hand reached out to feel its solidarity. He hadn't seen his father sweat like that before, or seen him grin so fiercely. His father became a towering, roaring mountain of red glitter. Jacob looked at his mother, expecting her to tame his father. She held her hand on her throat, as if it were sore. Jacob felt like turning into a shadow. When his father swung the door open, he gulped in huge breaths of air.

"Barry," his mother had laughed, but it had been a small one. "I had no idea dressing up and going out on Halloween would do this to you."

"It's good to be outside," Jacob's father had said. "We ought to move where we can be outside all year. Would you like that, Jacob?"

"We're moving?" Jacob had stopped walking and blinked up at his father. His mother had quickly walked over to his side, her shoes clicking on the sidewalk and making dry leaves snap, and took his hand.

"Of course not," she'd said, glancing at his father before starting to walk again. His father had shrugged and kicked a neatly raked lump of leaves, sending them scattering over the street.

Jacob looked up at the faces of his parents, yellow in the streetlights and stark under their glinting, plastic headpieces. He felt too old to go trick-or -treating.

Later that night, after Jacob had sorted his candy into good, so-so, and crap, he'd fallen asleep still tasting the last Snickers bar he'd sneaked before his mother had put the candy on a high shelf in the cupboard. He'd left his window open so he could hear the leaves in the wind. He didn't know how long he'd been asleep when his father shook him awake with a deep whisper.

"Come with me," his father had said. "Something's wrong at my store."

"What's wrong?" Jacob had rubbed his eyes. His father had pulled him out of bed by the arms, draping a coat over his shoulders. "I'm not dressed."

"It's important," his father had hissed. "I can tell. Be quiet now, your mother doesn't have a sense for these things."

Jacob had tried to hurry in the dark. Gripping his father's hand and keeping his other arm outstretched in front of him, he groped for solid objects. His father hadn't said anything during the drive to the store, but his hand fluttered from the rearview mirror to the radio to his seatbelt and back again. Jacob watched his father stare intently out the windshield, wincing when headlights shone in their direction. He pressed his mouth shut, sensing he should be quiet and watch.

They'd turned into the parking lot of Meat Feast and Jacob pressed his hands against the window, looking at the dark store.

His father had pushed his door open and rolled out. The truck shook when his father's weight jumped off.

"What's wrong with the store?" Jacob had asked.

"Get out here, quick."

Jacob had scrambled out of his side and hurried over to his father, who stood straight and tall, facing the street.

"You can hear that, can't you?" his father had asked. Jacob stood still, listening to a few cars drive by and the wind blow leaves in the trees. He shivered under his coat. "Listen," his father had said when another car drove by. "You can tell what that person's thinking if you listen to their tires. Did you hear that? Did you hear how calm and smooth those tires sounded? That's a family man, going home with last minute groceries. Here's another one."

Jacob watched a battered Honda clatter by, its exhaust pipe trailing in the street. He'd strained to hear something.

"Did you get that?" His father gripped his arm. "God, it's almost written on the road. That's a daughter who had a date with someone her parents don't like. She's sad because she hates him. They were right."

"What's wrong with the store?" Jacob had turned away from the street, looking again at the Meat Feast.

"It's mean of me to do this," his father had laughed. "I shouldn't eavesdrop, but I can't help it. I can hear a car way over on Patterson street now. It's a pizza delivery. I can hear the guy's thoughts. He thinks its damn cold and he's hungry. He wants

the money in the cash drawer. Let's go inside."

Jacob had pulled his coat tightly around his chest and stumbled as his father steered him by the shoulder up to the door and led him inside the shop. Inside, Jacob had felt himself breathe easier. The familiar surroundings seemed to touch him and relax him, even cloaked in shadows. He looked at the covered display case and the green 0.00 on the register and let go of his coat. There was a delicious sense of warm rebellion at being in a dark store after it was closed and he moved a little closer to his father, who didn't turn on the lights.

"Look at this," his father flung the cover off the display case to reveal empty white trays. "I have to fill it. Do you know what I'd like to fill it with?" He tossed the cover into a corner. "I can see it filled with ostrich meat. I'd be the only damn person to sell ostrich in the entire state, I bet. People want it, I can tell. They're bored when they come in here. They probably don't taste what they buy no matter how they cook it. They want something to make them snap out of it. Ostrich would do it."

Jacob had kept one hand on the display case and the other shoved in his pocket, feeling the warmth of a shredded Kleenex. He'd watched his father pace and flail around the store, a wild bear loose in the shadows. With an open palm, his father had clapped his own ears, swearing in a low voice.

"Shut up...shut up...I'm not listening today," he'd mumble. "Can you hear that?" his father demanded suddenly, looking at Jacob. Jacob had leaned toward the display case, trying to see his

father's face.

"Hear what?" he'd asked.

"They're making terrible noises."

"I can't hear anything."

"Open your ears," his father had stopped in back of the display case directly across from Jacob. He leaned over and picked Jacob up under the arms and lifted him so his legs had dangled off the top of the display case and his face had been pressed to his father's shirt, which smelled damp and sweaty.

"I'm going to make ostrich," his father had said. "I'm the only one who can do it. Do you understand?"

Jacob had nodded, his neck sore from arching. His father's voice skidded out of the range voices use for conversation. Jacob hung on to his father's shirt sleeve, gripping the warm cotton tightly so it didn't escape his understanding.

