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"The Way of the Wolf"
by S. Kay Elmore

NEW STORIES BY

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The Mirror of Aelitz

ELLEN TERRIS BRENNER

Is true wisdom a knowledge of the outside world, or of the world within one's self?

THE TALE COMES TO US FROM THE YOUNGER DAYS of a small but prosperous kingdom, nestled in a valley of the Cloud Mountains, and bearing the name Aelitz. Its people were strong, and its rulers wise; but the true source of Aelitz's prosperity (so all the countries around them believed) was a magical mirror of great antiquity.

Many tales coalesced around this mirror. It was said that it had fallen like a star from the skies in the Dawn Days, when the Earth was new; when the First Woman found it, she was so moved by what she saw in it that the tears she shed became all the lakes and rivers and seas of the world. It was also told that when the Second Woman stole the mirror for her own, what she then saw therein caused her to tear open her throat with her own hands, birthing all the animals of the air and the earth from her blood.

And many other such tales were told about this mirror, some of which held more truth than their tellers realized. But only the monks, who kept the mirror safe in their abbey overlooking Aelitz, were allowed to look in it. And whenever they were asked about the mirror, they only smiled.

King Jeil of the neighboring country of Rigad envied the success of Aelitz. His people were diligent, and he considered himself an accomplished warrior and ruler, but his country remained poor and struggling. So Jeil swore to get the secret of the mirror of Aelitz for himself, one way or another.

He dressed in pilgrim's garb, put plain harness on his best traveling steed, and rode with a small retinue to the monastery of Aelitz. There he beat on the great oaken door with the stone club he found standing by the doorpost, and waited impatiently.

The monk who opened the door looked at him with ancient eyes that were not in the least surprised to see him. "All hail, King Jeil of Rigad," she greeted him, "and blessings on the land over which you rule."

"All hail, Your Holiness," replied Jeil, annoyed that the monk had recognized him. "I have come to learn wisdom of the mirror in your possession."

"Nobody possesses the mirror," said the monk, smiling. "We are merely its guardians. And as such, I fear we must turn down your request."

"I am willing to undergo the proper initiation," stammered the king, unused to being refused anything.

"It would be no use for you to do that," said the monk, "for your intention is wrong."

"My intention is to improve the lot of my people," said Jeil, growing angry.

The monk smiled again, not unkindly. "The instrument with which you beat on our door is not meant as a door-knocker, but is a pestle with which we grind spices for our ritual incense." And Jeil looked, and was mortified to see brown resins clinging to the stone pestle, and smeared on the door where he had struck it.

"Why do you wish to look into ancient mysteries," asked the monk, "when you have yet to learn to look at the world around you?"

"How can I hope to learn if you will not teach me?" shouted King Jeil, but the monk had already closed the door.

Enraged, the king took his retinue away from that place and hid them in the wild woods of the mountainside. At midnight he rode back to the monastery, his horse's hooves and harness muffled in strips of cloth. Nobody stirred to stop him as he scaled the monastery walls, crept amongst the sleeping huts, and slipped inside the chapel. There in an alcove hung the mirror, a mere two hands' breadth wide, covered by a dense dark cloth. For a second he hesitated, surprised to find himself questioning his resolve. Then he shook off his doubt, seized the mirror and thrust it in his satchel. He was away and over the wall and spurring his horse before he could think one more thought about his deed.

"Why do you wish to look into ancient mysteries," asked the monk, "when you have yet to learn to look at the world around you?"

His retinue joined him at their appointed rendezvous, and together they thundered for the border, looking over their shoulder all the while for signs of pursuit.

Meanwhile the monks, all of whom had been awake the whole time, rose ten minutes after Jeil's trespass and rang the great bell in the midst of their compound. The sound of it filled the entire valley of Aelitz. Every mother's child of that kingdom, from the smallest goose-herd to the aged King bolted out of bed, crying "The mirror! The gods save the mirror!"

The King's champion, Fatila, also leapt out of bed. Cursing, she ran to the stables with her long dark hair streaming unbound behind her, clutching sword in one

hand, boots in the other. The yard teemed with still-awakening creatures—soldiers, stablehands, and horses—all stomping and crying after their kind, as the great bell continued to toll.

Fatila mounted her great war steed with a heavy heart. She had won many glories in war and in sword duels, and defied death many times. But for the past three moons she had been plagued with dreams of disaster, and she wondered now if this was not her death come at last. Her gloom only increased when a runner came from the monastery saying it was Jeil of Rigad who had brazenly stolen the treasure of Aelitz. She needed no mirror to tell her that many lives would be lost before one such as Jeil would admit defeat.

Fatila led the first pursuit party, with more horsetroops following swiftly behind. All of them knew the narrow mountain roads like the faces of their father and mother.

But so did Jeil and his band, and with their slim lead they stayed ahead of their pursuit, arriving safely at the great stone walls of their home city by dawn.

No sooner was Jeil's party within the city gate than the king wheeled on his sweat-drenched mount and cried out: "Close and bolt all the gates! Prepare for battle!" Soldiers stumbled out of barracks to the sound of trumpets and drums, and lined the walls with the implements of war. When Fatila crested the hill overlooking the great main gate of Rigad, her heart sank within her to see the walled city-state already primed for siege. There was nothing more she could do but wait for the rest of her troops to arrive, and prepare for a long bitter struggle.

Within the walls of Rigad, word quickly spread that their king had successfully captured the pride of Aelitz. Every soul, whether soldier or citizen, was alight with exultation. "The mirror! Glory to the mirror!" was the cry from battlement and square. Meanwhile, King Jeil had gone straight to his chambers and locked himself in alone with the mirror.

Many times during his flight had he thought to doubt his impetuous action. Aelitz, after all, was mighty in war and had a great champion in Fatila, and his country, being poor, might come to great harm in a siege. But then he would slide a hand down to feel the prize in his satchel, and all his doubts would scatter like the gravel under his horse's hooves. The mirror would make all right. The mirror would show him what to do.

Now he hung the mirror on the wall of his chamber, paused a moment to catch his breath, and then snatched away the relic's protective cloth. He was startled to see how plain it was. Its frame was unpainted wood, smoothed in the manner of driftwood from the far oceans. The reflective surface seemed neither glass nor metal but some other, darker substance he could not name. Images swirled below that surface. The images drew him closer.

He looked in.

He saw the birth of this world, and the worlds that lived and died before this one. He saw the nativities of the gods; he saw the nests that hatched the stars. He saw First and Second Woman arise from the mud in which the gods had sown them, to join in their primal sororal struggles at the Dawn of our world. He saw their blood and tears intermingle to give rise to all living creatures, and their wombs (alive and dead) give birth to the tribes of humanity and of the spirit world. He saw the human generations rise, one after another, loving and fighting, mating and killing, all unconscious of the consequences of their actions. And he saw the gods walking among them, sometimes recognized but more often completely unknown, and his heart quailed within him to imagine what the Eternal Ones must think of these sad, unmindful lives. And then it was as if the mirror were an eye looking back into his eyes, into his own soul, and he had no excuse to offer its implacable gaze.

When at last he looked away, he was surprised to see the morning sun still shining into his chamber.

He walked to the window, feeling very much older, and with a pang looked down on the hundreds of soldiers, his own and those of Aelitz, which his folly had summoned here to kill each other. War songs celebrating the mirror rose from his troops on the clear morning air, full of the spirit of conquest. War songs of righteous anger rose in response from the troops outside the walls. And there, on the ridge overlooking the Great Gate, rode a woman with long dark hair like a flag on the wind—Fatila, who never turned away.

He saw that there was no longer any way to capitulate without sparking either a rout or a riot. There was only one way left at this point, and he had brought it on himself.

Fatila was conferring with her generals over the reports from their scouts when a shout drew her attention to the Great Gate. The portals had opened a crack to let someone slip out: an unarmed youth in green, the color of parley. He stepped forward and handed a scroll to an Aelitzian captain, who came quickly riding up the hill with it to Fatila. She felt her generals' eyes bore into her as she read it, even as the words likewise stabbed into her soul. Finally she spoke:

"Jeil proposes a fair fight. He and I. To the death. Winner to take the mirror, loser's side to withdraw unharmed."

"It's a trick. He's learned arcane fighting skills from the mirror," said one general.

"You cannot learn such things from the mirror," said another.

"How do you know?" snapped Fatila. "Do any of you know what the mirror's powers are in the first place?" The generals fell silent. She stared at them all, realizing that

this question had been boiling up in her for some hours now.

"Just so," she spoke more gently, so that her generals now stared at her in turn. "None of us know. Strange, that our homeland had held this object sacred for all these years, and yet nobody has a blessed idea what it means. Even we, who lead our people to die for it."

"Blasphemy—" muttered one general.

"Enough." Fatila's voice grew hard again. "As I said, we do not know what Jeil could or could not have learned from the mirror. There are only two things we do know for certain. One, that a siege would be the ruin of both kingdoms. And two, that a duel might be the salvation of at least one."

She spurred her horse, then, and left her generals gaping as she rode down to the gate. The two armies on either side of their wall sent up terrible battle shouts as heralds cried out the terms of the fair fight.

When Jeil rode out from the gate, Fatila barely recognized him—he looked like a man who had awakened from a fever dream. Without a word, he dismounted and strode to a nearby tree; over a branch he slung a satchel that sagged with the weight it carried. He stepped away, and waited.

Fatila gestured, and from amongst her soldiers emerged one of the monks from the monastery. Calmly he approached the tree, opened the satchel, and looked under the cloth shrouding the object within. "It is the mirror," he announced in a clear voice. His smile seemed to strike Jeil like a blow.

The armies grew silent as the two combatants faced each other, swords drawn, bodies still. Something in Jeil's eyes made Fatila catch her breath: this was a man who had seen premonitions of his death, just as she had seen foreshadowings of her own.

Then with a whirl and clash of steel on steel, it was begun.

The armies found their voices again and made the mountains ring with their cries. Back and forth on the grass the swordfighters strode, matching each other move for move. It seemed they were more perfectly matched than any two warriors had ever been. Wherever one swung or thrust, the other's blade was there to meet it, and neither was succeeding in getting so much as a nick on the other's armor. The armies shouted again and again; never had anyone seen its like, and each onlooker began to feel even a grudging admiration for their enemy's champion, so wonderful was the fighting.

But as the minutes wore on, and grew to an hour, and then two, the cries of the onlookers faded again, replaced by mutterings of dread. No normal warriors could carry on a fight this long, and still move with such grace and ferocity.

Fatila heard the mutterings as if from very far away. In every duel she had ever fought, she had reached a brief peak of transport, in which she and her sword were one, singing through the air, a perfect balance of forces striking home. In every previous duel that peak had lasted at most a few minutes, more often only seconds, before she and her blade found their opponent's heart. Now the transport was continuing for unimaginable lengths of time. In fact, she had lost track of time. All she knew was the singing blades, his and hers, and his eyes that had lost all fear of death, and her heart whose fear had likewise vanished. She felt that she might take a blade in her own breast this time and bless it for a worthy death.

