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Mosaic

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Mosaic

by

Vicki L. Kennedy

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Rita Ciresi, M.F.A.
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Dedication

For all of you who wouldn't let me quit.

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Mosaic

Vicki L. Kennedy

ABSTRACT

Mosaic is the story of Alicia O'Day, a woman who looks back at her life from the vantage point of middle age and attempts to arrange the shards of her past into something meaningful. As she relates her story, illustrating her errors, we realize she has changed and grown enough to see herself with added wisdom and humor. The chaos of her younger days is seen as a learning process. The broken vessel has been mended, and the scars from the seams add interest to the original piece.

As Alicia reviews her life, she glues the broken fragments back into place and proclaims them part of a whole, a work of art. She begins to feel less like a fragmented woman, and more like a multi-faceted human being who has lived through a series of trials. She comes to realize that her friend Jeffrey is not really the glue that has held her together. Instead, she finds that all along the way, it was her own strength of character that caused her to persevere.

When completed, *Mosaic* will be a novel representing the complete picture of a woman's life as she understands it from the vantage point of middle age, a time to re-evaluate the past and start over with a wiser plan.

Introduction

If I think about it, I realize much of my writing has been done during or after periods of my life when I was embroidering or quilting or doing some kind of needle-pulling-thread-through-fabric type of activity. Why was I sitting there concentrating on a little piece of fabric? Escape, pure escape. My mother watched in amazement as I embroidered through my divorce. “Your life is in chaos! How can you sit there with that little picture in your hand as if all’s right with the world?” She didn’t understand that I was *making* it all right with my slow methodical creative stitches. As my hands slowed my world down to a manageable pace, the thoughts flying through my head also slowed down enough to form meaningful sentences. It was then that I would lay down the needle and pick up a pen to record the words that I now could hear with perfect clarity. I didn’t know what I thought until I wrote it down, but I couldn’t slow down the words until after I sat stitching. Otherwise, the words were like sensations experienced by an LSD flyer: coming so quickly and so intensely that no sense could be made of them. Something beautiful was in the depths of my mind, but couldn’t be expressed until the stitching hands slowed things down.

So I stitch, I think, I write. Stitching comes after chaos. So the full cycle goes like this: chaos, stitch, slow the thoughts down, write, edit, go back to normal life, forget to write, chaos. Writing has brought me back to sanity many times over in my life, but I never recognized the complete cycle until recently.

Writing has to have emotion as well as intellectual insight, or it seems dead to me. Without emotion, without feeling, the words don't seem as intense or real. So for me, successful writing is done either as the result of life chaos or by careful remembrance of it during the aftermath.

I recently lost everything in a house fire, including most of the words I wrote down for over forty years, and it feels similar to losing a body part after surgery. Something is missing. I can't prove it and no one can tell by looking at me, but I have indeed suffered another loss. *Another* loss. Sometimes I look down to see if I am still here at all, so much has been taken from me over the years. It's hard for me to believe there can possibly be anything left. Thank God, I must be collecting new material faster than I'm losing the old. Creativity fills the void. What can I create to fill the emptiness? Well, let me tell you a story....

I started writing stories when I was a child. I made little booklets of them, complete with crayoned illustrations. I would show my masterpieces to my mother, but the most I ever got by way of a response was "That's nice." So writing became a secret passion, something I did to alleviate my pain, my boredom, my loneliness. As a little girl, I did have an elderly great aunt with failing eyesight who loved my visits because she would have me read aloud from her favorite book of poems, a book she later gave me. She's probably the reason I learned to love poetry.

For a while, though, I left writing behind and concentrated on schoolwork. But when I was fourteen, I suddenly awoke to a love of people and a need for friends. I was a Beatlemaniac, as were most of my girlfriends. We began exhibiting our creativity by

writing poems about our fab four friends. We competed to see who could come up with the most clever poem about our idols. I remember writing a Lennon-type extended pun about John's wife—My Cyn/My Sin. My ability to spin poems of this nature made my name among the creative set at Emerson Junior High.

However, that same year, my family moved from Ohio to Florida, and again I was friendless and lonely. I had a secret passion to be a singer, but I was too shy to audition anywhere. Plus I couldn't read music. So I entertained myself by writing a story about a teenaged girl whose parents die. She has nowhere to go live other than with her older brother—who is, of course, a rock star. This became my practice novel, rewritten a zillion times over the years. By the time I would finish one version, I would have learned enough to know I had to start over, utilizing my new knowledge to rewrite from page one. Just one more edit, I told myself, each time. I think I taught myself to write with that book. When I went through horrific relationships that threatened to destroy my self-esteem, that made me crazy and suicidal, my salvation was to pull that novel out and tell myself “Yeah, but I can write!” or “I've got to finish this damned novel before I die.” So I'd start it over one more time. I pulled most of it out of the remains of the house fire. Like me, it refuses to die.

I got through most of my life telling myself that *someday* I would devote the bulk of my time to writing. Since *someday* never seemed to show up, I managed to sneak a little writing in and around my day-to-day life. As a young mother, I typed on my Smith-Corona while my son sat beside me pounding on his red plastic toy typewriter. He took our work very seriously. For years I kept notebooks and diaries and journals, writing

down scraps that came to me while I sat on the bus on the way to work, washed dishes, or typed for my employers. I went through periods when I wrote for local newspapers or read my poetry at coffeehouses. When my kids left to live with their dad, I moved to an island, joined a professional writers' group, and wrote three different books, none of which totally pleased anyone, but all of which were great practice and held "great promise." Finally, a 60-year old woman who had just completed her master's degree from a low-residency school challenged me to do the same. I even applied, but of course I was told I had to finish my B.A. first. Since I had never been able to get a full-time writing job because of the lack of that degree, I decided to go for it. I moved to Florida, to the cheapest place I could find—a mobile home—and enrolled in college, at age 49. I was determined to become a better writer. A serious writer. A writer with a degree, even. But most of the time, the coursework, along with earning a living, left little if any time to write.

This got worse after I became a student teacher. Then I began to notice a strange thing. I started looking at my work the same way I was looking at the work of my students—with a strange detachment. I started to see some of my blatant errors—errors I hadn't been able to see before because I was too close to the material. But I couldn't mark things on my student papers and then not correct them in my own work, could I? Though I had days when I felt totally incompetent, my students told me they'd never before learned so much about writing in one little course.

That is certainly heartening, since even after all the courses I took as an undergraduate and graduate student, I still feel like a rank beginner, as if there is some

mystery, some secret, I can't seem to grasp. A little voice in my head keeps piping up with "When will I feel like a *real* writer?" I don't know if that day will ever come, but I intend to keep writing, all the same. I need to write. I have to write. If it's a sickness, I don't want to be cured of it.

This work, *Mosaic*, began as a memoir, but evolved into a work of fiction. It became more fun to intensify the scenes with additional color. It became necessary to condense repeated themes into one scene, multiple characters into one larger-than-life character. I could get out my color box, mix a wilder palette, and paint a primitive Gauguin instead of the tight little realities that would have dictated the borders of a memoir. I like bright, compelling colors. I like to embellish. It's way more fun.

My general tendency, though, is to write essays commenting on the strange things I have encountered first-hand and through extensive reading. I take in words the way some people take in air. As a child, I read whatever I could find in the house: cereal boxes, my mother's magazines arranged on the coffee table, the books she kept in bookcases on either side of the living-room fireplace. I discovered the school library, but long before the end of sixth grade I had read everything in it of any interest and had to start walking to the community library, which not only had a wider selection of "children's books" but floors full of "adult" books which I found I could easily read, as well. Still, during the summer, it was fun to be lazy and read mountains of Bobbsey Twins, Cherry Ames, Nancy Drew and all those other easy-to-read series books. I loved mystery books as a child, but as I got older, the mysteries of the workings of the human psyche became much more interesting than whodunit. I read about people of other

cultures, particularly Native Americans (North, Central, and South) of the past and present, studied archaeology, and inspected the workings of present-day subcultures: prisoners, mental patients. As a teenager I read books written by Jewish and Black authors—to find out about groups of people I knew nothing about. I loved reading about any kind of artist—painters, sculptors, musicians, writers. All of this was to find out the answer to the ultimate question—why do people do what they do? And the ultimate mystery—which world is more real? The outer or the inner?