His father had smiled, a broad smile full of teeth, and, keeping Jacob up with one arm, reached behind him and grabbed a cleaver with the other. He held it between their faces, it's blade dull gray in the dark.

"Put your hand on that," his father ordered. Still watching his father's face for something familiar to smooth the features, Jacob wrapped his hand around the handle of the cleaver, feeling its solid, heavy wood.

"On the metal."

Jacob had slid his hand up to the bottom of the blade, then laid his fingertips on the cold metal. His father's fingers covered

his. Jacob had felt his arm and shoulder aching and his feet falling asleep, but he didn't move and didn't take his eyes away from his father, who was smiling wider. Jacob knew he would have to wait to cry. He kept himself still. He imagined he was heavier than he was, so his father would have more to hold him down.

Jacob finished the windows in Dr. Feldman's office, taking his time because he liked the thick carpeting and the smell of leather. After they were done, he scrubbed out the bathrooms and the lounge, then was ready to go to the laboratory he'd been assigned. He took the elevator down to the basement and collected the containers for waste chemicals.

Cleaning the lab meant sweeping the floor and separating trash into proper containers. Jacob swept and emptied the broken glass, paper, and chemical waste. His hands were shaky. There was a bottle of hydrochloric acid on the table in front of him. Jacob let himself lean forward and wrap his hands around it. It was plastic; no indication that its contents were more powerful or potent than the cleaners he used.

Jacob got a beaker from a shelf and set it on the table. The lines on the glass were reassuring; confident measurements. Unscrewing the cap of the acid, Jacob looked around to make sure he was alone. It was silent. Carefully, he tipped the bottle. The liquid poured out, faster than he expected. He put it down. The acid almost reached the 500 ml mark. Jacob expected a feeling of satisfaction to come over him, but pouring the acid wasn't enough.

It wasn't enough to let it sit.

In the trash he'd emptied, he found a pin. He wiped it off, then brought it back to the table. It made a soft plop when he dropped it in. The acid bubbled. Jacob waited for the pin to disappear a little at a time, but it didn't. Jacob watched until the acid stopped fizzing before dumping it into the sink.

He started thinking of the time between his eleventh birthday and now, how scooped out and barren those years had seemed as his father was shuffled between hospitals, doctors and medicines.

Jacob's mother had moved to an apartment when he was sixteen, after she divorced his father, who had been admitted to an ~~inpatient~~ hospital. Jacob had spent summer helping his mother scrub the walls and floors, smooth strawberry wallpaper onto the kitchen walls, install a stereo system that nearly reached the ceiling, and had moved the furniture around ten times until she decided that it looked both comfortable and elegant.

One night she'd locked herself in the bathroom for an hour with her tape player, playing Micheal Bolton until Jacob felt the apartment drip with swooning saxophones and a voice that tried to rip with rawness but turned plastic and phony. She'd come out of the bathroom with red eyes, smelling like strong chemicals. Her hair had gone from mouse brown to jet black, and she stroked it timidly with her fingers, smiling a little at Jacob.

"A little drastic," she'd said. "But I think I'll get used to it."

"It looks all right," Jacob had lied, turning back to his

biology book and focusing intently on the anatomy of a crayfish.

His father had balanced his black and white moods somewhat with lithium and he was released from the hospital when Jacob was seventeen. He'd had to close the Meat Feast, and could not find a job except with the Compton meat plant, ten miles out of town. Jacob had gone to visit him at the beginning of fall.

"You call if you get even a little nervous," his mother had told him.

"I'm not nervous," Jacob had said, but drove to his father's apartment arming himself with conversation so there would be no moments of silence. There had been too many of those during the hospital visits, when they'd looked around each other as the noise of the hospital filled the void.

"It's not much," his father had said, when he'd opened the door. "But I can stand it."

"It's sort of dark, isn't it?" Jacob had asked, stepping inside. The living room gaped wide, with only a couch and a small table with a TV. The blinds weren't drawn, but the room felt dark even with cream-colored walls.

"Not much sun," his father had said. "I get a good view of the sunset, though."

"The sunrise wakes me up at Mom's," Jacob had said with a queasy-sounding laugh. "Even with the curtains closed. Are you feeling OK?" he asked quickly, stuffing his hands in his pockets and wishing the question hadn't come out of his mouth. His father

had shrugged and grinned a little.

"I'm eating better," he'd said. "I'm starting to like mashed potatoes again."

"How's the job?"

"It's all right. I'm only going to be there a little while. There's an opening coming up at the Spare Rib and Pork Barrel, or so I hear. I oversee Compton's slaughterhouse right now. Hardly the same thing as owning a store, but I can manage."

They'd spent the day like it was a pristine tea party, ✓ language keeping themselves slightly stiff and frozen. They'd played poker, which Jacob's father said he'd learned to play well when the staff wasn't looking, and watched the Lions stomp the Colts. His father had let him have beer with his hamburger. Jacob could still taste the beer if he thought about it, bitter, cold, and smooth. He'd drunk it slowly. It erased all other tastes in his mouth and filled his stomach with foam.

"God, I didn't show you, did I?" his father had asked, after they'd finished eating and were watching The Match Game. "Come with me, I'll show you what I found on the side of the apartment building today."

Jacob had followed his father to his bedroom, which was swollen with gold light from the sunset. Red cartons from a Chinese restaurant were scattered on the floor, some sweet and sour sauce had crusted in the carpet. His father went over to the table by the unmade bed and picked up a piece of paper, carefully lifting it to his face.