But then, she felt herself transcending even this heightened battle transport. As their blades continued to dance, she thought she could hear the singing of gods and stars as they had sung at the moment of their birth. As their feet trampled the sward to dust, she felt them moving in the primal dance of love and hate between First and Second Woman. As she looked deep into her adversary's eyes she could see all the sorrow of the ages for the forgetful generations of humanity. And his eyes looked deep into her own also, and she could not hide her soul from him.

When Jeil rode out from the gate, Fatila barely recognized him—he looked like a man who had awakened from a fever dream.

Three full hours they fought, neither gaining the advantage, and then at last they paused, facing each other. Their mortal fatigue was finally overwhelming whatever power had borne the both of them this long. At this point, the duel would no longer be decided by the most skillful play of sword, but by the blunderings of exhaustion.

Then, breaking into a frightening smile, Jeil planted his sword point-first into the now-dusty ground, and knelt beside it in concession.

As the Aelitzian army broke out in cheers and the Rigadians in wails of grief, Fatila looked on the surrendering king with sorrow such as she had never felt before.

"I cannot kill you," she said.

"But you must." He looked up at her, still smiling that terrible smile, eyes flooded with tears. "I beg you."

"Forfeit his life to us."

They both turned, startled, to find themselves looking into the serene countenance of the monk. He already wore the satchel over his shoulder. "It was us he wronged," said the monk. "It is we who should decide how best to dispose of him."

Fatila nodded, incapable of speech.

In short order Jeil was mounted on a horse with his wrists bound to the pommel. Fatila watched as he rode away, led by the monk and a detachment of soldiers back to the monastery. He looked back at her once. And then he was gone.

There followed much conferring of emissaries and diplomats, and many careful and tactful speeches, until eventually Rigad was left in the charge of Jeil's younger sister and a regent. Both armies withdrew without further incident, and so ended the war—but not our tale.

When the party accompanying Jeil arrived at the monastery, the monk dismissed the soldiers and led Jeil in alone. He then dismounted from his own horse, took a knife from his belt, and cut the ropes that bound the vanquished king.

Jeil gaped at him. "What do you mean by this?"

"I am disposing of you. Your old life is hereby over and dead. You are now a monk of this order."

"But I violated every aspect of your order."

"I will admit," smiled the monk, "that yours was not the usual way of initiation into the use of the mirror. But then, as one of us told you, we do not possess the mirror, we are only its guardians. This is neither the first nor the last time that it has chosen its own initiates, in its own way and time."

It was only a day later that the monastery received another visitor: Fatila, also seeking initiation. She too was told she had already been initiated by the mirror, having seen its reflection in Jeil's eyes. Eventually Jeil and Fatila became the abbot and abbess of the monastery, and the prosperity of both their homelands became the stuff of legends.

But as to the mirror, it is now lost to us, as is so much of the wisdom of the Younger Days.

ELLEN TERRIS BRENNER

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Understanding Green

DAVID APPELL

"All growth is a leap in the dark, a spontaneous unpremeditated act without benefit of experience."
—Henry Miller

When I returned from lunch there were two messages on my desk. One was from my mother, calling no doubt to tell me about her latest adventure with my father. The other was from Joyce, my older sister. Joyce calls me perhaps four times a year, as if to give me a quarterly report on her life, but rarely when I am at work. I called her back immediately to see if her balance sheet had made it to the black.

As soon as I said hello she asked, "Did she call you yet?"

I knew she meant our mother. I pretended I didn't get my mother's message. This was sneaky but not really a lie, since I didn't actually speak to our mother when she called. Besides, this way I thought I could find out a little about what was going on.

"Well, we're invited to the house. For dinner. All three of us. This Saturday. They have something to tell us." For an English professor, she sometimes speaks in remarkably incomplete sentences, especially since she doesn't have tenure. "In August. Can you believe it? It's not even a holiday. Something's up." Jumpy Joyce, we called her as teenagers. Always nervous, always the first to conjure up suspicion.

"I for one wouldn't mind getting out of the city on a weekend day in August. At least it will be green."

"Right," she said.

"Besides, she probably just wants to show us a giant zucchini in her garden. Or maybe she converted the den to a hydroponic farm."

"Right, Marc," she said somewhat coldly. I get a great deal of pleasure out of showing my sister what it is like to be normally weird. It is something she never got the hang of.

"Well, I think something's up. But you obviously couldn't care less. I guess I'll see you there then," she said.

"Not if I see you first," I said as straight as I could. I heard her sigh loudly before she got the handset back in its cradle.

WHEN I ARRIVE AT MY PARENTS' HOUSE ON Saturday afternoon Joyce and Pam are sitting on the back deck above the swimming pool. Joyce is drinking an iced tea and Pam has a glass of wine. The reverse might make the day go a little smoother, I think. Our little sister Pamela can get pretty wild.

"Where are they?" I ask.

"Upstairs," Pam says with a bored toss of her head. "I think we might have caught them in the middle of something." Since when did she find sex boring, even if it was between our parents?

I pull up a chair. We are each alone, two by choice. I'm separated for nearly a year, after three years of marriage. We are going through the legalities now. Pam is by herself today, but she could have her choice of nearly any man, as beautiful as she is. She usually sees three or four of them at once, and no doubt they are all wondering where she is today and which of the others she is with. I think she enjoys that. Only Joyce resents the whole of mankind because someone had once fallen in and out of love with her. Of course, it isn't that simple. She hadn't liked it a lot before then—mankind, that is—but the experience hastened her quest to find the worst in everything. Now bitterness is turning her into a frump. It is not easy to watch your sister turn into a frump, especially when she is in her early thirties. She isn't unattractive, when she tries.

But she has stopped trying. Perhaps she doesn't even realize it. I would like to tell her this, but I don't know how to begin.

I sit next to them and wait for our parents to come down. Joyce is reading the *Times*, and Pam gets up to go into the house and pour herself another glass of wine. "Need anything?" she says to me.

"Yeah. Peace, happiness and eternal life."

She pauses for a few seconds, just the right amount. "Well, how about a glass of white zin instead?"

"Okay."

She gives me a wink as she opens the sliding glass door.

PAM COMES OUT AND HANDS ME THE GLASS AND SITS next to me. "So how's it doing?" she asks. I know she means my heart. After Laurie left suddenly for another man, Pam helped me more than anyone—listening, supporting, encouraging. She worked gently but steadfastly to cushion me, then to pull me up, to reassure me, and to help me through the last wintry year. A deep hole opened in my life when Laurie left, and the trees dropped their leaves and stood leaning into the brisk wind, so the landscape seemed barren—scorched and defoliated. I am still adjusting—hurting, lonely, but working now to be content with myself first. I can feel small green shoots beginning to break through the black ground, thanks mainly to my younger sister. She is the strongest person I know.

We live only twelve blocks apart on the Upper East Side, though we see each other more often at my parents' than we do in the city. We are both busy. But when my marriage ended I found myself seeking her out, for companionship, but also because I wanted to be with someone who understood me instinctively. I missed that most of all when Laurie left, and yet now I'm not sure we even had such an understanding, only having been together for a few years. Perhaps I missed simply the idea of it. At night, when the sun went down and the city became closed and cold, and all I felt was loneliness, I would call Pam and leave a message on her machine. I then waited until she came home, and within seconds I would begin to pour out my pain to her. She would listen and then ask why didn't I come over and spend the night at her place? I would always joke and ask her if she was sure she was going to be alone that evening—with Pam you could never be sure. And then I would jog the twelve blocks to her building as fast as I could. Every time I stepped into her apartment it felt in some ways like I was coming home.

A deep hole opened in my life when Laurie left, and the trees dropped their leaves and stood leaning into the brisk wind, so the landscape seemed barren —scorched and defoliated.

We would talk far into the night. She was a wonderful listener, and when she felt the time was right she would give me her thoughts. Laurie was selfish and wrong, she would say, you deserve better, and you need to remember that. Get through this, and you'll come back stronger for it. I needed to hear that, and I wanted to believe her. She made it sound so simple, like she had all the answers, as though life was a chess game and she was a grand master. Just take care of yourself, she said, and the rest will fall into place.

"Be like a tree," she said once. "Keep your roots in the ground and spread your branches and let your leaves soak in the sun."

"And what about when autumn comes?" I asked.

"Accept it. But most of all, don't forget that spring is just around the corner."

I began to stay at her place four or five nights a week, sleeping on her couch. In the mornings I would rise early and walk back to my own apartment to get ready for work. One morning, as I walked sleepy-eyed into her elevator, I pressed the wrong button and found myself on the floor that led to the roof instead of the lobby. I decided to go out and look at morning coming over the city. As I stood at the edge in the early November sun and listened to the city wake up, as I felt the chill and light in the air, I glanced to my side. There, next to a ventilation shaft, pushing out of the gravel and tar on the dirty rooftop, was a small sapling. It had perhaps a dozen leaves, the tips of which were just beginning to turn yellow. The leaves in the park had already turned and dropped, and yet here, in the most unlikely of places, a small, lonely tree struggled for life and clung to its green.

I stood and looked at that tree for half an hour, and I decided that maybe things would be all right. I rarely stayed overnight at Pam's after that.

WE ARE IN THE MIDDLE OF A CONVERSATION ABOUT whether Pam should be wearing blush on such a hot day. Pam has worn blush since she was eight years old. Joyce, who asked the question, has taken the negative. "Especially out here," she says.

"It's Long Island, for Christ's sake, not the Yukon," I reply.

"Besides, there's a lot of pain in this face that I need to cover up," Pam quips.

Joyce takes her seriously. "You? Pain? Ha."

Pam opens her mouth to reply, but I put my hand on her knee and say quietly, "Don't get her started." Suddenly our parents show up. They smile and hug and kiss us while we exchange greetings. Even my father, who usually shakes my hand. Then he lingers around Pam. She was always his favorite.

"So what's up?" Pam asks.

"You're not pregnant, are you?" says Joyce. Pam rolls her eyes, but I think it might be Joyce's way of trying to make a joke.

"Of course not," our mother says, laughing. "We just have something we have to tell you. But it can wait until after dinner."

"Well, I'm certainly wet with anticipation," Pam says. Joyce shoots her a glance. It seems the wine might be starting to go to her head.

I HELP MY FATHER GET THE BARBECUE GOING. HE IS wearing his tall chef's hat and his apron. It has an inscription on the front, a paraphrase of Descartes: "I cook, therefore I am." He loves it. Cooking now gives him more joy than anything else in his life, except my mother.

Joyce insists we eat inside, "because of the flies." After we are seated my father brings the food to the table: teriyaki chicken, asparagus polonaise and a chardonnay he has picked. Joyce has a glass, but Pam and I decline and stick to the zin. My father pretends that he is upset at our lack of manners, and my mother smiles to herself.