When I was little, I loved Lois Lenski's books, the Little House books, *The 5 Little Peppers and How They Grew*, *The Borrowers*, *Pippi Longstocking* and all of the Eloise books. As a teenager, I favored the dark moodiness of Dostoyevsky. Of course, I read Thomas Mann and Kahlil Gibran, along with *Rolling Stone* magazine copy. These were must-reads in the sixties. Dylan Thomas and e.e. cummings were my favorite poets.

I recently reread Joyce Carey's *The Horse's Mouth*. My 1970 paperback copy survived the fire. I wondered if a book that had impressed me enough as a teenager to cause me to carry it around for thirty-five years would still have any effect on me. I found it did. His use of color and subtle sarcastic humor still attracts me, and the format of note-jotting stream-of-consciousness still hits me as a valid way to paint a story. That probably explains why I love all of the beat poets and writers, especially Kerouac.

I think being a young woman in the 70s, who read all of the emerging women writers, affected me deeply. Suddenly it was ok to write about being pissed off about having to take care of everybody while your husband watched TV (as in Judy Blume's *Wifey*). I think these women helped me find my voice. They showed me it was ok to

write about the thoughts and subjects that naturally came to me, and that it was no longer necessary to couch my observations in the language or vantage point of adult males.

I love the writing of Margaret Atwood, Alice Hoffman, and Connie Mae Fowler. They make me feel totally alive. I also love the humor of Tom Robbins, Carl Hiasson, and the late Douglas Adams. I still think Louise Erdrich is great. These are people I read and reread—for the pure pleasure as well as to admire their expertise with language.

Sometimes I think reading so much has hindered me in that I read so quickly I don't slow down enough to see what the authors are doing that's so great. I have been forcing myself to read slowly and dissect work to see how it's done. Some things are so obvious, I'm missing them. My work sometimes lacks elements I would instinctively miss if I were reading.

When it comes to the day-to-day nitty-gritty of the writer's craft, I have learned the most from the comments of other writers and instructors. However, they have to be carefully chosen. The first groups I got involved with seemed to be for the purpose of ripping up each other's work. As far as I could see, no one learned anything. No one improved. Not wanting to get involved in ego wars, I went back to teaching myself from books. The writers' group on Martha's Vineyard was the first one that actually gave me constructive criticism. The members were all professionals, but felt I had promise. They told me what I did well, and they told me what I did wrong. I rewrote and they either approved or disapproved of the changes. Everyone read something every week, and everyone listened respectfully to the others' opinions. In this way, I learned from the comments about other people's work, as well. After that, attending college-level classes

caused my writing to improve exponentially. I have learned by watching other people improve, as well as by the comments of the other writers and the instruction of the professors who read my work.

I think I also have been influenced by film. I love the sharp wit and fast exchange of dialogue in the black and white films of the 30's and 40's. Film and theater have added to how I see and hear a scene—when to start, when to cut to another scene, what props should be in view, where the characters should be standing. Film and art, especially paintings, have influenced how I see the environment, particularly with regards to the use of color. My love of music and singing has probably affected the content and pacing of my poetry. Actually, the way I see it, everything one takes in with any of the senses affects one's writing.

All I know to do is to keep looking, keep listening, keep writing, keep reading, keep learning. Still, people often point to something in my work that I should have known not to do. “Duh,” I’m thinking, “how could I have done that?” The second my critic points it out, I know he or she is right. I’m getting quicker with the rewrites, though. I more easily see my mistakes. And I haven’t given up.

Excuse me, now. I have to go inhale a few more words.

Exhaling will come later.

Beginnings

I have this problem. I'll be trying to remember a certain time of my life and the only way I can do that is to remember which man I was interested in. Some people hear a song on the radio and it puts them back to a definite time. Then they can click on a specific memory of a certain day in a particular town with a special someone.

For me, a memory can be pulled from the archives by running my finger across corduroy fabric or hearing a bird chirp. A certain smell can set me off. For instance, the aroma of strong coffee, mixed with the stiff chaser of cigarette smoke—has to be a Pall Mall—contained in the cool early morning musk of an old room with lots of wooden objects, with an undertone of yesterday's whiskey. This combination pulls a good memory. What a fine bouquet we're talking about—my first whiff of what I took to be masculinity. Align it with a broad chest of reddish hair and a rough face and a deep voice that crackled when it was coated with liquor, and that was Jeffrey. The first man I actually wanted, though he didn't want me back. He let me stay at his house, but did not share his bed with me. Somehow this made me want him more. Sometimes in the morning if the air is cool, I can smell my way back to him.

Also, it's hard for me to tell a story in a straight line because of this sensory memory thing. I could be telling you about my husband, who didn't smoke, when someone walks by with a lit Pall Mall and I'll instantly be thinking of Jeffrey. See what I mean? And, anyway, Jeffrey memories are all intertwined around the others because he's

been in and out of my life so many times, I lost count. Then there are all the telephone calls...

August, 2004

Florida

“Save anybody lately?” These are Jeffrey’s first words after I pick up the phone. J doesn’t start with “hello,” even if it’s been seven years since the last phone call.

“Whatcha doing? Anybody under the bed? Anyone IN the bed?”

“Not lately,” I say. “All the young men are taken and none of the guys my age can get it up. Are ya missing me or something?” I sit down on the chair in front of my desk in my home office, lean back, and prop my feet up on top of a pile of typing. This may take a while.

“Yeah, right,” J scoffs. “I was just wondering if you joined the nunnery yet.”

“Nope.”

“Didn’t drown in any of the hurricanes, either, I see,” he continued. “Didn’t get hit in the head with a flying palm tree?”

“Naah. I can still run pretty fast.”

“Well, that’s good. I called during Charley, but, of course, you didn’t answer the phone.”

“I was ordered to evacuate. I knew you were calling, but all the lines were down. And since you’ve never caught on to the telepathy thing, you didn’t know I was calling you back.”

“Aaaahhh,” J says, like he’s taking this all in stride. “Well, I’m thinking of coming down there and sleeping on your couch. Sick of Vineyard weather and there you are in sunny Florida. You have to cook thirty-one dinners for me. You owe me.”

“Sure,” I say, taking a sip of my tea. “No problem.” He’s referring to my last visit to him when he wouldn’t let me cook for a month. He always says he’s going to come see me, but he never has. He won’t leave his quaint little island. It’s always me who has to do the traveling. Every once in awhile, three times so far, to be exact, I go see him. Last time he invited me, I said if I came, I wasn’t going to leave. He said, fine. We lasted a little over a month. I took pity on the confirmed bachelor and moved out.

If he were capable of living with someone, it might be me. But what would it mean? We have never slept with each other. In the Biblical sense. Probably a good thing. Would probably ruin my longest-running friendship. Thirty-five years and counting.

“Can I bring a dog?” Jeffrey is asking.

“Sure.”

“How about two or three?” he pressures. J likes to know where your line is so he can attempt to move it a foot or two.

“Fifteen’s the limit,” I say, looking out the window at a gently-swaying palm tree.

“I can live with that,” he says, and I’m thinking, I wish you really could. I wish we could actually live together. Because without him I always feel lonely. Really, though, we are both better off alone. We need our freedom and our aloneness. Money

and love have always been totally elusive. Freedom is expensive, but I've always been able to arrange for it—as long as I'm willing to give up everything else.

“So what have you been up to?” J asks. Then we catch up on each other so we don't feel left out anymore. By the time he tells me how he answered his door in the nude to scare away a pesky neighbor, and I tell him how my cat pooped in my shoe because I went away for the weekend, we are feeling close again.

Christmas 2004

Ohio

I wake up to the sound of my great-grandfather's Seth Thomas table model pounding through my consciousness like a pulse beat during a hangover. Surely, this pain cannot be coming from an old clock.