"It was real hard getting this," he'd said. "It took me a while. I didn't want to crush it and ruin it."

He'd brought it over to Jacob and lowered it slowly. In the crease Jacob saw a dried brown skin, and he'd touched it as gently as if it were china. It made a quiet scratching noise.

"Sometimes I can still hear them out there," his father had said.

"What?" Jacob had looked up.

"Cicadas. It's late in the season, but for some reason they're hanging around. I like to think I can hear this particular one, since this is all I have of him, but I know I can't."

"Can I hold it?"

"Be careful."

Jacob had cupped his hands and hardly sensed the weight of the paper, but tried to hold his breath so he wouldn't move the skin. His palms grew hot as his mind swam and dove for something to say, but he stood still and listened to his father's heavy breathing, which felt like it shook the walls.

After he'd dozed off on the couch that night, his father was called in to work. In a fog of sleep, Jacob hadn't paid attention to his father leaving. He'd turned over on his stomach, slid his arms under the pillow, and closed his eyes again.

He'd woken up in what felt like a few minutes, the skin on his neck prickling. He'd glanced out into the room and froze. In the faint light that was coming in from the morning, he could see his father standing in the doorway. His clothes were black with blood,

his face smeared with red, and the smell of raw cow intestines choked Jacob's nose and throat. Jacob gripped the pillow as his father began to walk toward the couch. His father sat down by Jacob's hips and spread one hand over Jacob's side. Jacob was paralyzed under its weight.

"How long have I been doing this?" his father asked. "How could I not have heard? They're so loud. They're so soft."

Jacob had tried to move, but then his father had leaned forward and grabbed him around the shoulders. Jacob felt himself being pulled off the cushions and pressed into his father's chest. The blood-crusted overalls his father wore were hard against his cheek and he gasped at the smell up close. His father began rocking back and forth, clutching Jacob in a fierce grip.

"They said if I washed with their soap, I wouldn't ever know what I'd done. I watched them do it so many times, I didn't think twice about doing it myself instead of watching. Do you like cows? One of them stepped on my foot. I think it thought I was getting back at it when I cut its throat open."

"Why didn't you shower?" Jacob had asked, now trying to push himself loose. "How could they let you leave like this?"

"They tried to stop me. I don't want to wash it off. They were so loud. I can't forget hearing that. I have to hear it."

"Dad," Jacob's hand wrapped around his father's shoulder and pushed. He tried pushing again, but it was like trying to get out of python's strangle-hold.

"I don't think I like the pills," his father had said. "Look

what they let me do. Can you hear them at all? I think they're still in my ears."

"No, I can't." Jacob hit at his father's chest and felt the arms around him loosen. He pulled back and shook his head. His father was looking past him, out the window where the sky was turning a lighter blue. Jacob had sat there for a few minutes, looking at the brick red crusted in his father's knuckles, before calling his mother.

The morning of the hearing,Jacob parked under the shade of a large oak tree, and walked across the parking lot to the stairs of the hospital. The outside had been freshly painted when he'd first visited his father here, but now the paint was cracked. The halls were still filled with echoes and filled with the smell of steamy cafeterias and Lysol. Natalie met him at the door of the hearing room and put a soft hand on his arm.

"This is hard," she said quietly, leading him into the courtroom. Jacob looked around, and saw his father sitting, slumped over, in the front row, his hair plastered down with water. Jacob looked away and followed Natalie's sharp footsteps to a row further back. A psychiatrist was on the stand, brushing his hair back from his forehead after each question from the lawyer.

"He's refusing medication," the psychiatrist said in answer to a question. "I don't recommend he be released without his condition being stabilized by medication."

"I can't feel my damn fingertips," Jacob heard his father

yell, and he shook his head as if to shake the voice out of his ears. "I can't **hear**." His father's lawyer gestured him to be quiet.

"Even with medication," the psychiatrist kept going smoothly. "I have to recommend long-term care for the patient. I feel his reluctance to accept treatment is the tip of the iceberg."

As the psychiatrist was excused, Jacob unbuttoned his top shirt button and waved his hand in front of his face. The other men, the lawyers, the judge, the orderlies, looked pasty and hot in the heat. Jacob was called to the stand, and he rose carefully, testing the steadiness of each foot before moving. He watched, but his father didn't look at him as he sat in the wooden chair. Jacob licked his lips and looked around for a water pitcher. The lawyer asked him to describe what he'd seen the previous week. Jacob dug at the skin under his nails, biting his lip against the pain.

"I went to visit my father at his apartment. I was supposed to take him to a drugstore to renew his prescription." he began. "I knocked, but he didn't answer, so I tried the door and it was open."

"What state was the apartment in?" the lawyer asked, chewing his gum hard. Jacob smelled stale spearmint.

"There were clothes all over, and dishes with food crusted on them. I saw glasses with mold in the bottom. The TV was on, but it was turned to a station that had gone off the air. It was hot, there weren't any windows open. I saw the bottle of Lithium on a table, untouched. There were ants crawling on it."

"Was Mr. Hollister in the apartment?"

"I found him outside."

"Doing what?"

Jacob looked again at his father. He slumped heavily, like a puppet with cut strings. His eyes were staring at the floor and his thumb moved back and forth on his leg. Jacob swallowed.