One by one we finish and wait, as if a show is about to begin. But first my father must serve strawberries and cream. Halfway through my mother puts her spoon down, and we know that is our cue to begin listening.

"Your father and I have made a decision," she says.

I look at Pam, then at Joyce. The last time my mother said this they completely redid the interior of the house. We were all still living at home then. We made it through that, but barely.

She looks at my father. "Do you want to tell them, dear, or should I?"

"Go right ahead, dear."

She looks us each in the face for about a second and says, "Your father and I are going to get a divorce."

I start to laugh but nearly choke on a strawberry. Pam raises her eyebrows, trying to figure out the joke. Joyce reaches for her glass of wine. My parents wait and watch us, but nobody moves.

"I told you they wouldn't believe us," my mother says to my father.

"Really, Mother," Pam says. "We would have come out just for a visit—you didn't have to make up some lame excuse to trick us."

"Darling, we're serious."

"Right," says Joyce. "You've been married for thirty-three years, happier than any couple I've ever seen, and now you're going to get a divorce?" It is, for her, quite a long sentence.

"Yes. Why not?"

"Why not? Because people don't do that, that's why not! I thought you loved each other."

Finally my father says something. "We do love each other, Joyce, very much." Simple.

My mother embellishes. "Of course we love each other, sweetheart. We always will. You can't stop that."

"You're serious, aren't you?" I ask.

She looks straight at me and her eyes ask me to believe her. "Yes, Marc, we are."

I stumble for a word. I ask a question, some combination of *how* and *why*.

"Well," she says, "we've decided that it would be best if we stopped being husband and wife and simply remained friends. Now that you all are grown and we're both older, we want to do different things. As you know, I've always wanted to take a few years and travel around the world. Now finally I have the time and the money. I might even settle in France. Who knows? We've

thought about it and talked about it for quite some time now. It feels right."

"And what about you, Daddy?" It is Pam.

"Well, I have a chance to open a restaurant in California with a partner. I think I'd like to sell the business and give it a try. Maybe write my cookbook, finally."

"How splendid!" Pam exclaims, too enthusiastically.

Joyce interrupts. "But aren't you going to miss each other?"

"Of course," says my mother. "It's not like we'll never see each other again. It is possible to love someone without being next to them every day. But after spending half your life with someone, even someone you love, well… sometimes a change is appropriate. Who knows what will happen? Maybe we'll each meet someone and fall in love. Maybe we'll have dinner three years from now and decide to get married again." She pauses, then adds, "Wouldn't that be romantic?"

None of us says anything. Finally my father speaks.

"This may be hard for you to imagine at your ages, but a person gets tired of chasing security their entire life. The familiar can become the despised, if you're around it too long. The best hitters go out on top."

"What a terrible analogy," I say. "This is life, not a game." If nothing else, my own divorce is teaching me that.

"Well, I don't know if it's an analogy," my father says, "but it's certainly like an analogy." He smiles. It is one of his oldest jokes.

After a short pause Joyce asks him, "Aren't you afraid of dying alone?"

"No," my father says, becoming serious. "I'm more afraid of dying without doing all the things I want to do."

AFTER THE DISHES ARE CLEARED MY PARENTS TELL us they are going on a walk. I think they want to give us time to talk. We drift to the den, where Pam begins to shoot pool. She has graduated from wine to vodka and soda. I take a cue stick and join her. Joyce keeps to one side of the room and paces.

"I just can't believe it," she says.

"I know." I don't know what else to say.

"I mean, look at us. They were our last hope."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Pam asks.

"Well, look at us," Joyce says. "None of us has ever had a successful relationship. At least they did. I always found that comforting."

"I resent that," says Pam. "Speak for yourself."

"I didn't mean this week," Joyce sneers. Pam glares at her, but having scored a quick point, Joyce keeps going. "I thought they would never split up. I mean, of all the people in the world… it's like they were made for each other." Joyce sits down, and suddenly she looks very weary. It seems that she is taking this the hardest of anyone. I suppose it is because she has the strongest need to believe that things can work out between two people. Misanthropes always do. She hides it extremely well, but it only convinces me more. I know her too well.

"Well, I can sure as hell understand it," Pam says. She puts her head down and takes a quick shot, hitting the ball hard. "Thirty-three years is a long time. Things would get pretty boring after that long. Imagine sleeping with the same person for thirty-three years. What could you possibly do that would be new and exciting?"

"A person gets tired of chasing security their entire life. The familiar can become the despised, if you're around it too long."

"They seem to suffer through it okay," I say.

"Sure, but they must wonder about other people. They must want the excitement of meeting someone, kissing them for the first time, doing it with someone new."

Joyce always responds to Pam's remarks like this, and she's looking to score another point. "Not everyone thinks about sex, you know."

"True," Pam replies, as she sees an opening. "Some people actually have it, too."

Joyce leaves the room.

WITH JOYCE GONE I TRY TO SORT THROUGH SOME OF what has happened today. I am still shocked about my parents. Like Joyce, I too have often compared our parents' relationship to our own. Either we missed something crucial, or they simply found the secret. I am upset at them—though proud too, in a way I can't quite explain. But after a while I realize I also feel something about Pam—she has not said much about all this. She has been too cavalier, too flippant. At the same time, I sense a tightness in the room that seems to come from her.

I have always been the only one who could ever really talk to Pam. We are only a year apart, which is a big reason for our closeness. I was her big brother—not that I could ever teach her much, because she always seemed to know more than I did, about everything. But I could protect her or rescue her, depending on the situation. Joyce was never able to do that, for either of us. Joyce is four years older than me, but she has always seemed like she was somewhere else, like she was from another generation. Even now, when four years is not as long as it once was.

"Pook," I say, "aren't you the least bit surprised?"

Now that we are alone I can use her nickname. She made me stop using it in front of others when she was

eleven, but she's never objected to my using it in private. It is my way of letting her know it is only me.

"No," she says, acting tough. "Why should I be?"

She seems prepared to dig in deep if I pursue this particular line of the conversation, so I make a slight shift. "Well, you certainly were surprised when I announced I was getting a divorce."

"That was different."

"How?"

"For one thing, you called me every night for a month and cried."

Pam has been slippery like this for all of her adult life. She is the kind of person everyone wants to be around—always fun, with a twinkle in her eye. But if you ask her something deep, if you get too close to her core, she jabs and darts and ends up behind you, arms back down at her sides, smiling while working to catch her breath. Everyone gives up at this point. But today I feel that I should pursue her across the ring.

We play nine-ball for several minutes, exchanging brief phrases so that the game proceeds on course. I can tell she is thinking. After she misses an easy shot she stands up and looks at me.

"What was the first thing you thought of when Mother said they were getting a divorce?"

"I don't know. Disbelief, I guess."

"No. I mean what was the first image that came into your mind?"

I pause.

"Laurie."

What had flashed into my mind was how bitter I felt when she left, and how much it hurt. It hurt because after everything that happened I still loved her in many ways and yet I almost hated her, and I didn't want to do that. And I missed her and I wanted another chance, and I knew that was gone forever. It hurt because I wanted exactly what my parents had, and yet every day I wondered if I would ever find that or if I was the type who would bounce through life without it, making do, bucking up, falling down. I wondered how my parents could willingly give it up. I still thought about her fifty times a day. I feel afraid to try again. I didn't know how to get what my parents had, let alone ever think about giving it up. It is strange that a single name can come to symbolize so much.

Pam pauses to let my feelings soften. Finally she says, "You know what I immediately thought of?"

"What?"

"Miss Flowers."

"Dad's secretary?"

"Yes."

"Why?" I am surprised. It has been years since we had last seen her. On summer days when we were bored my mother would put Joyce in charge and give us train fare to go to my father's office for lunch. Miss Flowers was always the first and last thing we saw there. She was a large woman who smelled funny—in a former time she would have been called a spinster. Even children could tell she was lonely. She doted over my father, and she doted over us because we were his children. Pam, especially, had never liked her.

She looks at me but is silent.

"Why, Pook?"

She puts her cue stick back in the rack and goes behind the bar to mix herself another drink. She says nothing, and I look at her but decide to wait. Finally she looks back and says what she has been thinking. "Because she was an old maid who wouldn't leave Daddy alone."

Before I can respond she adds, "And because she didn't like me either." I am surprised to hear her say this.

"She liked you," I say. "She was just an old lady. She never meant you any harm."

"Like hell!" she says in a sudden burst that surprises me. "Like hell she didn't. She never liked me because I was pretty."

"Pam, really."

"She didn't. She was a lonely old bat, and she wanted other people to be unhappy too. Just like Joyce. I'll bet Joyce ends up like her someday…."

She is rarely so blatant. Suddenly I feel sorry for Joyce.

"At least Joyce acts like she cares," I say coldly.

"What other choice does she really have?"

I am able to restrain myself. I let it pass and wait a minute. "Pam, come on, this isn't about Joyce. It's not about you being pretty either. What's the matter?"

She swirls the ice in her glass, but it is clear she is only stalling. I walk over near her and sit gently on a stool. Her head is down. The room is growing dark as the day begins to end. Quietly I say, "What is it, Pam?"

She looks at me, and her eyes are moist. She starts to say something, then stops. Then, quietly, she says, "I thought she wanted Daddy for herself."

"Miss Flowers?"

"Yeah. I thought she wanted to take him away from us. And I thought he was going to leave us for her, especially after he and Mom would have a fight," she says. "In fact, I expected it." Then after a pause during which she seems to go somewhere far away, she adds, quietly, "They all leave you in the end anyway." She looks away and says, "Every single one of them."

I don't know what to say. Pam has always been so together that I've never really had to comfort her before. She always seems so happy that I thought she was, that she was living the way she wanted to. I have always admired her because I thought she made her choices for the right reasons, not out of fear like so many other

people. And now suddenly it is clear to me that she struggles inside as much as the rest of us.

After a speechless minute I get up from my stool and move behind the bar toward her. She lets me hold her. At first her body is tense and it feels awkward. But slowly she softens in my arms and I feel her body begin to shake. I feel her fight it too. Finally she lets out a long, soft moan and begins to cry, slowly at first, then harder. For a moment I imagine it is Laurie I am holding. I let her cry into my shoulder until she is finished, until her eyeliner runs down her cheek so that she looks like a sad clown. She looks up at me and I try to smile, but then I realize that for the first time ever she is looking at me for an answer.

"Be like a tree, Pam," I whisper.

She wipes her cheek and purses her lips and tries to smile. "Marc, I'm so damn tired of autumns and winters and springs. Whatever happened to summer?"

All this time, I thought she had it all figured out. "It will be okay, Pook," is the only thing I can think of to say. I am not completely convincing, and I know she knows it.

JUST THEN WE HEAR SOME SHOUTING IN THE BACK yard, followed by two quick splashes. Pam wipes her eyes and we leave the den and go to the sliding glass door that leads to the deck. Joyce is already there. The three of us stand beside one other and look out—the misanthrope, the clown and the… I don't know. The wounded, maybe. The wounded who wants to heal.