It is pitch black and beyond freezing cold in my parents' family room on Christmas morning. I need super strength for this visit, but after a week, I am sick to my stomach, awake before dawn, trying not to disturb anyone with my nocturnal meltdown. I am a middle-aged returnee to my parents' middle-aged suburban home. I now live thirteen hundred miles away, but I keep returning for visits every so many years, trying to rewrite my childhood, always finding that the new version is just as sucky as the last fifty-three. You really can't go home again, mostly because there's no such thing as home.

So I keep moving, over and over, to make sure I never get even remotely emotionally attached to anyone, any place or any thing ever again. Too much shit to carry around otherwise. I'm learning to travel light. Lighter, anyway. Of course, I got the brilliant idea to come north for Christmas in a year when the entire northern coast, the Ohio edge of Lake Erie, is experiencing "record-breaking" weather—the temperature extremely low and the number of inches of snow extremely high. We're currently at ten below, the wind blowing on top of fifteen and a half inches of snow. Not a Florida girl's idea of a dream vacation. I hate cold and I hate snowfall of any kind.

Depression set in somewhere after the four-hour delay of takeoff and the family bickering I've endured since I landed. You'd think it was my fault I wound up ringing their doorbell at two a.m. It was supposed to be ten p.m. Yell at the airline for having a plane with a broken fuel gauge, I'm thinking. Yell at them for overfilling the tank and spilling fuel all over the runway so we had to wait 'til they mopped it up. Yell at them for thinking it was fixed and boarding us, then deboarding us, then boarding us again. Yell at that lady who waited 'til we taxied out and then decided there was no way she was flying on this plane and made us taxi back in. Yell at her for having checked her bag and making us wait while they pulled everything out to look for it. Just don't yell at me. Hello to you, too.

In the morning I wake up and there is six inches of white stuff on the ground. If I didn't have a premonition before, I know now. Gone are all those plans for visiting my children a bunch of times and going to the movies with my sister. For three days I am snowed in with the two people whose idea of recreation is how pissed off they can make each other. When they are calm, they play with their cats, feed the birds in the backyard, and watch *Jeopardy*. I am so happy for the peace that I watch *Jeopardy* with them. Once the roads are cleared, we spend the next couple days shopping and puttering around. I am astounded at how quickly I can fall back into being like them—enduring life instead of living it.

But now it is four twenty a.m. I have been here a week. Tomorrow I go home. I thought I had been enduring just fine, but suddenly the tears are sheeting down my face and I remember how lonely I was the whole time I lived here. I have gone back in time,

reverted to an ancient calendar. I want to call Jeffrey and moan. He's the only one who will always listen to my panic and guide me through.

This is the second time I've woken up this morning. The first time I felt like I was smothering. I thought I had forgotten that feeling, but there it was again. I couldn't breathe, the tears were starting, and I thought I would start sobbing. I got out of the bed in the guest room, because I know the walls between the bedrooms are paper thin. I thought I had successfully sneaked down two half-flights to the family room.

But within a couple minutes both parents were standing there looking at me, visible only because of a patch of moonlight filtering in through the window. They're asking if I'm ok, or if I'm sick. It is hard to reconcile their caring for me with the hatred they seem to carry for each other, the constant viciousness that has disturbed me so.

"I'll be in and out of the bathroom for a while. I'm sorry I woke you. I was trying not to." I get all this out, I think, without betraying the fact that I've been crying. It's dark and they don't see well without their glasses. I should be safe if I can keep all this stupid emotion out of my voice. "How about some ginger ale?" my dad asks and I say, "Yes, that's a good idea," and I walk up the four steps so I'm on the ground floor of the split level, follow him to the kitchen like I am nine years old again and take the glass he can find in the dark, and the can of ginger ale he finds inside the fridge by the light. "I'm going back to bed," he says, then. My mom has already gone back up. "Ok," I say. I am thinking about two people's biological clocks being awakened by the needs of their 53-year-old child. That makes me even sadder. They would never wake up for each other.

So here I am, waiting for an explosion that never comes. Instead there are just sheets and sheets of tears. I am sad for what they needed and never got and what I needed and never got and then I drink ginger ale I don't need and sit there some more in the moonlight, crying. I don't even know why I am crying. I just know I have to.

It's at times like these that I sometimes fall all the way back.

1969

Florida

“I’ll pick you up at seven,” said the voice behind my back, *his* voice, as I stood before my hall locker. Suddenly, my brain was a sieve; I couldn’t even remember my combination. I whirled around, but Jim had kept on walking, apparently rather briskly, and was already out of speaking range. I did a complete three-sixty, but there were no other females around, no one else around, period. Talk about insecure. I had to figure out if he was really talking to me. Of course, how insecure did he have to be to ask me out in such a way? Or, in retrospect, maybe he was that arrogant and I was too in love to notice. But I don’t think so. At any rate, he just kept walking. I had already made my interest clear, so what was there to discuss?

I was seventeen and so was he. However, I was a senior and he was a junior. That made this infatuation something to hide. I was the editor of the school literary magazine and he was the school’s sarcastic wit and writer of short stories extraordinaire. I had a crush on him. He ran track and my best girlfriend and I showed up at all the sparsely-attended meets, sticking out like groupies on the bare bleachers. So, yes, he knew. But had he actually ever talked to me? No. So, of course, he’d never asked me out before, either.

Then his best friend walked by, his best friend, who unbeknownst to me, was already dating my best friend. “Did Jim just ask me out?” I asked.

“Yep.”

“How can he pick me up when he doesn’t know where I live?”

“Oh, but he does. You’re going on a double with Roger and girlfriend,” he said, referring to the third member of the literary musketeers who attended all my meetings.

Yes, he showed up, and yes, we dated. Once. My shyness and the blatant sluttiness of Roger’s girlfriend didn’t mix. I didn’t get asked out again.

I graduated high school and went on to community college. During my first year of college, and Jim’s senior year of high school, he became big man on campus. Among other things, he edited the same magazine I had just done, won track meets, aced courses, and acted in a play which I went to see. Apparently, it added to his prestige to have a college girl come to see him perform. I went backstage to congratulate him and I wound up being hugged and introduced to everyone. In the back of my mind, I believed that once he got to college, we’d reconnect.

I didn’t see him again until one night when he dropped into the store where I worked the late shift. Right before it closed. Wanted me to go out with him and his friends. I told him “no.” My mother had this strict rule about calling the house late at night and waking everyone up for anything less than life and death situations. If I broke her rule to call her and say I was going out, she’d rant, rave, and say “no” anyway. She’d make my life hell for days. So I declined his invitation.

And I never saw him again.

Alive.

The very next morning, before I had gotten out of bed, the phone kept ringing, a fairly unusual event at our house. But I was tired, and stayed in bed. Each time the phone rang, I heard my mother speaking quietly, as if not to wake me. Finally, she went outside in her garden. The next time the phone rang, I got up and answered it.

“My God,” came the voice of one of my friends, “we’ve been trying to reach you all morning. Did your mother tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“Oh, Alicia, Jim is dead,” my friend sobbed.

“That’s impossible,” I said, in shock. “I just saw him last night. He wanted me to go out with him.”

“Get your newspaper. It’s on the front page,” she instructed, so I did and it was, and I still didn’t believe it. A drunken teenager had run a red light and broadsided Jim. Killed instantly. My friend listened to me sob now. “I’m sorry,” she moaned. “I’ll take you to the funeral, ok?” I heard her, but I said nothing. Already numb, I hung up and walked back to my room.

I went to his funeral, dressed in the tropical mourning color of white. I stood off to the side while his girlfriend, dripping in black from head to toe, wept loudly, surrounded by comforting crowds of friends.

But then one of Jim’s friends, who’d come to my store with him, parted from the crowd to talk to me. He said Jim had been looking for me that night because he wanted to talk to me about heaven. Heaven. I stood there thinking about that, hoping he’d made

it, because he must have known his time was up. Maybe he was going to tell me he'd be there waiting for me.