"He was out in back, kneeling in the dirt by the building. He was clawing at the ground. It looked like he was trying to dig up a crocus, but he kept saying 'I'll find them. I'll find them. I can hear them. They want to come inside. I want one' I asked him what he was doing but he didn't hear me."

good

"Do you know what he was talking about?"

"He would stop sometimes and smear dirt on his cheeks, like he was washing his face. I asked him why he hadn't been taking his medicine. He still didn't answer."

"What was his appearance like?"

"It didn't look like he'd washed or slept in a few days. His eyes were red and his hair had dirt in it."

Jacob ran his hands back and forth on the arms of the chair. His father was looking up now, his eyes focused on Jacob and his tongue running around his teeth. The hospital lawyer finished and Jacob's father's lawyer rose to his feet, pushing up the knot on his tie.

"Are you sure you don't know what your father was looking for?" he asked.

"I wish I did."

"I can't hear them anymore," his father shouted, suddenly full

of a rumbling, sweeping energy. "I wanted a real one. I didn't want to scrape them off the side of the goddamned building."

The lawyer calmed his father down again and excused Jacob from the witness chair. Jacob felt his father's eyes burn into him as he walked back to his seat next to Natalie.

"How long will he have to stay here?" he asked her. She thought for a minute.

"I guess at least a year," she said. "He seems pretty determined not to take medication. He kept telling me and Dr. Kirsten it filled his ears with fluid and made his hands numb. He said it made him unable to tolerate heat and that he couldn't hear. Those aren't typical side effects."

The judge didn't deliberate for more than two minutes. He committed Jacob's father for a year with the possibility of long term care. Jacob let go of Natalie's hand and felt himself stand up. It felt like a crack was running down his spine, as if he was ripping out of something. The courtroom's lights made his eyes squint and the heat made sweat run down his body. He walked towards his father. The courtroom smelled like rain.

"I'll visit a lot," Jacob said, feeling the words flail for impact. "I promise."

"Why don't you wake up?" his father snapped, starting to cuff his own ear with his hand. The orderly grabbed it. "It's too hot for visitors. Go home."

The orderlies had gotten a better grip and moved him out of the courtroom. He shuffled, and his head swayed down to his chest.

The lawyers and judge left, their briefcases neatly tucked under their elbows. Natalie asked if he wanted to talk. Jacob shook his head. She told him where she would be if he needed her and walked out.

Jacob touched the bottle in his pocket and brought it out, looking at it in the empty, hollow courtroom. In the hall he could hear talking, laughing, footsteps, carts being wheeled to various rooms, and he closed his eyes to listen hard. The sounds whirled together and clashed. He could hear them, but there was something deep inside of him that felt like he'd be cut off from sound for a long time. He opened the bottle and poured a handful of the pink capsules into his hand. They grew moist with the sweat from his palm. Jacob stood still for a minute, then flung the pills at the witness chair. They landed on the floor like a quick, soft rainfall and he rolled the sound into his memory, trying to keep it from slithering out.

Contents

Char Miller

A Concert in Autumn

From the kitchen window I watch my father vacuum the rusty blue Tempo, while I wait for my frozen waffle to pop up in the toaster. My father kneels in the driver's side, grasps the vacuum hose like it's a wild python and crams it in the space between the two front seats. Yellow leaves from the big walnut trees in our yard spin down in little hurricanes, piling on top of the windshield wipers.

The toaster pings and I smell something burning. My waffle is half black because our toaster has lots of crumbs caught in the bottom that we can't clean out and it burns almost everything. I break off the burned part and put it in the garbage, then spray pine-scented cleaner all over it, hoping that will keep the bugs from crawling into it. Our house is old and wood; it fills with insects in the fall. This year I can hear termites eating the walls.

I spread strawberry jam on the half of the waffle I can eat and walk into the living room. There are stacks of musical scores on the floor that make an obstacle course on top of the nubby green carpet. Grabbing the remote control, I flop on the couch, turning the TV on so I can watch reruns of 'Fantasy Island' before I have to leave for school.

Stretching one arm against a white throw pillow, I can tell my summer tan is completely gone. In the summer, my father and I spend all day in the garden. The sprinkler hiccups in circles, spurting water over the grass. We listen to Scott Joplin's piano rags ripple

on the portable tape player while we tie the tomato plants to stakes and try to dig dandelions out by the roots. After the sun starts to go down, he grills chicken outside, letting me brush the barbecue sauce over the pieces. We eat outside, watching the sun dissolve in the sky before we go to the bird sanctuary to feed the geese or to the zoo to watch the sea lion show.

My father bursts through the door, I can hear the vacuum being dragged inside and land with a thud as he dumps it in the foyer. He goes into the kitchen and I can see him pouring a cup of coffee from the tin percolator before he wanders into the living room. His face is red; his hair has been blown out of its part and brushed over to one side. He leans against the archway and stares at the TV. The coffee smells strong. I watch as steam drifts up from the yellow mug and disappears by the time it reaches his nose.

"So," he says. "You'll be a big twelve years old tomorrow."

I don't know what to say to a remark like that.

"What should we do?" he asks."I'm afraid we'll have to postpone a long celebration until after this weedend. I'm still getting ready for the fall concert. Got a movie you want to see?"

"I don't know. There're too many mushy love stories out right now," I tell him.

My father and I do the same thing every year on my birthday. He apologizes because the symphony's Board of Directors schedules the fall concert so close to my birthday and that he has to spend it planning the program or rehearsing. He says he has tried to get the date changed, but the board doesn't listen well to the

conductor. We usually spend my birthday in the Family Mart, after he gets home from practice.