"Mom and Dad are back," Joyce says vacantly. "They're skinny-dipping."

We look out into the dusk at my parents. Their clothes are hanging on the trellis, which stands among the lush, green foliage of their yard. They do not even seem to think that we might be watching. They splash and laugh and seem oblivious to the world, as if only the two of them are in it. I wonder when they will file the papers.

DAVID APPELL

Types 500 characters a minute, 375 of which are "backspace." The ratio of what he's learned to what he's forgotten is still greater than one, but slipping. He currently lives in Vermont, whose unofficial motto is "Nine months of winter, three months of bad skiing." His home on the Web is <http://www.together.net/~appell/>.

Way of the Wolf

S. KAY ELMORE

If empathy was our only guide, could we so easily separate ourselves from the animals?

THE SCREEN DOOR SLAMMED AS DINA RAN OUT OF the house, her back stinging with pain from her dad's slap. There had been no warning this time. He'd lashed out at her almost casually when she was too slow going out the door to do her chores.

Her mother had told her softly not to cry. "Bug, honey, just go take care of your animals, dinner will be ready soon." She wanted to cry. She stuffed the cry down into her stomach and promised to let it out soon.

Her family called her Bug, but her dad called her awful names. He wasn't her real dad—she knew that because her real dad died in a war when she was a tiny baby. Her mother had a picture of him in the big photo album, and she liked to look at him. He wasn't tall like her new dad, Tom. He was short, with dark hair and dark skin. Her mom said he was an Indian, and Bug was part Indian too.

She stopped where she knew he could see her from the kitchen window. She reached for the long wooden hook she needed to close the tall chicken coop doors, and went around the building slowly, closing and latching each door for the night. When she was out of sight, she dashed to the low doghouse, built of straw bales and plywood, and crawled inside the narrow entrance.

Inside the doghouse, she could sense that Abi was there. The aged wolf-husky mix had been with her for as long as she could remember. The dog belonged to her real dad, and when he died, she had become Dina's. Dina called her Abi, because her mother said the dog's name was so long and complicated that only her father could pronounce it right. Abi would do. She was stout with age, and limped along on three legs. A coyote trap had taken off one of her front legs halfway down.

She found the wolf-dog asleep in the farthest corner. The girl crept into the corner and buried her head into her warm side, sniffling her tears into the thick fur. Abi sighed, rested her head on the dirt floor, and closed her

eyes. Bug put her grubby arm around the body of the dog, holding her like a child grips a teddy bear in the panic of a nightmare, and rocked back and forth on the ground, crying.

In her mind, Bug made a picture of a small puppy, wounded and whining, curled between the paws of its mother. She sent the picture to Abi, so the dog would understand how she felt. Slowly, a picture came back to her: the puppy nestled against her side, safe and warm. As if to punctuate her point, the dog lifted her head and licked Dina's arm twice.

Dina remembered the first time he'd beaten her. She had dropped a jelly jar onto the kitchen floor. Her new father had taken off his belt and put four red welts across her back. Four. She remembered. She remembered standing in the bathroom with her mother, looking over her shoulder in the mirror and counting to four in a small voice. Her mother had put her in the bathtub and washed her back with a soft sponge. Dina remembered her mother crying.

Bug stroked the thick ruff on Abi's neck, and the old dog sighed. The dog's eyes flicked to look at her, then to look at the open end of the doghouse, then closed to nap under the welcome caresses.

Abi's head lifted suddenly when the screen door to the trailer slammed open. Mother's voice called out over the yard: "Dina! Dina-Bug? Come to dinner while it's hot!" Her voice sounded so normal, as if she were ignorant of Bug's misery.

Bug crawled out of the tiny opening to the doghouse, followed soon after by the old wolf-dog. Abi limped three-legged behind her, holding up her bad front leg so she wouldn't have to stand on it. Bug filled the water bucket for the other dogs, and set it carefully at the edge of the two half-circles made by their restraining chains. These were the sheepdogs, her dad's prized Border collies.

The wooden steps creaked as she stepped up to the trailer door. She let out her breath, opened the door and went inside. Abi scratched a little at the doormat, turned around three times, and plopped down on the steps with an audible grunt.

"What took you so long? We've been waiting dinner on you." Her dad's accusing voice greeted her at the door.

"I'm sorry. I had to give the dogs some water. Sandy knocked it over again," She kept her eyes down as she stood, hands shoved in her pockets, waiting for approval to sit at the table.

"I don't like you being late. Don't make me tell you twice." She winced inside, her face impassive. "Sit down."

Tom was a big man, taller than her mother. But he was heavy set, his stomach round and distended from drinking too much beer. He had an orange stain on his middle finger from the home-rolled cigarettes he smoked. He said it saved money that way.

She pulled out her chair carefully, so it wouldn't squeak on the floor, and made sure to pull it back up close, so she wouldn't drop any food on her lap. She'd been yelled at for being messy at the table. Mom dished out dinner, a stir fry of vegetables and scrambled eggs, with enough ham hock mixed in to make you remember the meat. She thought her mom was pretty. She had brown hair falling down behind her back nearly to her waist. She was small and thin, the lines of age just starting to show around her cornflower blue eyes.

Bug tasted her dinner and wondered what it would be like to eat with chopsticks. Did kids in China eat food like this at their dinner tables?

In her mind, Bug made a picture of a small puppy, wounded and whining, curled between the paws of its mother. She sent the picture to Abi, so the dog would understand how she felt.

"Mom, do you think I could carve some chopsticks out of cedar wood?" She looked up.

"Yeah, I guess so. You're getting to be pretty good with a pocket knife. Just be careful, okay?"

"Okay mom, I will," She put another bite of dinner in her mouth, reached down to get another one, carefully, so the fork didn't scrape the plate and make a noise. She chewed carefully, so she didn't make a lot of noise with her mouth. She'd been slapped for that. She didn't think chopsticks would make any noise on her plate.

"Do you have homework?" Tom asked.

"Nah, I did it at recess today. Just some math worksheets. Nothing hard."

Her mother beamed "She's getting all A's in school, Babe. I'll bet she's the smartest girl in her class." Mom looked at Bug and smiled big, showing her teeth. Bug smiled back.

"Mom, there's a science project due pretty soon. They are going to have an alternative energy contest at school. We have to do a project about energy and there's a fifty dollar prize if you win. Can you help me with one?"

"Sure, honey, what do you want to do it on?" Mother put down her fork.

"Well, since we have the solar cells on the roof, and I helped to put them up, I wanted to do a project about that. Will you help me? I need some pictures of the stuff on the roof and the batteries, and that kind of stuff."

"Sure, I can get the camera out tomorrow." Her mother's voice held a note of finality.

"Mr. Beals says that the project is due at the end of the month, and I want to do a poster, and show what the solar cells do and how they make electricity. They're gonna have judges come around and look at all of them. Mr. Beals says that the President made the contest up and it's goin' on all over the place."

"It sounds fine, Bug." She heard the warning in her mother's voice again. Mother looked over at her husband across the table, hopeful.

"And the prize is fifty dollars!" Bug continued cheerfully. "And if you win, you get to go to Richfield for the next part of the contest, and if you win there, you get two hundred dollars! He said that the very best projects get to go to Washington D.C. and the President will give you lots of money and you get to be on TV and everything!" Bug chattered at her mother excitedly, trying to win her approval. "Think what I could get with two hun—"

Tom crashed his hand down on the table next to Bug's plate, "God! Shut up, willya?" Tom cut her off sharply, pointing his fork at her for emphasis, "I don't want to spend my dinner listening to your voice yap." The fork was inches from her face.

"Tom…" Mother's voice trailed off, disappointed. "She's only nine. Let her do a science project for school."

"Yeah," Bug added cautiously, watching the fork, "I have to do one to get a grade." She wondered, would she get away with it? Maybe mom was on her side. Maybe.

"Well, how much is it going to cost? I don't want to throw all my money away on you, ya know." He went back to eating his dinner, his threat made.

Silently, inside, Bug sang victory. She sent a picture of a puppy playing in the grass to Abi. She'd actually won this time.

"Um," Bug started, thought a bit, then continued, "I need a couple of pictures, and a piece of poster." Her voice picked up, pleading, "It won't cost more than a couple of dollars, really."

"Yeah, whatever. Go ahead." He reached over to turn up the wick on the oil lamp.

Nothing more was said over dinner.

"OKAY!" MR. BEALS WALKED AROUND HIS DESK TO stand in front of the class, "I gave you an assignment on Friday to come up with an idea for the science fair. Everybody have one?" He looked around at the faces of his students, "Mitch? You're first. What is your science project going to be, and how do you plan to research it?"

He went around the room in order, the third graders stood one by one and recited their projects. Dina couldn't help but snicker inside at some of them. They were stupid, she could tell that hers was good.

"Dina? You're next." He motioned with his hand for her to stand.

"Um, my science project is photovoltaic cells and how they work." She used the big word, knowing that most of her classmates didn't know what it was. She liked to show them up.

"Really?" He smiled at her. She could tell he was surprised. "Where are you going to get that information?"

"Well." She took a breath, "We have photovoltaic cells at our house, because we don't have power lines where we are, and I helped put them up, and, um, my dad has all the books about them."

"Gawd!" A hateful voice came from the back of the class. "You don't have electricity? No wonder you're so weird." The thin blonde girl rolled her eyes.

"Kim, that's enough." Mr. Beals warned. The tone of his voice was just like Tom's. "Well, Dina, it sounds like you wont have any problem with the project. Sam? How about you?"

She sat, grateful that he'd moved on to the next person. She put her eyes down to her notebook and continued drawing the unicorn in the margin of the page. She tried not to think about Kim Whittaker. She hated her, with her blonde hair and blue eyes, her snooty voice. Kim always had nice clothes, bought at Christiansen's and ZCMI. She had a little gold chain around her neck. She lived in a real house and had a phone, and she was the most popular girl in the class.

Bug pictured herself as a big growling wolf, and Kim as a scared rabbit. Her wolf-self pounced on the Kim-rabbit and tore its head off. Bug smiled to herself.

SINCE HER FAMILY HAD THE ONLY FARM UP IN THE hills, there weren't any other kids around for her to play with. After school, she fed the dogs, and took care of the chores for the night. She wondered why she had to work so much. She knew that the other kids in school went to each other's houses, watched TV, or played video games after school. She almost never had time for that sort of thing, even if she had neighbors.

The sun was still shining when she finished her chores, so she slipped off to the green shade of trees down by the creek, across the ewe's field, with her fishing pole and her dog. She hardly ever had time left after chores to go play by the creek.

She stopped in the ewe's field to call her very own goat, Dancer. After Dancer's mama abandoned her in the field, Bug kept her from dying and nursed her with a coke bottle and a rubber nipple. The little doe was convinced that Bug was her mother. Once she was across the field, Bug threw her head back and brayed like a goat. A few seconds later, she was answered by Dancer, running across the field and *maaaa*-ing for all she was worth.