For a long time afterwards I was angry at myself for not going with him—why had I cared what my mother would have done to me for being late? And then I realized it would have been a moot point—I might have died with him. Still, I wished we'd had that last conversation, that I'd been able to answer his questions, soothe him, calm him, ready him—even if I wasn't going to go with him on the ultimate trip. Maybe we would have talked, and he would have delivered me safely to my parents' home before he left us all.

I went morose; death was on my mind constantly. I began to believe that I had been meant to go with him, that I had missed my cue, had been left behind. I contemplated suicide. I'd lost my soul mate—and it wasn't just a breakup with possible reconciliation in the air—no, he was gone. It was going to be a lonely trek, getting through this whole long life without him. No use looking for my love, because I knew he'd already left. I was eighteen. My life was over.

A few days later I was back at school, sitting at a desk in the publications shack. Those of us who wrote for the school newspaper and literary magazine had been allowed to take over a little building on the edge of a parking lot, left behind by the construction crews. This was our hangout between classes and our workplace for creating words. Only the sound of the newspaper editor typing a story broke the silence, which was fine by me, since I was still in my dark death mood.

Then, as I sat there, the sound of CCR came blaring from the speakers of someone's vehicle outside and I smiled in spite of myself. Jeffrey. Jeffrey was this older

guy whose G.I. privileges were paying his tuition. Besides being on both publications, he was in my creative writing class. Even for 1969 he was considered weird by all the students my age, since he rarely talked to anyone. Other than me.

Next came the sound of an old truck door being opened, badly in need of a little WD-40, and the clank of empty beer and wine bottles hitting the pavement. Then the door slammed, and whistling commenced. Next thing, he was in the hut with me.

“Where’ve you been?” J asked.

I hadn’t been to class all week—too busy planning my future suicide.

“Where were you, the Bahamas?” he repeated, trying to get me to look at him.

“Funeral,” I said, finally, staring him in the eye.

“Jeez!” he said, making a face. “Bummer. Someone close?”

“This guy I—“

J did a double-take. “I thought you were Little Miss Virgin!” he blurted.

I glared at him. “You know, it is possible to love someone without having slept with him. It happens.”

“Sorry,” J mumbled. “Really, that’s horrible, you really cared about him.”

“Yes.”

J sat there a minute, thinking. “So, are you going to class?” he asked quietly.

“Sure,” I said.

So he walked me to writing class. People gave each other weird looks when we walked in. I guess we were an odd pair to be friends. He was older than me, shorter than me, a little chubby, smoked too much, drank too much, drugged too much. People

thought I talked to him because I was scared of him, but the truth is, I was the only one who wasn't scared of him.

“We need a knife,” J announced when we'd gotten to our places at the long tables that served as desks in that room. He set a square paper box on the table. “It's her birthday,” he whispered to me, conspiratorially.

“Whose?” I asked dumbly, still centered in the bottom of my dark little world.

“The instructor's. Go next door to the teacher's lounge and beg a knife.”

I just looked at him aghast. What was I? The little kitchen helper? Just because I had ovaries? I banged my books down and left, shooting him what I hoped was a very pissed-off look. He just chuckled and started opening the box. So I walked to the room next door which, sure enough, was a teacher's lounge, totally deserted, and started rummaging through the drawers in the counter under the coffee machine. There was a little plastic knife, but I put it back. Too small. I finally found a very big, very sharp knife, suitable for carving turkeys. I carried it safely, pointed down, until I was right behind Jeffrey, then with the knife in my right hand, I drew my left hand around his throat. With my right, I brandished the knife in front of his face. “Yo, ho!” I said, in my best pirate voice.

J gasped, then started to laugh. I handed him the knife. From then on, I could do anything. I drank continuously from his metal thermos of coffee, brought in to kill his hangovers, but also to keep me alive, since I had no money for food, and repeatedly threw out his annoying cigarettes without repercussions. No one could figure out how I got

away with this stuff. Most people were frozen motionless by one cold glance from the man. Here I was, the child, unafraid.

On days when he perceived that the crowd was disapproving, he would wait in the hall, then fall into step beside me as I walked away from the class. Without a word, he'd be beside me, but then suddenly he'd be spilling out thoughts no one else knew he had. He had decided I was trustable, a worthy listener, at least, for the tall tales he told outside of the bar. Perhaps it only worked because I was at that odd juncture of my life--willing to listen to anything strange, anything different from what I'd heard before.

Because for me, next to J, everyone else was boring and flat. His outrageousness wafted over to my nose, smelling of life, and I breathed deeply. In a good mood, he made me laugh. In a bad mood, he made me think. Maybe he respected me because I saw through his act. I know I respected him because he saw through mine.

And no one else was equipped with our bizarre ability to communicate. Sitting in the publications shack one day I moaned in pain from a headache that wouldn't quit. None of us penniless community college students owned so much as an extra aspirin. Jeff, however, took one look at me and left. Despondent, I stayed put, figuring he was in one of his black moods. Either that or he was on a high so good he didn't want it interrupted. Within ten minutes, though, he was back, handing me one of those sample-sized bottles of Excedrin. He'd walked clear across campus to the administration building where he'd seen them handing out sample packs to new students, just to score me some free pain-killer. Roses would not have been as appreciated--nor would they have indicated as clearly the soft heart inside the growling bear.

Jeffrey the jolt. I think he jolted me back to life. I began to think I loved him-- that maybe he even loved me, but I had nothing but these small gestures to go by. Though guys came on to me daily, Jeffrey just wanted to be friends, nothing more. I couldn't figure it out. I knew he did a lot of "better living through chemistry," but I knew other people who drank and smoked and were still interested in women. He didn't seem to be gay. I couldn't figure out the mystery. In my inexperienced young state, I decided I just wasn't attractive. Or that my true love was already dead, after all.

So I decided being friends was ok. Some days I wanted to live life as freely as he did, but usually I was too scared. I didn't want to visit druggy-land. I liked my brain, my thoughts, my soul—I didn't want to lose them. I didn't want to change realms, I just wanted this one to shape up. Plus I wanted to share my realm with someone. This would make it perfect, I thought. Love was supposed to be a good thing. How come I couldn't find it?

Still, even in my straight state, he was the only man in my life more interesting than a pet turtle. Even stoned, he was a poet—the words came out of his mouth wiser, more profound than anything I'd ever heard a flesh and blood human being say. Well, at least since Jim. Sure, I'd read some pretty great stuff in books, but this man was spouting it in real time, in my presence, usually only in my presence. When anyone else showed up, he clammed up. I took that as a compliment, the way I think he meant it. Me. He trusted me. Yeow. I wanted to become a bohemian like him, but I was too steeped in my 1950's Ohio middle-class upbringing, and Christian to boot. I just couldn't let myself do

it. Anything that didn't happen was just all my fault, I decided. I was too young, too unhip, too unsophisticated. A drag. No wonder he didn't want me.

1972

Martha's Vineyard

"Alicia. What's your poison?" Jeffrey asks. He's got to go to work today, Saturday, my 21st birthday. He's stopping at the liquor store on the way home to stock up for the party he's throwing for me so I can meet his friends, all of which, he promises, are crazier than him. This seems doubtful, highly improbable, really, but I grin anyway.

"Gin," I say, bravely. How the hell should I know, the 'til now under-age consumer of beer and wine?

"Whoa," J says, admiring. I guess that I've made an okay choice. "I'll pick up some tonic and lime, too, then," he says and I nod yes. "Better take a nap," he says singsongy, filling his trusty metal thermos with hot coffee--the same green thermos, now scratched and dented, that he used in college. "There. I'm set," he says, satisfied. "I'm not kidding. Go back to bed. Get ready for the gang. You won't get any sleep tonight, either." I shrug. I'm not a napper, but who knows. It had been a weird night. I'm not exactly rested. Then he's out the door. So I do go back to bed. Not the one I've been assigned in the guest bedroom, but the one I wound up sleeping in last night, kind of. After a half-hearted drunken attempt at deflowering me, J had given up and gone to sleep. Who could blame him? I was that weirdest of all creatures, a 21-year-old virgin. In the seventies, yet.