He sends me off to the bakery department to get a birthday cake while he fills the shopping cart with frozen dinners and microwave lunches. He doesn't like me trying to cook when he isn't there and I know as soon as my school starts, his rehearsals run late, board meetings are dragged out, and planning for Christmas programs gets hectic, so he takes microwave Beef-A-Roni with him in the morning and leaves Hungry Man Chicken Dinner in the freezer for me. We make a strange-looking pair in the check-out aisle, between single men buying beer, onion rolls, and bologna, and irritated mothers trying to slap their childrens' hands out of the candy bins.

Aunt Susan usually calls later at night to wish me Happy Birthday and she asks about my school and my friends, then tells me my present is in the mail. It's always a sweater; she says we live in a terribly cold state and worries about my catching the flu.

"Well maybe we could go to a play," my father says. "And you haven't told me which bookstore you want a gift certificate from. The one in the mall or the one downtown?"

"I like the downtown store," I say. "It carries more Lois Duncan."

"All right," my father nods, taking a sip of his coffee."Would you like to come to one of the concerts? We're doing a tribute to Mozart. You like Mozart, don't you? There're going to be selections from 'The Magic Flute' and 'Eine Kleine Nachtmusik'. The concerts

are sold out, but you can listen backstage."

"I don't know," I say. "I've heard those a lot."

Last year I kept sneezing because the velvet curtains were so dusty and the wooden floor squeaked loud and fierce when I walked around. It felt hollow and dim back there because the ceilings were high and the walls were cement.

My father watches as Mr. Roarke greets the guests of 'Fantasy Island' by toasting them with champagne, and shakes his head.

"You're brain's going to wither up like a prune if you keep watching so much of this stuff," he says.

"I don't watch it all the time," I say. "Besides, it's too cold to do anything outside."

The phone rings, and my father sets his cup down on a stack of music before picking up the red wall phone in the kitchen. I hear him mumble, "Yes?", and I see him start twisting the cord around his hand. His end of the conversation is made up of short, irritated blurbs, so I can tell he's talking to Mrs. Wabash, the president of the Board of Directors

to Mozart...I'm telling you it would be a mistake...Shirly, be reasonable, please...don't yell...don't **threaten** me either...all right, we'll do parts from the 'Requiem', but I really don't think...". He pauses for a second, then slams the phone down. I jump at the noise and look into the kitchen. He stands with one hand on the counter, mumbling. The morning sun lights on his wedding band as he shoves the other hand through his hair. After a few minutes he stalks to the foyer and I turn back to 'Fantasy

Island'.

I hear coat hangers jingling in the closet and the front door gets tugged open. My father calls to me,

"Lila, I have to go to the office. I'll be home late tonight. Your lunch money's on the counter."

"You didn't eat breakfast," I call back.

"Yes, I know, I'll grab something later."

"We have bugs," I tell him."Can we get an exterminator? I think I saw a millipede in the laundry."

"Well make sure it doesn't wash the reds with the whites," he says. "Don't be late for school," he adds, and I hear the door scrape across the linoleum before slamming shut.

A commercial for maple syrup has come on, so I push myself off the couch and go into the kitchen, stretching my legs because they are cramped from being bent. I see the Tempo rip down the driveway; yellow leaves flying off the windshield like startled butterflies. From the rack on the wall, I get a green coffee cup with a treble clef-shaped handle and fill it halfway with coffee. The rest of the cup I fill with sugar and milk until the liquid is pale and sweet.

I check the fridge to see if there is anything else to eat for breakfast. In the summer, the shelves look like a rainbow with the vegetables from our garden; red peppers, squash, eggplant, beets, peas, yellow beans and tomatoes. When I open the drawer, one dried up carrot rolls around, cracked and wrinkled.

I go back into the living room, picking my way around the towers of music, noticing that the room is barely large enough to hold the couch,

entertainment center and brown leather armchair. Tapes, CD's, and records, arranged alphabetically and by period, cover two walls. Baroque starts in one corner, classical spans half a wall, romantic turns the corner, and contemporary finishes the line. The composer taking up the most space is Vivaldi, especially his Trumpet Concerto in C; there are six recordings of it. Aunt Susan told me once that my mother was a trumpet soloist.

'Fantasy Island' is back on, and I blow on my coffee before sipping it. Mr. Roarke is saving a woman who sold her soul to the devil. I like it when he saves people, he's good at it. He's very wise, but he's gentle and he seems like someone everybody should have come their room when they have nightmares. When I have nightmares, I make up characters to be his family, since he has no family on the show. I've made up a son named David, a daughter named Paula, and a woman he would fall in love with called Lisa.

I finish my coffee; there is a wet drizzle of sugar at the bottom. I rinse out my cup and my father's in the sink, unplugging the percolator before getting my backpack. I open the front door to check the temperature.

The air is prickly with cold so I wind a scarf around my neck and dig for my mittens before leaving.

Our steps are thickly coated with walnut leaves. Chestnuts and acorns have dropped all over the yard like little bombs. I drag my feet through the leaves to feel their heaviness on my tennis shoe, wondering if I should ask my father to send me to Aunt Susan's for the weekend as a birthday present. She lives in Arizona, a long way from Michigan.