The little doe slid to a stop in front of her, legs going in all directions. She jumped up on her hind feet and

pawed the air, then pranced a little. Goats didn't understand pictures like the dogs did. They talked to each other by dancing, by the way they held their ears and tails. Her greeting dance was just that—it said how happy she was to see her and how much she missed her. Bug set off across the field with her dancing goat and limping dog, to see if Lost Creek would give up a rainbow trout for her dinner.

Her favorite place was a small grove of gnarled scrub oak trees. Some of their branches bent so low to the ground they made a fine place to sit. They sat on the creekbank for the rest of the evening, pretending to fish. Bug had been fishing that creek for as long as she could hold a pole, but had only caught two trout so far. She sent pictures of squirrels and rabbits hiding in the brush to Abi, who wandered off on her own small adventure to find them.

As the shadows of the trees lengthened across the grove, Bug heard the rustling sounds of deer in the wild rose bushes. She froze, and stilled the little goat beside her. In her mind, she pictured herself as a goat, standing quietly by the creek. Deer were easy to fool. If she thought very hard about being a goat, they wouldn't be scared of her at all. It was almost as if she were a goat to them. One by one, the big white-tail deer filtered into the grove.

The deer sensed them, and saw two goats lazing by the creek. They stepped near the water to drink, unafraid of the two creatures that shared the grove. They had seen goats before, and these two were no threat to them. They picked their heads up suddenly, alerted, and moved away from the open water.

Crashing through the underbrush, Abi returned, barking wildly at the deer. They bounded quickly across the grove, back into the brush at the edge of the field. Bug, no longer a goat, called out to her dog, but it was no use. Abi leaped into the brush after them, her gait slowed by her bad leg. "Abi! Abi come back!" She jumped from the bank, and followed the trail into the brush as far as she could fit. "A-beeee!"

A few minutes later, the wolf-dog returned, sending happy pictures of a wolf pack chasing deer, the smell of hunting prey, herself running at the head, running with four good legs. She sent pleased feelings of full tummies and lazy dogs.

Abi was right—it was dinner time. The trio wandered back across the field. This time they were fishless, but had two handfuls of dried rose hips from the wild rosebushes by the creek. They were old, hard and wrinkled from the winter, but they would still make good tea.

TWO WEEKS WENT BY, AND HER POSTER PROJECT WAS almost done. The pictures her mom took were put away carefully in a kitchen drawer, and she even bought a marker for her when she got the poster paper. Bug had spent a long time carefully copying down the information from the big book of her dad's. What words she didn't understand, she looked up in the dictionary at school. She used lots of words she didn't understand, to make it look better.

On the morning of the science fair, she got up at five, as usual, and went about her chores with a sense of urgency. There were eggs to get, and chickens to feed and water, endless chores done every morning, rain or shine. Abi trailed behind her, her placid eyes watching everything her favorite child did, her limping gait steady, if slow. Abi followed her into every pen and pasture, the sheep not giving her a second glance. They knew, somehow, that the wolf-dog was no threat to them. She was too old, and lame.

Deer were easy to fool. If she thought very hard about being a goat, they wouldn't be scared of her at all. It was almost as if she were a goat to them.

Bug let the sheep out to pasture and filled their water tank, making sure to turn the pump off. She once forgot to turn the pump off, and she still had a scar on her thigh where Tom had whipped her with a metal fly swatter.

Her favorite part of the morning was milking the goats. Sunflower and Terra were the only ones with milk to speak of. Their kids had died at birth, so they were inside the barn with the pregnant does, and needed milking.

She liked the warm smells of the mama goats, she liked their big keyhole eyes and floppy ears. They crowded around her as she opened the gate, crying for attention. She got a cup of oats, walked inside the milking stall and let Sunflower get in. Bug pulled up the stool and got the milking pan from the wall. She leaned her head against the warm side of the goat as she milked. The clean swish-swish of the milk was calming, rhythmic.

As she milked she sang to herself, following the rhythm of the milk in the pan, "Gonna win, Gonna Win. I'm the best, I'm the best." Abi sat to her side, tongue lolling, tail hopefully thumping on the ground, sending images of a full milk pail, herself drinking from it. The goats, too, did not fear the old dog. She was as accepted as the child, a regular part of a regular morning.

Bug poured part of the milk into two beat-up pie pans on the ground. The dog lapped happily from one, and she lifted up the other to the hayloft. Barn cats materialized from the rafters and meowed pitifully, then growled to each other as they crouched together at the pan enjoying their breakfast.

THE LONG DRIVE TO SCHOOL WAS SILENT. TOM DID HIS best to navigate the old truck down the muddy, rutted roads, ruined by too much rain and too little care from the county. Her project poster sat on her lap, wrapped in a black plastic bag to protect it. She clutched her arms around it, protecting it from Tom. He would ruin it and blame it on her if she gave him half a chance.

She took the poster to the gym on time, and set it up with two yardsticks her mom lent her so it wouldn't fall down. There were other projects in the gym, so she looked at them. They were all stupid. Hers was the best, she knew it.

During third period, Mr. Beals came into Mrs. Conners' class and called her name.

Her heart raced. It was the judges! They had come to talk to her about her project. She felt light-headed when she walked to the gym with Mr. Beals. She talked to the judges, two men and a very pretty lady in a suit. They asked her questions about her big words, and smiled at her when she told them about the process that turns light into electricity. She showed them the pictures, and pointed out the different parts of the electric relay system, the battery storage, the power gauges.

They thanked her, shook her hand, and sent her back to class.

At seventh period, the Principal got on the intercom and called everyone to assemble in the gym. The whole school was there, all four grades, sitting on the bleachers, teachers herding students like Border collies. Bug sat alone at the bottom of the bleachers, bouncing her knee nervously, her arms wrapped around herself.

Mr. Beals got up and talked about the science project, how the President had made it up, and "the importance of alternative energy resources for America."

She ignored him. She watched the judges, especially the pretty lady in the suit. Mr. Beals finished talking, and the lady got up to the podium to speak.

"The runners up for the Alternative Energy contest are…" She called out name after name and Bug sat up straight.

"Our winners for the Nadir Valley contest are," Bug heard every word echo in the gum, "Samuel Johnson for his report on garbage energy, Third place!"

Bug swallowed. She had a lump in her throat, and she needed to pee. She watched Sam walk up to the line of kids on the gym floor, with his white ribbon in hand.

"Second place goes to Amy Thorsen for her report on Nuclear energy!" Amy got up, laughing, and bounced the step that Bug was sitting on. She ran to get her red ribbon and stand in line next to Sam. Bug couldn't breathe.

"Our first place winner from the third grade, with a remarkable report…" Bug trembled. She couldn't hear. "Photovoltaic Energy, by Dina Cooper!"

Someone was shaking her. Mrs. Conners laid her hand on her shoulder, "Go on, Dina. Walk up there, hon!" Mrs. Conners gave her a proud smile, showing her teeth.

She didn't feel the floor of the gym. She floated over to the pretty lady, who handed her a blue ribbon. She drifted over to stand next to Amy and Sam. Cameras flashed. The runners up were told to sit down, and the photographer from the paper took a picture of her holding up her blue ribbon, Sam and Amy next to her.

One of the man judges came to talk to them. He said that he was taking their projects to Richfield with him, and that the contest for the county was going to be there. The contest was going to be held on Tuesday, and they would be driven to Richfield by the Principal. Amy and Sam were dismissed to go home, but the Judge told Bug to wait, and that he had to talk to her.

He smiled down at her, "Dina, you are going to receive your prize of fifty dollars at the county contest, along with the winners from the other regions." He looked at her faded blue jeans and T-shirt. "There will be people there from all the papers, so can you dress nice?"

She looked at the floor. "I'm sorry, Mister, Um," She looked up at him, tried to look him in the eye. "these are the only pants I have that don't have a hole in them."

He looked at the floor. "Well." He put his hand to his glasses. "I'm sure you'll find something," and turned to walk away.

Bug felt suddenly stupid. She was ashamed of her clothes, ugly, old and bought from the Goodwill. Her Gramma used to make her pretty dresses, sewing them on the old Singer which stood now in her mother's bedroom. She had a whole closet full of clothes then, but she had grown out of all of them. Her mother put the dresses in a big box, saying that she'd save them if Bug ever had a little sister who could wear them.

Mom was there to pick her up after school. The rattling old truck looked out of place with the other cars at the curb, but Bug didn't care. Mom hardly ever came to pick her up. She ran out to the truck, grinning and yelling.

"I won! I won fifty dollars!" She didn't care if the other kids heard her. "Mom! I won! I get to go to Richfield on Tuesday! I'm gonna win the two hundred dollars, I know it!"

"Oh Honey! That's great! I'm very proud of you." Her mom reached over the gearshift and hugged her daughter tightly. She laughed with her, "Lets go get ice cream to celebrate." Mom put the truck in gear, and they rattled off down the street. The little burger stand on main street had the best ice cream in the world, and the mini cones were a quarter each. Bug got two.

"RICHFIELD?" TOM YELLED AT DINNER. "I DON'T GIVE a damn what she won, I don't want some bastard I don't

know driving her to Richfield!" Bug could almost see the chimney on the oil lamp shake with the force of his words.

"Tom! Dammit, she won the science fair! Can't you let her have a little fun? Jesus Christ!" Her mother yelled back, pleading in her voice.

"But, Tom," Bug started. "They're going to give me fifty dollars and I have to be there to get it." She looked at her dinner plate.

"Listen, I'm glad you won the science thing." He said it so full of hate she winced openly, "but damnit, you have to go that far? Richfield is an hour away! I don't want to throw my schedule to shit to come get you in Richfield after this thing is over."

"But… the principal is going to drive us back too. That's what they said." She could feel the tears behind her eyes, making her throat hurt.

"Dammit, Tom," Her mother added "If it's that much trouble, I'll go get her."

"We'll see."

There was no more said over dinner.

RICHFIELD WAS BIG, BIGGER THAN NADIR VALLEY. IT had stoplights. The school car pulled into the Richfield high school parking lot and the three anxious students got out. Bug had done her best with her clothes. Her mom unpacked an old dress that Gramma had made, and discovered that if they took out a tuck here, and put elastic there, the dress fit. It was a little short, above her knees, but that didn't matter.

The day passed nervously for Bug. She walked around, looking at the other entries from all over the county. She was in the junior division, and the projects from the high school students looked so much better than hers. About noon, somebody's experiment on chemical energy blew up, creating a bad smell in the gym. Bug informed Mr. Beals that it was a *noxious* smell, hoping that he would notice her vocabulary. He laughed.

At two o'clock, the award ceremony began. She didn't win the big prize, but was a runner up this time around. It didn't matter, she had won at her school, where it counted. She was called up with the other Junior division winners, and got her fifty dollar check. It had her name printed right there on the line. It was hers.

At three, the ceremony was still going on, the high school kids lined up on the gym floor. Bug was worried. She needed to get home.