It is nine-ish. P.M. I don't know anyone at this party except Jeffrey, but that's all right since he's the host. All of these people, at least a couple dozen, maybe three dozen, have come to Jeffrey's home, at his request, to usher in my 21st birthday. I don't even have this many friends. Total. Well, now I do. It's finally actually legal for me to drink and we are all going to drink with a vengeance tonight. All the way 'til four thirty the next morning, at which time I will be precisely 21 years and 24 hours old.

J lives on the Vineyard in his family's home. His parents are at their other house in Florida where I met J at community college. My parents are now back in Ohio trying to erase all that loose Florida living from the impressionable minds of my sisters and me. Though J works as a carpenter, money is obviously not a worry with a rent-free Vineyard home available. I, on the other hand, took peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to the office for lunch every day for two months in order to be able to afford the plane ticket here. Already I don't want to leave. People actually have fun here.

"You're slowing down, birthday girl," J says, pouring another dollop of gin in my glass, then a spray of tonic water, then he's off. I turn around to watch him walk into the kitchen, set the two bottles down on the counter, then return to the dining room, beer in hand. "Hey!" he crows jubilantly, head back. "Is this a party?" The trouble with me is, I can drink all night and never start crowing. People are everywhere. I've never had this many people in one room for my sake in my entire life. Of course, I remind myself, they are here at J's request, not because they know anything about me.

"Do you dance?" a very stoned man asks politely, hand at my elbow. He bows elegantly.

“But of course,” I say. I do love to dance, an activity in which Jeffrey does not indulge. He does, however, like to sit and watch me dance with others. When I do something he doesn’t understand, I become an exotic specimen he cannot figure out. J says he likes mystery in a woman.

We dance rather awkwardly since it’s a fast rock’n’roll number and my partner is seemingly hearing a waltz in his head. I hear grass slows you down. I don’t know for sure ‘cause I haven’t tried any yet.

I slow down to waltz pace. Now I have time to think. The first thing J said at the airport last night was “oh, my God, who are you?” He was referring to my clothes, he said, my big-city office gear. Hose and heels and a skirt. I’d forgotten he’d never seen me in anything other than jeans. When we got to his rambling old house I had immediately changed into jeans and a sweater. “There! Now I know it’s you!” he’d said. Which seemed like a funny thing to say just cause I had my work costume on. I was still me. I’m always still me.

We’d sat at the huge old oak dining room table, the table my current dance partner occasionally bumps into, the table with a view of the overgrown backyard, talking and talking and talking. More talking than we’d done all the other times we’d talked, put together. I am amazed that already I can’t remember anything in particular, just that I felt very close to J, as if he knew what I wanted him to say. We’d been talking for quite awhile before I realized I hadn’t called my parents to tell them of my safe arrival after my second-in-my-short-lifetime flight. “Whoa,” I’d said suddenly, startled, and told J what I’d forgotten to do. “Yeah, better call them,” he’d said in a serious tone, a father tone. As

I'd walked to the phone to make a quick call, I realized why I'd forgotten. 'Cause I felt like I was home. A real home where someone was glad to see me. Plus for the first time in my life, the dreaded feeling of what-will-my-mother-say/do-when- she-finds-out- about-this was gone. I'd had to travel over five hundred miles to do it, but I was free. At least I felt free. At least for today, at least for this minute. I had learned a new definition of home. Course I couldn't tell J that, because he'd think I was pushing to stay.

"Excuse me," J is saying now, tapping both me and my dance partner on the shoulder. "My turn." The waltzing man backs up two steps in a daze. "You looked bored," J whispers in my ear, taking me in his arms and leading us through a couple of turns.

I'm thinking, jealousy?

"I thought you didn't dance," I say, archly.

J starts laughing. "Alicia, that should be perfectly evident now," he says, and stops dancing. I must have hurt the feelings he says he doesn't have. He pulls me over to the stereo and cranks it up so loud people stop what they were doing to yell, complaining, which at a party full of people who love rock and roll, is pretty damned loud, but when they look around and see it's Jeffrey, everyone goes back to their talking or drinking or smoking, raising their voices to hear and be heard over the din. J stares at the stereo as if it were a TV instead of the source of mind-numbing noise. I reach forward with my free hand to turn the volume down, but he pushes my hand away. He's never let go of my other one. So, our backs to the party, I stand there with him, pretending I'm not getting a

headache and that his behavior is perfectly acceptable, not surprising to me at all. Part of me knows he is making a statement. Another part knows he is very drunk.

After the song ends, J drops my hand and walks away. I turn the stereo down to an acceptable roar and follow him to the kitchen. He is grabbing another beer. “What?” he asks, before I say anything. I look at the empty gin bottle, then at him. He hands me the beer, grabs another for himself. He cocks his head to one side, listening. “Who turned my music down?” he growls.

“I’m in here, how do I know?”

“You are such a brat! Ally oop doop, doop....” he starts singing. He bastardizes my name this way when he’s slightly pissed off with me.

“It’s my birthday, I can do anything I want,” I say.

“Except!” Jeffrey is pointing at me.

“Except what.”

“YOU know,” he insists, heading for the dining room where he crawls under the table, sits down, beer in hand, and begins howling.

Some people turn around, some laugh, especially when I roll my eyes, but the party continues. Eventually J stops howling and resumes drinking beer. I drink a few myself, then.

In the morning when I wake up, J is beside me. Both of us are fully clothed. I groan and go back to sleep.

I don't remember Sunday, but on Monday morning J fills up his trusty thermos again and goes to work. I lie in bed, trying to psych myself up to go survey the damage. The cedar-shingle-sided houses here are rustic outside and in. Nothing like the plastic perfection sought for in the un-cool Cleveland suburbs I live in. No wall-to-wall carpeting and matched living room suites here. The houses are ancient and the furniture passed on to generations of wealthy but frugal New Englanders. The floors are usually wide-planked oak with threadbare Oriental carpets strewn across them. I like that if someone spills a beer on the floor, no one gets upset. The old oak floorboards get a quick swipe with an old t-shirt, and that's that. All is forgotten. I have never felt so free and laid-back in my life. The Vineyard in the seventies. Yes.

Still, when I finally get up to look at the condition of the house after the party, I realize that even for the Vineyard, this is a little over the top. Viewing it in a sober state, anyway. Every surface is covered with beer bottles, cigarette butts, crumpled chip bags, half-eaten crackers, dirty glasses, album covers, and bunched up t-shirts still damp from mopping up spills. Then there are the spills which didn't get mopped up. It's a disaster area. I almost crawl back into bed. Then I think of the money J must have spent on this party for me. I remember that he went to work to make more. I remember that he hates to go work. So I decide, since I am now a 21-year-old adult, that I should stay awake and clean up this mess. Trouble is, there doesn't seem to be much in the line of cleaning materials around and I am without a vehicle to go shopping. So I do the best I can with what I can find--a bottle of dish detergent and rags made of old t-shirts. It takes me all day and for breaks I look through stuff, trying to get a better feel for the Jeffrey I obviously

don't know but badly want to know. He has let down his guard for once and let me into his real life. I don't want to let him down.

I look through photo albums. J as a little boy, J on a fishing boat, standing next to his Dad, who did chartered trips for a living. Who is this man who won't let me into his head, who talks in code? Every other guy has come after me for one thing. Sex.

According to my Midwestern upbringing there is no way you can have sex with a guy and then have a "normal" life. You must save yourself for the guy who thinks you're special.

The guy who will marry you. Then you will have sex and children. But everywhere around me, people are doing everything in the opposite order. Sex first. Maybe a relationship later. Sometimes they hang around and marry you. But probably not.

Probably you just move in together. I am out of date, out of sync, torn between the two time zones. Do I want to be with it or status quo? And do the rules really change with geography? I want so much to be approved of, to be loved, but I have no idea how to play the game.