When I was really young and starting to ask questions, my father told me my mother had gone to live with her favorite composer, Vivaldi, in heaven after I'd been born. When I'd gotten older, I'd wanted to know

exactly when she'd gone, and I'd asked him that one day while he was cleaning the windows. He'd started scrubbing hard, and the ammonia from the cleaner filled my nose.

"It was in the fall," he'd told me, squinting at a streak that was more stubborn than his paper towels."She's happy now, that's the important thing."

Aunt Susan, my mother's sister, had been visiting that day, and I'd asked her the same question. She'd pulled me in to her lap, wrapping her arms around my waist and propping her chin on my head. "She had a terrible disease, Lila," she'd told me. "There was nothing anybody could do. She was able to hold you before she died, and she was so happy because you looked like her mother."

"What disease?" I'd had to know. Aunt Susan had patted my knee. "Oh, I don't know if I remember the exact term--"

"What disease?" I'd demanded, my voice higher. I'd finally gotten the name eclampsia out of her. The name had rolled like distant thunder in my head for a long time, until earlier this year. The bookstore downtown has a medical section. In a book about pregnancy, I looked at the section containing eclampsia. I picked the terms into small syllables, and they spelled out eclampsia in a black and white sense that still gives me nightmares.

I reach the corner of Elm and Park. Park Street has the Wedel's my father and I will go to as soon as the crocus buds appear in the spring to buy starter plants and seeds. The clerks know us; they ask every year if we're going to try watermelons again, since our melons never make it, even though we spray each leaf with soapy, ashy water to kill aphids and other pests. All the other customers, mostly older women in big flowered shirts and tan pants, seem to know us, too, because they smile at us while they fill brown sacks with bird seed.

When I get to school, Mr. Havens, my teacher says, "Lila, would you come here for a minute?", in a voice that instantly makes me want to yell, "I didn't do it". I trudge up to his desk, and see he is holding the report I had to write yesterday on the film we saw about Mercury and Venus. The pages are slashed with red and Mr. Havens looks stern.

"Do you understand what science is?" he asks, and rushes on before I can answer. "It is fact, it is hard evidence, it is definitely not what you have in this report. Did you understand the assignment was to write a scientific report on the movie?"

I nod and he sighs.

"How factual does this sound?" he asks, and starts to read my paper out loud. I quickly look around, groaning to myself when I realize how many people are in the room and will hear him.

"Mercury and Venus were bored to death going around in circles," Mr. Havens starts. "Especially Mercury because he went so fast and so many times. One day they decided to look for a black hole and go swimming--"

"All right," I say hastily, my cheeks burning. "I'm sorry."

"I like creativity," he tells me. "You'll be able to do this when we have a creative writing assignment, but not as a science report. Understand?"

"Yes," I nod again. "Do I have to do it over?"

He shuffles a pile of papers around his desk, frowning as he thinks.

"No," he decides. "But make sure the report you do on today's film is what the assignment asks for."

I walk away from his desk, breathing easier, and go to my seat which is in the back corner of the classroom. My last name is Yantes, so I sit in the back row next to a boy named Ivan Zachariah. He's tiny, and wears jeans with huge cuffs. He constantly pushes his glasses up when he talks, and when I first started talking to him, he cringed like I was hitting

him. We talk better now, even if he mumbles at his desk most of the time. Tom Bradford, the biggest, meanest, boy in the class, calls Ivan "Ichabod" or "iguana shit" when Mr. Havens isn't listening, and always smacks Ivan hardest when we play dodgeball in gym.

Ivan is looking at the cafeteria's weekly menu when I sit down. He glances at me, pinching a corner of the menu with his fingers.

"They're having pizza today," he says hopefully.

"What dessert do you have?" I ask.

"My mom gave me a big piece of apple strudel," he said. "She made it last night."

"What kind of sandwich?"

"Ham salad, I think, with mustard and lettuce."

"All right," I dig in my pocket and pull out my lunch money. As I lay it on his desk, he hands me a brown paper sack that has "IVAN Z." printed in black marker on it. Ivan loves the pizza and hotdogs and tater tots they serve in the cafeteria, so we trade almost every day.

The morning is math and science in our class. Ivan helps me finding the lowest common denominator so I can add fractions. Thomas shoots a thick rubber band at Ivan when Mr. Havens writes a problem on the blackboard. Ivan hunches over his paper, pushes his glasses up. I tear off a corner of my paper and roll it between my fingers, then stick it in my mouth, chewing while Mr. Havens searches for another piece of chalk.

"Lila, don't," Ivan says under his breath, when I take the spitball out of my mouth and set it on the corner of my desk.

"He deserves it, Ivan," I say. "I bet I could get him right in the back of the neck and make a big red welt."

"Don't," Ivan insists. I see he's gripping his pencil like a javelin, and his eyes are big and worried, so I shake my head, but I flick the spitball onto the floor.

We watch another movie for science, this time on Jupiter and Saturn. The film splutters through the old projector, and the picture blurs, then clears. There is a corny sounding flute playing in the background as a man's voice booms,"What planets lie beyond Earth's horizons?". I have my notebook open and my pencil is poised over the paper. Black space, speckled with small white stars, spreads over the screen. The music changes. The flute is replaced by whispering strings that slither up and down a minor key, and then Jupiter looms up from the black, green and cloudy.

The hearty voice of the narrator is gone and a flat, nasal monotone takes its place. "Jupiter is the largest of the planets. It is 480 **million** miles from the sun. It is made up mainly of noxious gases and is very cold, reaching temperatures of **minus** 260 degrees."