"Mr. Beals, when can we leave? My mom is supposed to pick me up at school, and if I'm not there, she's gonna get worried."

"Oh, dear." He looked genuinely concerned. "We can't leave until this is over, because they still have to take pictures of you for the Richfield paper. Can you call your mom and tell her you're still here?"

"Mr. Beals, we don't have a telephone. They don't make telephone lines that go out as far as we are." She said it apologetically, then quietly, "Besides, my dad says we cant afford one anyway."

He looked at her and bit his top lip. "I'm sorry, Dina."

She stood for her picture in line, trying to smile. She was late. It was 3:30, and her mom would be waiting for her. The cameras flashed in her face, making red spots on her eyes. She hoped that her knees wouldn't show in the picture.

It was five o'clock when they got back to Nadir Valley. She looked around for her mom, but she was nowhere to be found. She sat on the step and put her chin in her hands.

"Where the hell have you been?" She could feel his anger, and she could hear the buzzing cloud of pain starting in her head. She was going to get it this time.

The principal looked at her. "Do you need to use the phone?"

She thought. Her mom's friend, Sara, lived near town and maybe she would be nice enough to drive her home. "Yeah."

He unlocked the school and was opening up the door when she heard the truck's engine at the curb.

"Oh!" she said, "There she is. Thanks, Mr. Carter." She ran down the steps.

She stopped. It wasn't her mom. It was Tom. She slowed and walked up to the truck.

"Where the hell have you been?" He demanded as she got in. She could feel his anger. He was furious, and she could hear the buzzing cloud of pain starting in her head. She was going to get it this time.

"I'm sorry, they had to take pictures and we couldn't leave until they were done" She talked quietly, carefully, trying not to make too much noise. She looked at the floorboard, she wrapped her arms around her bookbag.

"Look at me." He demanded. She looked at the floorboard. *"Look at me!"* He screamed at her, picking her head up roughly by the chin. "I have been all over town looking for you, and I don't appreciate it, goddammit." He spat out every word, every word clear and ringing in the cab of the truck. Spit hit her on the face.

"I'm sorry…" she squeaked. She couldn't breathe. She wanted to pull away, to run out of the truck back into the schoolyard, but if she did, he'd kill her. She wanted to wrench her face out of his hand, but she couldn't move.

"Right. You'll be sorry." He tossed her head to the side with his hand, hurting her neck and bruising her chin. He

put the truck in gear and drove. Bug looked out the window, thinking about the fifty dollar check she had in her bookbag. Would it be enough for her to live on if she ran away?

He drove in silence as she looked out the window at the passing roadside. In her head she made pictures of a wolf pack surrounding a bear. She made the wolves attack the bear, tearing gashes in his sides and arms. Her face hurt, and her throat was full and sore from choking down tears. She put the cry back down into her stomach, trying to save it for later, but the cry made her stomach hurt, too. She sent the pictures in her head away. She sent a picture to Abi, a pup running fast, tail between its legs.

HOME LOOMED IN THE HEADLIGHTS, THE SOFT GLOW of the oil lamp coming from the kitchen. Mom opened the door as they drove up. Abi lurched up from her place on the porch and stood next to her, tail up, ears forward. Guarding. Abi sent Bug a picture. Wolf on a rock, looking over the valley.

"Well? How did it go, Bug?" Mom smiled at her, calling from the porch. Her voice was cheerful.

Bug climbed out of the truck and walked up to the porch, dejected. "I didn't win the big prize mom. I was a runner-up." Her voice was restrained, quiet, meek.

"Aw, honey, that's too bad." Her mom made a sad face. She reached down to caress Bug's face. Bug winced as her hand touched the bruised spot on her cheek where Tom had grabbed her. "What's the matter, Bug?" Her mom turned her cheek to look.

"I'm okay." Bug whispered. "Please, I'm okay." She thought, Please, please mom, don't make him mad… he'll hurt you too.

Her mother's eyes, her beautiful cornflower blue eyes, turned the color of ash. "He hit you, didn't he." Her mothers voice held a tone that scared her. Please don't make him mad, Mom.

"No, mom… I'm okay!" Her voice rose, pitched in fear.

"You son of a…" Her mother cursed, stepping around bug to confront her husband, "How dare you!" Her voice was cold, frightening.

Abi's picture was of a wolf pack surrounding a bear. Bug threw her arms around the wolf-dog, trying to keep her back. All she thought to send to her was no, but she didn't know how to say it.

"That ungrateful bitch of a daughter made me wait two hours for her to get home." Tom pointed his accusatory finger at the cowering child, "She took her sweet god-damned time getting there. I don't want to hear any shit from you!" He shook his finger in his wife's face, "This is *my* house, by god, and you'll do whatever the hell I tell you to do!" He yelled so loudly, so full of violence that the words were nearly tangible in the twilight air.

Her mother's words came out quietly, she stood with her hands on her hips, facing him down. "If you ever lay another hand on my daughter, I'll kill you." She stood in front of him. She looked him in the eye. Dina was suddenly very scared of her mother. Her face was cold, her eyes narrowed in rage. She started to walk toward him. He backed up a step, his face caught in disbelief that his wife would dare threaten his sovereignty.

"You bastard." She hissed, almost whispering. "You." She backed him up another step, "How dare you call yourself a man when the best you can do is beat up on a nine-year old girl." Dina had never heard her mother talk like that. Mean. She sounded like she was growling. She stood petrified on the steps as Abi wriggled out of her grip.

His face reddened with rage. "I'll do whatever I want in my house. I pay the bills, I put clothes on her back and food on the table!" He screamed into his wife's face, but for the first time in her life, Bug heard the sound of fear in his voice.

He shoved his wife aside, knocking her into the gravel. In quick steps that took hours he crossed the driveway. Bug couldn't move fast enough and he grabbed her by the hair.

"Stupid!" He pulled her up from the ground, dangling her in the air with her hair in his fist. "Don't you appreciate what I do for you?" He shook her. She put her hands to her head and tried to pry loose his fingers, tried to get away.

She tried to nod, or say something—anything—to make him let her go. Her head was filled with the pictures of the bear, the bear killing her, killing all of the pack. Somewhere in the back of her mind, behind the cloud of pain, she heard a low sound.

Tom dropped her onto the gravel and kicked her where she lay. "Are you grateful? Huh?"

Her mother was screaming. Bug realized that out here, there were no neighbors, nobody would hear her. Nobody would come to help them and he would kill both of them. She struggled to rise, to run away into the hills to hide.

"When did you ever thank me? Huh?" He knocked her down with the back of his hand as she tried to crawl away. He kicked her in the ribs, rolling her over on the driveway. She tried to breathe, tried to make her mouth form words. He kicked her in the stomach, and she collapsed, choking and vomiting. Her mother had stopped screaming but the air was full of bees.

The low sound in the back of her mind got louder. Vicious. It was a terrible sound, like a horror movie she wasn't allowed to watch. She didn't have time to think about it because the sun was setting, and she could hear the darkness as it rolled over her.

The old wolf on the doorstep abandoned that part of her which was still a dog. Inside, there was a heart there that knew nothing of humans. She let it come rushing out into her teeth, a snarling growl. The smell of blood in her head and the screaming infuriated her. Her precious child, her pup, lay whimpering in pain on the ground, and the enemy stood in front of her.

The wolf launched herself from the ground on three bad legs and ripped all of her good teeth into the enemy's thigh. She tasted blood, and bit down again. She tore through jean and flesh, maddened with instinct. She smelled the terror in him and it made her bolder. She attacked him again, throwing all her weight into his legs. She heard the sound of metal, and could tell the man had been hit from behind, good strategy to her wolf-sense. She lunged for his throat, for the kill. The smell of blood was good.

The woman stood in mute horror, the shovel in her hand forgotten. She tried not to register the image of her daughter's old, lame dog, and what she had done to the man on the ground.

Abi limped to stand growling over the body of her child. She licked at her face, then lay down beside her, nudging her. Her pup wouldn't wake up. She flicked her eyes to look at the woman, trembling and stinking with fear. The woman dropped the long metal thing in her hand and fell to her knees.

Abi heard her name, spoken softly. She understood her name. The woman crept forward, hand outstretched, the fear-smell fading.

The old wolf-dog licked her chops, her hackles lowered, and she lurched painfully to stand protectively beside the girl. That part of her which was wolf went quietly back down into her old heart, and she wagged her tail a little, to let the woman know she should not be afraid.

Dina's mother came slowly toward her and reached out for her child. She didn't want to think about what she had just done. She didn't want to look at the bloody man on the ground. Abi whined, her eyes flicking between the child and the man. Her mother knelt beside the barely conscious girl, and picked her up gingerly.

The old dog followed them with her limping, if steady, gait. They climbed into the cab of the beat-up truck, and the woman helped the dog up into the cab. She scratched at the floorboard once or twice, and plopped down with an audible sigh. The woman put the engine into gear and screeched away.

"YOUR NAME?" DEPUTY HANK OLSEN ASKED kindly, trying to catch the woman's eyes. She was shaken and crying, and he didn't blame her. Her daughter was in ICU a few rooms away, with eight broken ribs and severe internal injuries. The local doctors weren't sure if they could handle the job alone, and a pediatric specialist had been 'coptered in from Richfield. Last word, she was in critical condition.

"Catherine Coop…" She let out a little breath, "Cooper."

"What happened, Catherine?" He put his pen to the paper quietly. He needed her calm, but he also needed the report. A fat woman, a friend of Mrs. Cooper's, stood behind her, her hands resting on her shoulders.

The wolf launched herself from the ground on three bad legs and ripped all of her good teeth into the enemy's thigh. She tasted blood, and bit down again.

"Um." She wiped her eyes. "My dog… she killed my husband." She wiped her eyes again. "He was… he was trying to hurt my daughter. He beat her up all the time." She broke into sobs, leaning against her friend for comfort.

"Uh, Missus…" He looked at the friend, searching for her name.

"Rasmussen. Sara Rasmussen. My husband is taking the sheriff out to the farm."

"Sure, Jay and I are the volunteer firefighters together." He tried to smile at the women. "Mrs. Rasmussen, was Mr. Cooper often violent? Would you say he beat the child?" He made notes in his book.

"Officer, go look at that little girl in there and have the doctor tell you how much of that damage was done tonight, and how much was there to begin with. He had no business hitting that child." She looked disgusted. Her voice, however, spoke of more than disgust.

"Where's the dog?" His brow furrowed. The dog could be rabid. The family lived pretty far out in the boondocks, after all.

"She's out in the truck." Catherine looked up at him. The woman understood his concern. "No, mister, she's not a bad dog. She was protecting us." Mrs. Cooper spoke haltingly through tears. "She saved Dina's life."

He got what statement he could out of the badly shaken woman. It looked fairly clear to him. Rabid dog. No charges. He doubted if the local court would even want touch it. He said as much to Mrs. Cooper and her friend.

"Do you have a place to stay?" Hank asked Mrs. Cooper.