I go back to mopping up messes, carrying dishes to the kitchen sink, and carrying trash to the can outside on the back porch. Eventually I can find the floor, the surfaces of tables, and have removed the debris from the seating in the living room and dining room.

The mess is all in the kitchen now. I keep working 'til it's done. Then I drink a beer that somebody missed, way on the back of the shelf in the fridge, and listen to the stereo, cranked up way louder than I ever had it at my parents', while merrily washing dishes.

Still J doesn't come home. I realize I am very tired and go upstairs to the guest room for a nap.

I wake up to the sound of cussing. It's not an angry voice, though, but more like admiration. "Jesus Christ!" Then a whistle. I hear footsteps coming up the stairs. Then J is standing in the doorway. I want him to come and kiss me hello, wrap me in his arms. But he just stands there. "Man!" he says. "You've been busy!"

"Oh. Yeah," I say, nonchalant, as if I do this every day. I prop my head up with my hand and return his gaze.

"Well, c'mon. We're going to Daniel's. Pizza and cards. I came home to get you." It's already seven, he's obviously already been somewhere drinking, and must have suddenly remembered someone was waiting for him. He doesn't look like the memory pleases him too much. But I hop up and follow him out of the bedroom, down the stairs, and out to the pick-up.

When we get to Daniel's, a card game is going on in the middle of the living room. Four guys around a card table, their women sprawled out on couches and chairs, talking, watching the game. Music is blaring. Another chair is put by the table, and the men start arguing about whether or not it's possible to play this game with five people.

"Hey!" one of the women says, handing me a beer. "Alicia! God! We've been hearing about you for ages! Good to finally meet you. You guys, this is her! Jeffrey's Alicia!"

"Oh, my God," says another, "so you do exist!"

Makes me wonder just what J has told them about me. Just who or what were they expecting? Mystified, I sit down and listen to the women, try to join in the conversation. That they know about me means Jeffrey has talked about me which could

be a good thing. That the men play cards while the women sit behind them seems like a throwback to the dark ages. Is this what it means to belong? You're there for him in the background? If you're lucky, he comes home for you before he goes out drinking? Two of the women I recognize from the party; two weren't there at all. The two that weren't at the party say something about my age, then wait expectantly for my explanation.

Yes, I am eight years younger than Jeffrey. J'd been in the Air Force before he started college, but he'd been kept stateside—never got sent to Nam. This is probably a good thing since even people who started out perfectly normal, came back from that war totally wrecked. Who knows how messed up someone like J would be with a few war experiences thrown in. So he'd gotten off easy, then gone off to college late, whereas I'd started very early, at seventeen.

One of the women gives a knowing look to Becky, who'd been at the party and witnessed my dancing and Jeffrey's intervention, the stereo gazing and the under-the-table howling. "This is her, all right," she says to the doubter. "Sometimes he actually does what she asks him to!"

"No!" the doubter scoffs. Then they go on about their jobs, and the island, and their men, and the parties they've been to this week, which beach is the nude one, and the price of good dope.

"Don't you guys ever play cards with them?" I eventually ask.

"Are you kidding? Listen to them for a minute and you'll know why." So I do and what I find out is that the card game is one they've made up, a game that has progressively more complicated rules, the drunker you get. In fact, the game makes no

sense at all unless you are as drunk and/or stoned as they are. Since they are usually way ahead of the women in that department, the game makes no sense to them. I, on the other hand, have been packing them in--beers, I mean, a talent I didn't know I had, and the damned game is starting to make sense to me. I could actually win. In fact, I'm sure of it.

J comes to realize that I am watching them, gets up, hands me his cards, says "take my spot" and heads for the bathroom. Confused, I take the cards and sit down. The guys are amused until I start beating them. I'm getting into it. After a while I realize that J's been standing there, watching me in bewilderment. The game ends and the guys are hooting and hollering in amazement. "She's banned from this table," one says, laughing.

"Are you kidding?" Daniel says. "Frankly, I *like* a challenge."

"Are you saying I don't challenge you?" J roars. "Give me those cards!" he demands, pretending to be outraged. But then he does a very strange thing. He leans forward and kisses me smack on the mouth. Like he's proud to be associated with me. Or he's marking his territory or something. Then he takes the stash of cards from my hand and sits down. He looks at me for a second, like, that's all for now, and starts gathering cards from the table so he can deal another hand.

I walk back to the couch. The doubter is giving me an amazed look. Becky hands me another beer. "Christ, give her two," the doubter is saying, handing me a beer for my other hand. "That was worth the price of admission."

Every day for a week I read the books I found lying around the house—some old novels from the forties, obviously his parents', and some newer stuff J'd used in college.

There were old jazz records from his father as well as *Abbey Road* and *McCartney*. I played “Maybe I’m Amazed” ‘til I wasn’t amazed any more. When the house started feeling confining, I’d take walks into town.

Every night J would come to get me after work and we’d go here or there, to bars or homes where people were drinking or toking or doing stuff I didn’t want to do. “Well, you’re not gonna see what *I’m* gonna see,” Jeffrey would taunt, but I was already wondering if I wanted to see what he was seeing. Everyone here was supposedly well-educated and intelligent. Some were very wealthy, from old money handed down for generations; some were trust-fund babies, partying it all away. You’d think they’d have big plans for hanging onto the world by the tail, but they were so used to it, it didn’t matter to them. They drank and drugged themselves to oblivion. I asked J why, once, around mid-week, and he said, “It’s a fucking island. Are you here to escape or aren’t you?” Yes, but escaping to oblivion wasn’t quite what I’d had in mind. I could have drunk myself to death in Ohio just fine, thank you.

Seemed to me, wherever J was, he was unable to see the obvious—that I had come all the way here, a very long way, to be with him, and though he took me to all the physical places he went to after work, it was clear we were not together in any other sense of the word. At least to me. I entertained myself by watching him and getting to know all his friends, because half the time I didn’t know if he remembered I was with him or not.

On the second Saturday I was there, he said he was taking me to breakfast—I’m thinking some nice scrambled eggs, home fries, buttered toast—but we wound up at a bar—coffee at the Seaview. Well, it was a bar at night, and I suppose it was considered a

restaurant during the day, before drinking hours. There were hotel rooms up above. It was the place to be every night, but not so inviting in the morning. Breakfast turned out to be a cellophane-wrapped donut while Jeffrey had his wake-up coffee to offset the booze in his system—and God knows what else. The people who practically lived here from after work ‘til the wee hours of the morning must just go home to sleep it off and come back for their coffee before they go off to work again in the morning. It seemed like all the same people were here, bleary-eyed, mumbling into their coffee cups, but I couldn’t be sure.

I remembered all the mornings at college—J with his thermos of hot coffee--and suddenly realized this wasn’t a binge for him. This was how he always lived. He was talking to the bartender, or coffee-pot tender, now that it was morning, and I was sitting next to him on a bar stool, lost in thought. I needed someone to talk to, someone accessible to me, but we weren’t communicating. “What’s wrong?” he asked, noticing for once, but I couldn’t tell him by then. What was the point?

So we partied through Saturday, through Saturday night. I watched him play the crazy card game ‘til four a.m., at which point I told him we had to go home; I had to pack to get on the plane. “What plane?” he growled, looking up from his cards.

“My plane to go home,” I mumbled.

“But I’m winning!” he protested, staring at his cards.

“Trust me. You’re not,” I said, heading for the door.

“Whoa, better follow your old lady,” one of the players advised, throwing his cards down.

I heard Jeffrey snort in derision, but the next thing I knew he was beside me, his hand gently taking my arm. “C’mon, let’s go,” he said.

I was disappointed. I had thought—ok, I had dreamed—that maybe the last night, at least, he would want to spend with just me, that he would want to talk to me to tell me what he wanted to say, why he had let me come up here, why he had asked me to come here. Why, when he had then ignored me all week?

Jeffrey was on a party line and I couldn’t get through.