The camera spans Jupiter while the strings crackle and hiss. The monotone continues,

"It is not even known for certain whether or not Jupiter has a solid core like the Earth's. It may be that this immense planet is nothing more than clouds and ice. The most interesting aspect of Jupiter is the Great Red Spot. It is not known what causes the spot, but we know there is great turbulence and storm-like conditions around that area."

Ivan scribbles furiously in his notebook, but my pencil hasn't moved. I sink in my seat, wrapping my arms over my chest, wishing I'd worn one of Aunt Susan's sweaters. A timpani starts thudding under the hissing strings as Jupiter fades away and Saturn peeks out from the folds of space. I sit up in my seat, because I think Saturn looks pretty; it looks pink and protective with its rings. The monotone breaks in.

"Saturn is even farther from the sun than Jupiter, about 900 million miles. Like Jupiter, Saturn is very cold, reaching temperatures of 360 degrees below zero. Saturn may have more noxious gasses than Jupiter, and

also may not have a solid core. The rings around the planet are ten miles thick and extend into space by 35,000 miles. To non-scientists, the rings may look like a simple phonograph record, but they are actually very complex and difficult to understand."

The movie ends with a long-distance shot of both planets, far away in their nest of blackness. Mr. Havens turns on the lights and tells us to hand our papers forward. I haven't written anything. I was too busy thinking how horrible space was; nothing but blackness and planets that are too hot or too cold for life.

"Lila, where's your report?" Ivan asks.

I shrug. He looks nervously towards the front of the room. Mr. Havens is waiting for papers from the A's and B's row. Ivan tells me to quickly copy a little of his paper.

"But don't make it exactly like mine," he says.

"Thank-you," I say gratefully.

I don't copy much, only a few sentences with word changes. I hand my paper to the girl in front of me, and Mr. Havens says tomorrow we will watch the film on Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto, the last planets in the solar system. I realize my stomach is growling, so I start daydreaming about the apple strudel until it's time to go to lunch.

More leaves have fallen on the porch by the time I get back from school. There isn't much on TV. I try to get interested in 'The Brady Bunch' or 'Different Strokes', but I get bored because I can tell what's going to happen within the first two minutes.

I turn off the TV and wander into my father's room, where he spends most of his time when he's home. His suit is hanging on the closet door. Music is all over this room, too. His French horn case is tucked in a corner, dusty because he doesn't play until the symphony's busy season is over. There is a trumpet case under the bed; I can see it sticking out.

My mother's picture sits on the bedside table. She looks like the music she loved; simple on the surface, but surrounded by frills and curls. Her smile is sad. It's jarring, like when Vivaldi twists a happy tune down a dark, minor path.

I scurry back into the kitchen when I hear my father open the door. He moves slowly to the kitchen table and slumps into a seat, resting his head in his hands. From the corner of my eye I see something crawling, and I squeal at the sight of a large ant traveling up the water faucet.

"Dad, look," I say, pointing. "Shouldn't we call an exterminator?"

"No, they're expensive," my father stands up, grabs a paper towel and squashes the ant with it, dropping the towels into the garbage. "Have you eaten?" he asks.

I shake my head and he asks me what I like on pizza.

"Anything except those little dead fish," I say, and he picks up the phone to have a pizza delivered. The pizza place knows me. I don't like the frozen turkey dinners we have in the freezer so I order pizza a lot. They never even have to ask where I live any more, and I know by heart how much a small cheese with sausage costs.

"So, have you decided what you want to do tomorrow?" my father asks. I lean against the refrigerator, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

"Can I go see Aunt Susan for a weekend?" I ask. "It would be my birthday present. I'd like that better than a gift certificate."
"Susan lives pretty far away," he says, as if I don't know. "Maybe she could come in the summer."

Kicking my foot back and forth, I watch the sun starting to set and chilly, gold light filling the room.

"I guess a movie would be OK. Maybe there's a horror playing somewhere." I suggest.

"All right, if it doesn't look like a bloodbath," my father says,

going into his room. "I need to work hard tonight," he tells me. "We have to do the 'Requiem' tomorrow and I'm not ready for it, so I'll come out and get some pizza later."

He leaves money on the counter and shuts the door to his room. The sky is purple and pink from the sunset and the house is getting dark, but I don't turn on lights because then it seems darker outside. The pizza comes and I chew on a slice, after picking off everything but the sausage. The crust tastes like the cardboard box the pizza came in.

I knock on my father's door and open it. He looks up from a thick score he had been marking with pencil.

"I just wanted to ask you to throw the pizza box outside in the garbage when you're done with it," I say. "The ants will go crazy with all those crumbs."

"All right, Lila," he says, sighing. "I'll buy some Raid tomorrow."

"Raid won't kill termites," I say. "And I've heard them in the walls."

"I haven't heard them."

"Well I have, and I can't sleep because I'm afraid they're going to chew a hole and come into my room. They destroy whole houses, you know, if you don't get rid of them."

"Fine," my father says, picking up his pencil again."I'll listen more closely tonight."

"And when you get the Raid," I keep going, suddenly not wanting to stop and shut the door. "Could you get some fresh chicken instead of the frozen dinners?"

"You don't like frozen dinners?"

"The turkey's full of gristle."

"Do you know how to cook chicken?"

"I can get recipes from Aunt Susan."

"OK," he says, his foot starting to tap up and down."I'll buy a little chicken."