"She's staying with us. Jay's going to bring some of her things from the house when he comes back with the Sheriff." Sara offered.

"And the dog?" He raised his eyebrows and looked dubious. "We might have to run some tests on her to confirm the rabies. You all being out in the country and all, that might be a possibility."

"The dog will stay with us," Mrs. Cooper spoke up defiantly. "I'll take her to our vet, Officer. He can run the rabies test. We'll pay for it."

Deputy Olsen sat with them for another two hours, keeping the curious out of the waiting room. In such a small town, this news was going to be all over by morning. Doctors came and went with reports on the child's improvement. She was going to be all right, but she faced a difficult recovery.

Jay Rasmussen came in with a small suitcase of things for Catherine. He spoke in low tones to the Deputy, relating the scene at the Cooper's farm, nodding his bearded head slowly. They found the body of Tom Cooper in the driveway, his throat torn out, apparently by the dog.

"I've never seen anything like it. I've seen dog bites, but this one, well, that dog's got some wolf blood." He shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing like it I've seen."

"Jay, could you show me this dog? My god, he must be huge. Part wolf? Jesus."

"She." Jay corrected him.

The men shouldered through the swinging glass doors of the ER into the parking lot. Jay walked up to the truck, and a large, grizzled head poked up out of the open window.

"Hey Abi." Jay stuck his hand through the window of the truck to scratch her around the neck. "C'mon out, girl." He opened the door, and the wolf-dog struggled to rise from the car seat where she had been sitting. She looked dubiously at the ground beneath her, then looked up at Jay and whined. He understood, and reached carefully around her body to lift her to the ground.

"This dog?" the Deputy looked at the old, three-legged dog. Even through the blood dried on her muzzle and chest, he could see the gray of her fur. She was stocky, overweight and moved painfully with age. "Damn, are you sure, man?"

"Had to be, Hank. The other two were chained up out by the shed." Abi sat on the asphalt drive, and tilted her head up to look at Jay.

"She's no more rabid than I am. She was just protecting her own, I guess."

They stood looking at her for a few long minutes. Jay patted his thigh and called her over to the back of his own pickup. He lifted her into the back and closed the tailgate.

"Jay," Hank began. "You know the department is going to want this dog put down."

Jay said nothing. Abi rested her head on the tailgate and nudged Jay's hand for attention. He absently put his hand on her head, brushing the dried blood from her fur.

"I gotta get her cleaned up." His voice choked out of a closed throat. "Can't have her this way when we take her to the vet."

Hank waved to his friend and tapped his hand on the side of the tailgate as he stepped out of the way. He watched the dog in the back of the truck as Jay backed up and stopped to turn out of the parking lot.

Hank nodded his head toward the pickup truck, "Good dog."

He heard the thumping of her tail on the truck bed.

S. KAY ELMORE

Is a graphic artist and writer from Fort Worth, Texas. This is her first published short story.

Small Miracles are Better Than None

PETER MEYERSON

The definition of "parent" may be a little more flexible than you think.

AFTER AN AWKWARD, DESULTORY MEAL AT A beach front restaurant in Santa Barbara, they continued driving north along Interstate 101. The boy was too big for a child's car seat and too small to see properly out the windows. Robert had bought a special booster for him to sit in.

"Look at that," Robert said, pointing to a row of oil pumps paralleling the highway. The rigs were rocking back and forth like davening Jews winnowing secrets from the heavens.

"Did you ever see a praying mantis?" Jonah asked.

"Yeah! That's what they look like!" Robert said a little too eagerly.

Jonah glanced at him, looked out the window and lapsed into another of his long silences. They were neither surly nor rebellious; rather, it seemed to Robert, the child fell into states of meditative repose, an unsettling quality in a six-year-old. Once again, Robert thought, the trip was a mistake.

When they reached San Luis Obispo, he suggested they continue north along Route 1, the coast road.

"How come?" Jonah asked.

"Well. It's longer, but it's more beautiful. We'll see cows grazing right on the beach and there are tide pools with little animals in them. After that, we go up into the hills. It's slower driving because the road's twisty, but it's fun, and we'll see way out into the ocean. What do you say?" Jonah shrugged and Robert took the coast road.

Later, crossing a broad stretch of grassy flatland, Jonah rose out of his seat and looked over Robert's shoulder toward the sea. "Those aren't cows. They're cattle," he observed, breaking another silence.

"And you know the difference." Robert was impressed.

"People kill the cattle and eat them, but they're nice to cows because they give us milk."

Robert smiled. "So you and mommy don't eat meat?"

"Mommy doesn't. I like Big Macs."

"And she doesn't mind?"

"Uh-uh. Even when I leave some over. We bring it home for Merton."

"Merton?"

"He licked your hand when you came to pick me up," Jonah said, a hint of disappointment in his voice. Robert wished someone had told him the dog's name was Merton.

He parked by a narrow strip of beach and they headed for a rocky outcropping. An early afternoon wind bullied the tide toward the high water mark, and above, more powerful gusts shepherded a swollen flock of black-bottomed clouds toward the mountains to the east. Rain tonight, Robert thought. He hated driving in rain and was glad they would reach their destination before it arrived.

JONAH CLUTCHED HIS LITTLE STUFFED DUCK AS THEY walked along the shore searching for shallow pockets of life among the rocks. Sandpipers, pecking at the ever-changing margins of the sea, scattered before them, and gulls, like gulls everywhere, dipped and wheeled in raucous disputes that circled the earth. Robert didn't care for gulls; they stole the eggs of birds who mated for life.

Jonah rose out of his seat and looked over Robert's shoulder toward the sea. "Those aren't cows. They're cattle."

Jonah found a glistening basin of shallow water and was kneeling beside it concealing his excitement as Robert came over.

"That's a sea urchin, right?" he said, pointing to a black ball of quills.

"Uh-huh. I know this sounds weird, but some people, like in Japan, eat them."

"That must hurt," Jonah said, frowning.

"They don't eat the spines," he laughed, lifting the creature gingerly and exposing its underside. "It's this soft part that's supposed to taste good. Almost everything gets eaten somewhere. In Asia they eat dogs and snakes and make soup out of birds' nests and shark fins. And there's a tribe in Africa, the Masai, that drinks a mixture of cow blood and…" Robert grinned, "…pee pee."

"Pee pee?" Jonah, who had yet to crack a smile, roared with laughter. Robert remembered his son Eric at this age and how the mere mention of a bodily function would guarantee an outburst of hilarity. It was a cheap victory, he thought, but a victory nonetheless.

"How come you know so much?" Jonah asked after a while.

"I don't. Not really. But I find a lot of things interesting. Just like you."

"How do you know I find a lot of things interesting?" It was a question, not a challenge.

Robert looked at the boy and saw everything around them—the ruffled sea, the hot blue sky, this very moment

by the tide pool—residing in the child's luminous, green eyes, eyes that were refracting light into memories, memories that Jonah would carry long after Robert was gone. Aching with a loss too deep to name, Robert turned and started back toward the car.

"Because we're so much alike," he said.

"…I told him there is no Ultrasaurus, they only found some bones they think is maybe an Ultrasaurus, but they don't even know yet. But he won't believe me. Colin thinks he knows everything about dinosaurs, even when I showed him in a book that he's wrong. He said we don't read well enough to understand all the big words. Well, I do and I think what he says is dumb…"

Jonah had been talking nonstop since they left the beach. Robert concentrated on the road, endlessly weaving among the massive, splayed fingers of the Santa Lucia Range. It was tiring and irritating and the mountains seemed to be clawing at the sea.

"Are we almost there yet?" Jonah asked.

"Another, oh, hour or so."

"Is that long?"

"Not to me. But it's probably long for you."

"Why?"

"Time goes more slowly for kids."

"Huh.… How long is an hour?" Jonah mused.

"Hmmm. As long as it takes to watch four cartoons, including commercials."

Jonah laughed. "You're funny," he said. Then, scrutinizing Robert as though for the first time, he asked solemnly, "Are you really my father?"

ROBERT HAD MET IRENE AT A DOWNTOWN BAR. HE and his friend Tommy had dropped in for a drink after seeing a play at the Marc Taper. Robert had been there a few times before; it was a hangout for L.A. artists, and he liked it because it reminded him of his Village days when he was a graduate student at NYU. Had he been thirty, or even forty, he would have instantly dismissed the place, seen it as a buzzing hive of artsy frauds flaunting their mediocre talents. Now, having passed fifty, his major choices behind him, he envied them their youth, their future, and their natural sense of community.

Tommy had spotted a woman he knew and had gone over to say hello when Irene slid onto an empty bar stool and introduced herself.

"Hi. I'm Irene," she said pleasantly, then nodded to the bartender who began making a tequila gimlet. Robert studied her for a moment. She had large, almond eyes set in a strong, heart-shaped face, straight, raven-black hair and a perfect olive complexion. She appeared to be around twenty-five, but Robert guessed she was in her mid-thirties and had at least one American Indian somewhere in her family tree. She's one of those women who will always look ten years younger than she is, he thought.

"A baby's ass would envy your skin," Robert said.

Irene chortled and shook her head. "It never fails," she said. "I always know when there's someone around I should meet."

"Ahh," Robert sighed, looking at her fondly. "I'm in trouble again."

He was.

Three months later Irene came over to Robert's house to tell him that she was pregnant. He pleaded with her to have an abortion.

"I'm not asking you for anything," she said.

"That's not the point," he argued. "I've just finished bringing up a kid on weekends and holidays. I don't want to go through it again, not at my age."

"I'm not asking you for anything," she repeated pointedly.

"Don't you, I dunno, take precautions or something?"

"I see. That's supposed to be my responsibility," she said.

"Goddamnit!" He felt like hitting something. "You know, I've never been accident-prone before."

"Me neither. Maybe it wasn't an accident," she said.

"Please! It's bad enough. Don't lay any Freudian bullshit on me."

"Whatever." Irene shrugged. "I only came by because I thought you should know."

Nothing Robert said—and he threatened, cajoled and begged—could convince Irene to terminate the pregnancy. It wasn't a matter of principle; in fact, she was ardently pro-choice; she wanted to mother a child, even the child of man with whom she had slept only twice before he said they weren't destined to be a couple.

He had ended their liaison four weeks after it began. One morning over coffee at her loft, he told Irene—rather apologetically since he had quickly grown attached to her—that for him love required an abundant future, time spread out before it like a variegated buffet. One needed to sample the possibilities, he said. And, Robert claimed, he didn't have enough time left to learn what worked and what didn't.

"Are you ill?" Irene had asked, concerned.

"No," he replied. "But I don't think I have time to love anyone new as fully as I have in the past."

"Oh? And how 'fully' have you loved someone in the past?"

He shrugged. "Not fully enough," he answered. "Which is another reason I don't think it would work between us. I'm just no good at it."

Irene was relieved that Robert had revealed himself early on. She had no intention of knocking on a door that would never open. After suggesting he give some thought

to the idea that he was terrified of women, she let him slip out of her life without a trace of remorse or grief. As he left her loft, Robert wondered whether he had made the right decision. By the time he reached his office, he decided he had.