I thought of us standing in front of the blaring stereo at the party a few nights ago, J holding my hand, something he rarely did. That was what I had stupidly, consciously been thinking of, and in the back of my mind hoping his other hand would stay still and not turn the stereo up any louder than it already was. I wanted to be crazy like him, and then again, I did not. I began to wonder if they all thought J insane and me as insane as him. To stay here would mean that I had gone from one crazy household to another.

As much as I want to leave my parents’ house, I am not sure if this is the way to do it. I realize that I am an idiot at love, a failure at relationships. It’s because I have no training whatsoever. No examples I would want to use as models. Still, something in my gut tells me this love for J might mess me up worse than I already am. That maybe it wasn’t all me this time. I was in the presence of a body, but his mind was so far away, we weren’t communicating at all.

“Are you really leaving?” he finally asks.

“What else can I do?”

“You could stay,” he says. But I want it plainer than that. More romantic than

that. I want an ‘I love you’ or an ‘I’ll miss you if you go’ or ‘life won’t be the same without you.’ But I know for him it will be.

Sitting on the plane—I had to leave, I had a plane ticket already bought, a job waiting in another city, my bedroom full of my stuff, somewhere else--I had to go back, didn’t I? “Follow your captain,” J had said that day, kissing me lightly, then stood watching as I boarded the plane. There were many times, years afterward, that I regretted my decision. But every time, after I thought about it, I came to the same conclusion. My head and my heart never did come to agree on this one.

My decision was based on the fact that I still had plans, hope, and ambition. I would get a job at a magazine or an ad agency. Maybe I could go back to school and finish my degree, since I obviously wasn’t cut out to be somebody’s woman—not if it meant sitting around, watching somebody you care about slowly drink and drug himself to death. I didn’t want to see J die. Been there. Done that. Thank you. And I was convinced at the time that he would leave me and this earth early, and that it would be of his own doing.

I had to admit, finally, that J didn’t love me. So I decided I might as well return to home number one and work on a new escape plan.

1980

Ohio

My life restarted the day we broke a hole into the back of the house in order to install some sliding glass doors. Suddenly, a jolt of clear bright light shone through a six-by-eight foot expanse of glass, into the formerly dark room. Light. Earlier in the morning, later into the evening. A lightning storm became a dramatic movie, the flashes filling the room. The outside had begun to come inside. Without going out of my doors, the world had begun to come to me. Come to get me. Before, I had done very well, I thought, staying inside my four walls, never looking out. But now, the glass revealed the edges of four acres of beauty out behind the house. My world had expanded without any effort on my part at all. I knew that beyond the trees was a pond, and beyond the pond, a couple acres back, was a river, beyond that a whole world. It had always been there, but I had ignored it. I had thought I didn't need it. Or maybe I had just never thought about it. Now it seemed that perhaps I had been missing something, after all. The world had reached a hand into my little home and connected me, whether I wanted to be or not. The funny thing was, the house no longer felt big enough, now that I was being constantly reminded of the four acres. Soon after that, the four acres wasn't enough either. I realized my life had been on hold for eight long years. The marriage was over.

Ok, so maybe that's just a poetic load of shit. Makes it sound like it was easy to just up and walk out one bright day. But as my mother would always whine, nothing's

easy in this life. Think Murphy's law. If it can go wrong, it will. My life is Murphy's law personified. He's probably one of my ancestors. However, the poetic woman inside me always looks for the bright side. I try not to let her out too often because she's the dumb bunny who got me into this marriage. Ms. Passion. Ms. Naivete. Ms. Love Will Conquer All. She's the one who will still say haughtily in the face of your disbelief: love *will* conquer all. You just picked the wrong one to love. You gotta pick one who loves you back. That's the part I always get wrong.

The part of me that has a brain says, "duh!" But Ms. Naivete believed all those magic words Kevin said. "I love you. I don't want to live without you. I want to have children with you. I don't do drugs."

All the things I'd wanted J to say. So those four lines put Kevin head and shoulders above all my other suitors, even if he hadn't been six foot tall and handsome. Even if he hadn't been blonde and blue-eyed and strong. I was good-looking, too, but I didn't know it then. I felt very lucky that this big strong guy wanted to devote his life to making me feel safe and secure. I had never felt safe and secure. I didn't know it was a lie.

I was young, and thrilled to find someone who'd been raised the same way I had, who believed the rules were to be obeyed. No smoking, drinking, drugging, or messing about. I was tired of fighting off drunken, doped-up, sex-crazed men who only wanted my body. "Hi, baby, you're hot, wanna fuck?" was not a cliché. It was the world I lived in and I was tired of it. My handsome, clean-cut virgin was a breath of fresh air. Yes, virgin. That should have been my first warning because even I had given up on that one.

I didn't know at the time that it meant he had a psychotic fear of people. I didn't know then that every time I talked to a "stranger" he would have a fit.

I thought this guy was the one because suddenly we were both able to let someone into our locked-tight-against-strangers worlds. We couldn't keep our hands off each other; our bodies had taken over. We thought this was okay in our case since we were so in love—like this had never happened to anyone else before. We acted as if we were an exception to any rule mankind had thought up to protect its citizens. Within days we had forsaken all the beliefs of our parents, as well as any formerly-held spiritual dogma. We acted as if our love would solve all of our problems.

We made love before we went to work, as soon as we got home from work, and again before we went to sleep at night. Sometimes we would wake each other up in the middle of the night for more. We were making up for lost time. Weekends were even crazier. We basically never got out of bed. We still never drank, smoked, or did drugs. We figured we were in enough trouble already.

Eventually, one of Kevin's friends protested the sudden and total expulsion from his life. I awoke to the sound of someone banging on my apartment door. I lived in a building where you had to be buzzed in, so in my half-awake state, I couldn't figure out how someone had gotten to the inner sanctum, as it were. Kevin lifted himself up on his elbows and stared at me, just as sleepy.

"I know you're in there, Kevin, you can't keep ignoring me!" a male voice yelled.

"Friend of yours?" I asked, coolly.

"Oh, God, it's George. I haven't talked to him for days," Kevin said. This was

because Kevin had been at my house for days, leaving only to go to work. It was Saturday, though, and we were still home.

I raised my eyebrows. “Explain this to me. You have a male friend who follows you around?”

“I hear you talking in there, Kevin, so open the door!”

“It’s not my door!” Kevin yelled back. “Go away, you jerk!”

“You’re a rotten friend! We were supposed to go to the car show today!”

Kevin groaned.

“Why don’t you go to the fucking car show?” I say. “I’m tired of you, anyway!”

“I don’t *think* so,” Kevin says, reaching for me.

I slap his hand. “Then go get that maniac off my door!”

Kevin frowns, pulls on some jeans and goes out the door. I hear the mumbling sound of the two of them talking, then Kevin comes back in, a big grin on his face.

“What.”

“I got rid of him,” Kevin is saying, stripping off his jeans. “He’s got other friends he can go with.” I just lie there, taking in this sight. Two whole days with nothing to do, nowhere to go. Oh, dear. How *will* we fill up all that time?

Yes, clearly, I was hopefully addicted. I just didn’t comprehend this at the time. We hadn’t heard of co-dependency back then. I didn’t know the difference between lust and love. I could cut this part out, but it’d be like trying to cut off a birthmark. I’ve been told I have to love all of myself, even the hateful parts, the disgusting parts. Otherwise, I’m in denial. Otherwise, I’ll never be able to love anyone. Ever.

1979

Ohio

I wake up next to my husband, Kevin. My husband who beat me last night, who yelled at me, broke my stuff, called me filthy names. Cunt and whore and bitch, although, faithful wife that I am, I sleep only with him. I have tried so hard to do everything he wants. So he will be calm. So he will be happy. So he will leave me alone.

He is all right now. It is over with as far as he is concerned. He will get up and go to work and this will be a normal day. He will call it normal and will it to be normal and so it will be normal. My opinion does not count on this. There is no use talking to him. His mind is made up. No amount of tears or words or anger from me will change how he views this day.