"I can cook it for both of us when I get home and you can eat when you're done with work," I say. "I might be able to make apple strudel, too. My friend Ivan's mother makes it all the time and I bet she'd give me the recipe."

"That would be nice," he says, and his voice sounds strained. "But you know I usually eat at the office or grab something during rehearsal."

"You could wait," I say, taking a step out of the room, hanging onto the doorjamb.

He pushes the pencil eraser against his forehead, taps a finger on the pages of score in front of him.

"There may be some days I can wait," he says. "But I have very long days. If you want to start cooking, that's fine, I guess you're old enough, but right now I've had a long day and I have to get this piece settled in my head before tomorrow, so could I be alone for a little while?"

I step all the way out of the room and slam the door shut. All light has gone out of the sky and the house is full of shadows and dark corners. Feeling weak and shaky, I grope my way through the kitchen to the stairs. I scramble up the stairs, my feet slipping on some of the steps, and into my room, where I yank on the chain to the overhead light.

My tape player is in a corner, and I drag it to the center of the room. Rummaging through my tapes, I find my recording of Vivaldi's Trumpet Concerto in C, and my fingers fumble while I stuff it into the deck. I turn the volume up as high as it can go and press the play button. I lie on my bed and let the trumpet spout its melody over me. The violins twirl curlicues, and I slide into them, but I'm tense, waiting for them to sprout thorns.

I try to imagine a 'Fantasy Island' with Mr. Roarke and David and Paula and Lisa, but I can't seem to remember what the characters I made up were even supposed to look like. I can't picture Mr. Roarke's face too clearly, either.

I fall asleep quickly after that, Vivaldi still playing. I have nightmares. I dream I'm caught in Jupiter's Red Spot, which is full of freezing purple rain, blizzards, and tornadoes that whip poison gases into whirling green funnels. The only shelters are caves filled with sharp, ragged icicles.

Then I'm ripped from the Red Spot into space, where I drift slowly in blackness. My arms flail, trying to grab something. I pass by Saturn, and try to swim towards it, but the rings rush with hurtling asteroids. I glance at the planet and see nothing but filmy white vapor, and some of it drifts away and floats against my cheek. It's icy and wet.

I gasp and that's when I wake up. My pillow is hot and I feel sweat all over my back. My light has been turned off and so has the tape player. My sheets have been pulled up around me. I glance at the clock and then I hear my father playing his French horn downstairs. Sitting up, I pull my pillow into my lap, recognizing that he's trying to adapt a Bach flute concerto into one for the French horn. The notes are sad. They wind up to my room like maroon and sea green colored ribbons. I imagine them weaving into a satiny quilt and lie back down, letting the layers of color settle over me.

I oversleep the next day. It's after eleven when I get out of bed. My father must have left early. There is a note saying he will be home shortly after me and that there's a scary movie at the downtown theater. "Happy Birthday!" is written in red marker across the top. Underneath the note is my gift certificate to the bookstore.

My father must have cleaned the house last night, too, because

everything smells like Comet and sparkles. I start to go into the living room to watch TV, and then I hear the termites. Their gnawing and chewing is coming from everywhere. I imagine the walls bulging as more and more termites swarm in. I imagine their pale yellow bodies writhing and their jaws plucking at the wood until the walls burst and squirming piles of termites slide onto the floor.

I clap my hands to drown out the sound of them mauling the house and run out the door, leaping down the steps in one huge jump. I don't stop running until the house is far behind me, and then I slow to a walk, gasping and holding my sides.

I shove my hands into my pockets before they get chapped. I didn't think to grab a coat and I shiver in the clear cold of fall. The leaves have turned from yellow to red and brown, and they scratch along the sidewalk as the wind blows them. I duck my head to keep the wind out of my eyes and walk until I reach the symphony concert hall. The matinee concert has already started, but I walk around to the back anyway, and let myself in the door that leads backstage.

The music envelopes me immediately, pulling me towards its source. I know it's the 'Requiem', because it sounds nothing like 'Magic Flute' or 'Eine Kleine Nachtmusik' Even the cement walls seem to fill with the music. I creep across the floor to the edge of the curtain and look onstage.

My father is a small figure hidden by music stands, jittering bows, and gleaming brass, but I can see his face clearly. He closes his eyes, leaning into a swell of high flutes, cresting on the sweep of the sopranos' gliding C, and with a slash of his baton tames the timpani from a roar to a mumble. He sways on his podium as the music gushes into the auditorium, almost getting swept away, like a buoy pulling at its strings during a storm.

I reach one hand onstage. The light fills my palm. As if it's a rope, I pretend to grasp it and pull myself out next to the sopranos as another movement starts. This one is dark and angry. The choir rises and falls like raging whitecaps with strings whipped up and down jagged, slippery scales.

I hold my arms close to my sides and plunge into the middle of the violins, shoving towards the podium. Bows flutter and bounce over strings, the voices stream together to send their cry of "Dies Irae, Dies Ira" knifing through my ears. My father tears their cry out of them again and again.

When I reach him I feel raw, hot and sweaty. There is sweat glistening all over his face, too. I put one foot on the podium and push myself up beside him, facing the orchestra and choir. The music pushes against me. I grip the corner of my father's coat; it's soft and soon becomes soaked from my hand. The end of the movement has come, and my father holds both arms high.

Then he keeps the hand with the baton above his head, but brings the other one down and lays it across my shoulders. It feels heavy and damp. The music towers over us until he brings his baton down.