Irene was prepared to bring up her son on her own (she knew it was going to be a boy). She wasn't asking for support or for Robert to take on the obligations of fatherhood. He could have any relationship he wanted with the child, from joint parenting to never seeing him at all. Robert chose the latter, but insisted that he assume financial responsibility for the boy. Irene was a potter who hovered just above the poverty line. Robert ran a small company that made informational videos for doctors. He lived modestly, had few expenses, and had put away enough to retire even now if he chose.

Irene wasn't sure; she needed a few days to sort out the conflict between her instinct to remain independent and the wish to give her son the things she couldn't afford. Two days later she accepted his proposal. Robert was pleased. He genuinely wanted to help a woman he liked and a son he would never know.

"Aren't you even curious to see what he's going to be like?" she asked.

"I wish you both all the best," he replied. He meant it.

Two weeks later, Robert began taking Prozac.

Actually, he did see the boy once before. It was on a Saturday morning after his weekly half-court basketball game in Roxbury Park. He was walking toward his car and had entered the parking lot when Irene, emerging from her battered, antique van, suddenly popped up in front of him, surprising them both. She was carrying her year-old son in a sling, papoose-style on her back. It was too late to avoid her, or, rather, to avoid the child; they were standing right in front of him.

"Thanks for the money," she said. "It really helps."

"Good," Robert said, helplessly beaming at the fat, flushed, bundle grinning at him from over his mother's shoulder.

"You can touch him, you know."

"No… I can't do that," he said. He hurried past her, fumbling for his car keys, afraid he might hyperventilate before reaching the safety of his car.

Irene called after him. "By the way, his name is Jonah!"

A few years later Irene sent Robert a letter thanking him for his generosity and telling him that she no longer needed his support. After a recent gallery exhibit, her work was becoming somewhat fashionable and she expected that soon she'd be earning enough to bring up her son by herself. Robert read the letter again and again over the next few days trying to figure out why it filled him with so much sorrow.

However, having given up Prozac a year earlier, he decided against taking it again.

"…Two reasons," she said when she telephoned Robert at his office a week ago. (It was the first time they had talked since the morning in the park.) "One, he's my father, and since it often takes a while for people with brain tumors to die, I'm not sure how long I'll be away, and I'd like Jonah to finish the semester. And, two… well…" Her voice faded.

"He doesn't even know me! You don't have a problem leaving him with a perfect stranger?"
"Come to think of it, you are the perfect stranger, aren't you?"

Though Robert knew the second reason, he couldn't bring himself to ask.

"…And two, he's been asking a lot about his father lately. I know the pros call them, excuse the expression, 'age appropriate questions,' but that doesn't mean he shouldn't get some answers from you."

"He doesn't even know me!"

"That's the point."

"And you don't have a problem leaving him with a perfect stranger?"

"Come to think of it, you are the perfect stranger, aren't you?" She laughed.

"Irene! He's not going to feel safe with me!"

"Listen. Jonah's… unusual. He's a very adaptable kid. For chrissake, Robert, it'll only be for two weeks; then I'll come and get him. And who knows? You could get lucky. My father might die in two days and I'll be back by the weekend." She sighed. "Look, this isn't a ploy, okay? If I was gonna lay shit on you, I would have done it long before now. So, c'mon. I've never asked you for anything before, and it's not for me, it's for Jonah."

Robert was unnerved by what was quickly becoming an inevitability. "What… what happens if he gets attached to me?"

"He'll deal with it."

Robert escaped into silence and Irene waited, allowing him to agree at his own pace. "Okay," he finally said. "Memorial Day's coming up. I suppose I could take some time off and we could go up to Santa Cruz. My son and his family are living there."

"That's right!" she recalled. "Eric. I'd almost forgotten. And he's married now? A father? That's great."

"And… uh… I'm… obviously… a grandfather."

"Hey! Congratulations!" There wasn't a trace of irony or derision in her voice. Then, laughing: "My God,

Robert, that makes my six-year-old an uncle!" Robert laughed too.

The following morning Robert and Jonah left for Santa Cruz.

WHEN THEY PULLED INTO THE DRIVEWAY OF THE TINY cottage near Santa Cruz, Eric and Grace were waiting for them. Robert embraced them both. His son was a lean, muscular, twenty-seven-year old who taught drama at the university and raced ten-speeds on the weekends. He was the only person in Robert's life whom he loved unconditionally. His daughter-in-law, a sunny, spirited young dancer, also taught at the University. Until recently, he had liked her without paying much attention to who she was. He liked her mostly because his son loved her. But, on a previous visit, after she had put the baby down, he overheard her whisper to Eric, "I love my life." Since then, Robert adored her.

Jonah stood behind Robert and was staring at the ground as Eric walked over and lowered himself onto on his haunches.

"So you're my little brother," he said cheerfully.

Jonah, still looking at the ground, nodded. Eric glanced at his father, then picked Jonah up.

"Well. Welcome to the family," he said.

For a moment, Jonah looked wary and confused. Then, suddenly, he threw his arms around Eric's neck and cried without constraint.

IT DIDN'T RAIN THAT NIGHT OR THE NEXT DAY, AND they decided to go fishing. Jonah was ecstatic. He had never been deep-sea fishing and, with a bit of discrete help from Eric, he landed two of the four salmon caught by their party. By late afternoon a heavy fog forced most of the day-fishing vessels and private boats to return to the Monterey docks. Finding no quarry on shore, it rolled back out to sea searching for stragglers to envelop and beguile. They drove back to Santa Cruz, their catch temporarily laid to rest in an ice chest in the rear of the Jeep.

"They really put up a fight, huh?" Jonah said.

Eric put his arm around him. "They were no match for you, mista." Robert was touched at how easily and simply the two had taken to each other. He also found it odd that while he was still certain the trip was a mistake, he no longer regretted it. Indeed, he was relieved, even comforted, which baffled him all the more, since everything he feared was undoubtedly about to happen, perhaps had already happened.

That night the weather was warm and clear and the family gathered in the yard for dinner. Robert was charcoaling the expedition's bounty while Grace fed the baby on her lap. Jonah was stretched out on a lounge chair next to Eric, utterly entranced by the brilliant array of stars. Robert wondered how often, if ever, the boy had seen a night sky like this, a sky so vast and dazzling, it dared the eyes to turn away—so unlike the milky gruel above L.A. where stars kept their distance, hiding their radiance from the lingering blight of day.

"ARE WE EATING MY FISH?" JONAH ASKED. "I MEAN, you know, one of the ones I caught."

"Absolutely," Robert reassured him. "I cooked yours first."

Jonah grinned slyly. It reminded Robert of how Eric looked when he'd made his first catch. It was the look of a boy who has glimpsed his manhood and is relishing the moment before it fades into the future.

"Can Katy have some?" Jonah asked, anxious to share his prize with the world.

"Hmmm, she doesn't have enough teeth to chew," Grace replied. "But tomorrow I'll put some in the blender for her."

"And can I feed her?"

"Well… sure." she said, surprised. The adults laughed.

"Why's that… funny?" Jonah asked, flustered and hurt. Robert moaned softly to himself, reached out and caught Jonah's hand, resisting his effort to withdraw it.

"Jonah, we laughed because what you asked was… so… sweet. Boys your age don't usually care about feeding babies. We were surprised, that's all. Nobody was making fun of you, if that's what you're worried about." Jonah nodded, accepting the explanation, and Robert let go of his hand.

It's the first time I've touched this child, he thought. A line of Hart Crane's came to mind, something like, "Your hands in my hands are deeds."

JUST BEFORE BEDTIME, THERE WAS A CRISIS: JONAH couldn't find his beloved duck. Frantic, wild-eyed, trembling, he ran from room to room rooting about everywhere, under furniture, behind curtains, in closets, even yanking off bedcovers and sheets. The adults, too, spread out and began searching the house. Convinced that he had left his duck on the boat and that it was gone forever, Jonah buried his face in a cushion and sobbed inconsolably. His grief was beyond the reach of Eric's gentle reassurances.

"Jonah," he said, recalling. "I'm sure I remember you holding your duck at the dinner table. It has to be around somewhere."

It was; Robert found it in the yard under a chair. Jonah pressed the frayed, dew-damp, one-eyed handful of stuffed fabric to his face, nuzzling and sniffing it like a she-wolf reuniting with her lost pup. His relief was as profound as his despair and for the rest of the evening he smiled

radiantly at everyone. Because he refused to give up the duck long enough to bathe and change into pajamas, he got into bed suffused with the scent of the sea and salt and the salmon he'd caught.

They were sharing a large convertible sofa. After whispering to his duck, Jonah told Robert he was too tired to listen to a story tonight. He hugged his father, said goodnight, closed his eyes, and instantly fell asleep.

Robert was bewildered, not by the child's affection, which moved him deeply, but by Jonah's breezy assumption that Robert usually told him stories. Robert had never told him a bedtime story; the only opportunity would have been on the previous night when all Robert could think of saying was that they were going to have a terrific time fishing the next day. Then they had gone to sleep without another word.

The clean, pale light of a full moon filtered through the gauzy curtains and caressed the boy's face. A sculptor polishing a masterpiece, Robert thought. Something about Jonah was unusual, unique, something beyond his intensity and directness and brooding meditations. Many children, Eric too, as a boy, possessed these qualities. It was something else, something Robert hadn't encountered before.

He lay awake rummaging his mind for clues, turning over the events of the last two days again and again until, at last, he saw it: Jonah, in the driveway, sobbing in a stranger's arms. He lives with his pain, Robert marveled. It was his gift, a talent, a treasure, the source of Jonah's special knowledge of a world from which Robert, whose misery was fueled by flight, was barred.

Of course Jonah knew there would be other stories, Robert thought, and other trips like this one, days of fishing and nights under the stars with his brother and Grace and the baby. There would be movies, picnics, ballgames and much more, all with Robert, the father he had culled from dreams and fantasies and gathered into his arms for good and forever. Jonah had made a father of his own.

A surge of wind raised the curtains, allowing the moon to feed more fully on Jonah's brightened features until, sensing the light in his sleep, he raised his arm and covered his eyes. Robert half-hoped the moon would wake him. He urgently needed, now, this very second, to speak to his son and, as Eric had, welcome him to the family. But it would have to wait until morning.

He leaned over and kissed Jonah's forehead, then closed his eyes, fell asleep and dreamed of Irene.

PETER MEYERSON

Has only recently begun writing fiction and just completed a novel narrated by a disaffected rat. He previously worked in book and magazine publishing in New York. He has written many TV shows, mostly half-hour sitcoms and, a long time ago, developed and produced Welcome Back Kotter. *He also writes plays. Other parts of his past: multiple marriages, multiple divorces and multiple offspring—boys ranging in age from thirty-two to nine.*

And on the eighth day, the animals asked, "Can we vote on this *food chain* thing?"