Because I am silent, he thinks we have made up, everything is all right, and that if he, too, is silent, we are getting along. He thinks his silence is his apology and that I have accepted it. So he gets up and goes to work as usual.

I say nothing. Even if he realizes that I am still angry, he knows I feel sufficiently trapped to not fight anymore. I have given up, he thinks, and accepted my lot in life. I am quiet, but it is a cold quiet, even though my heart is pounding—surely he can see it rising out of my chest, at least feel its heat, screaming for comfort, screaming my planned betrayal, because I know as soon as his truck pulls out of the drive, that I will get up, put

clothes on me and my children, throw everything in the car, just as I have rehearsed in my mind, many times over, mentally listing the things I have chosen to take with me, but not touched, moved, or packed. I must not give any clue that he can see.

It is totally against my nature to lie, to betray, to be disloyal, to hide anything. It is killing me to do this. I think I have literally ripped something out of my soul and am holding it in my teeth to keep it from crawling back to turn me into my passive self. No, I will keep it in my teeth, bleeding, where I can see it, where I can watch it drip blood, where it will keep me angry enough to keep moving. This is what he is doing to me, I will remind myself. He is shredding my soul, so I have every right to take it back, to hide it from him.

I don't have the strength, of any kind, to leave while he watches, so I will do it the cowardly way, behind his back. Still, I know in my mind that this is the smart way to do it. Probably the only way. The only safe way. So I have forced my crazed emotions and my big mouth to be silent. I am being wise. It is called survival, and I find I have a will to live that is astounding. I never knew I had it. Not after all those teenaged years of thinking how gentle death would be, how death would be the perfect escape. Now I want to live so much the life force screams in my ears. Run!!!! I have children now, and they need me. I do not want them to watch this travesty of love, to misinterpret, to learn it wrong, just as their father and I have done. No, I want them to have a chance to find out what love is, or at least not to see this horrid example. I would rather they have no example at all than this one. I want my children to have a chance at a real life. So I will leave. I will do what I have to do. For me and for them.

I must lie. It's my in-your-face honesty that has always gotten me in trouble. I've tried to lie to him, but I always wind up saying what's on my mind, describing what I see, what I feel. He takes this as confrontation; he says I'm always starting wars. But I see it as him starting wars and me dumbly asking, when did you declare this war? On what grounds? I never even know we're fighting until it's too late, until anything I say or do can and will be held against me. His view is the only view allowed. If mine does not coincide with his, it is mine that must be skewed. Those are the rules. His body is bigger, he can beat me, so he wins.

But not if I leave. Who will he pound on then? Who will he lean on? Who will he blame for everything? What will he do without a scapegoat? So I am silent silent silent 'til his truck tires move the gravel and I know he's gone and I know I will be alone forever now and I have chosen it.

By default, I will always argue, for years and years afterward. I had no real choice. He wouldn't change. He wouldn't love me. He didn't know how much I was worth. He didn't think I was worth giving up violence for. He never even admitted he'd ever gotten violent. That's what he would have had to do to keep me. But he wouldn't do it. Or couldn't. I comfort myself sometimes that it was weakness, not belligerence, which separated us. But I rarely believe myself.

1981

Ohio

My hyper-active four-year-old son needed to learn how to play with children his own age. This was my thought. He was supposed to go to kindergarten in the fall. I couldn't see him sitting in a chair for more than a minute, let alone following some teacher's plans for the day. My best friend had suggested a play group: four hours, one day a week, at a local church. My husband and I were discussing this, as he drove us back from the grocery store. In my car. With both kids. If Kevin was home, he had to drive. And we had to take my car so we wouldn't be using up his gas.

"I'm working so you don't have to work. You're the mother. You're supposed to be at home. With our children!" This was Kevin's stance.

"I am home with our children," I protested. "We're talking about four hours a week! This kid can't sit still for an hour. He has to go to school in the fall. How's he going to do that if he can't sit still?"

"You just don't want to do your job!" Kevin roared, slapping the steering wheel with the flat of his hand. "You're useless! You don't make any money. All you have to do is play with kids all day, and you can't even handle that! So who is it? Who are you fucking now, you whore!"

There was no one in my life to make him jealous. By now I knew he was just a self-absorbed asshole with a not-so-secret fear that I would leave him. I was envisioning

his swerving into traffic, maybe getting us killed if he let go of that steering wheel. So I ignored his frantic insults. “Can you stay on the subject?” I asked, very sensibly, I thought. “We’re only talking about four hours a week at a play group! I’m not putting him up for adoption!”

Kevin’s silent glare, his red face, signaled me that we were already past negotiation. And when had negotiation ever worked with this man, anyway? Apparently I was dumber than dumb to even attempt talking to him. He was already in the rage stage. We would be lucky to get home in one piece. I clammed up now, while he started back up.

“I’m sick of you telling me what to do with my own kids! What’s wrong with you? When are you going to act like a real woman? You’re a dyke, aren’t you? I knew it. You don’t want kids; you never did!”

If I weren’t scared to move, I would be rolling my eyes or lifting my eyebrows or laughing. Tell me please, why I would be screwing all these men if I were gay? What is wrong with this guy? You-you-you. His tirade went on, pointing out all my faults—real and imagined. I think he began to hit me while he was still driving, but I can’t remember—it’s all a blur now. He pulled the car onto the circular driveway in front of our house. He grabbed my necklace, a piece of cheap costume jewelry from the local discount store, and yanked it from my neck. “All you do is spend my money!” he roared. “Get out of here!” He reached across my lap now, opened my door, then shoved me out onto the ground. I looked up and saw my neighbor, a woman I had called my friend,

looking out her kitchen window at me. Then she turned away and disappeared from sight. I picked myself up and walked into my house.

Within a minute, he was in the house, too, both kids in tow. I was supposed to be preparing for my sons' double birthday party. They were two years and three days apart in age, so we could only get the relatives to come to one birthday party for the two of them. But my party mood was gone. In fact, something had snapped. Finally. A friend of mine had been lecturing me for weeks. "You have two choices," she kept saying. "Stay and get beat up some more or leave. There is no third choice. He is never going to change. Get over that idea." Always before I had thought leaving him was impossible. I was married to the man. I was a Christian. Divorce was not an option. But that day, suddenly I didn't care what anyone thought. Even God couldn't possibly want me to continue like this.

I picked up my two-year-old and took the hand of my four-year-old and walked us to the car. My car. The car my uncle had given me and Kevin had never put a dime in since. But as soon as I would get one child safety-belted in, Kevin would reach in the other door and take the other child out. Then he threw my purse onto the roof of the house. I actually hauled the ladder from the shed, propped it against the house, and climbed the steps to retrieve the little bag of things I need to take with me. By the time I got back down the ladder, he had both children back in the house.

"Go!" he was yelling out the window. "But you're not taking my children!"

Right, I'm thinking, I'm going to leave them with you. The four-year old's already hyper from trying to live with you. If I can't live with you, why would I expect a

couple of little kids to be able to handle it? No, no, and triple no. So I started the child retrieval game again, and again he took the first to be buckled in while I was buckling in the second. Then he told me we should each take one, that that would be fair, as if we were dividing up candy bars.

All the parts of my body he'd punched were really hurting, aggravated by all the child hauling and ladder climbing. I was exhausted. I wanted to cry, I wanted to scream, I wanted to ask someone, anyone, why this was happening to me. What had I done that was so wrong, anyway? Clearly, I had failed at being a wife, but I was determined that as a responsible adult, I would be the best mother I could be. Because their father was a nut-case, it was my duty to get them away from him so they didn't wind up as crazy as he was. "Put them back in the car!" I yelled, even as the tears started, tears I quickly wiped away since his parents' car was pulling into the driveway. His mom, dad, and brother were all ready for the birthday party. "What's wrong with her?" they asked, getting out of the car, but from the looks on their faces, the question was rhetorical. At least I was hoping it was rhetorical. Kevin had told me so many times that I was the crazy one, it was hard to hold onto reality. Maybe it was true that no one saw what I was seeing.

"Oh, she's hysterical again, imagining things," Kevin was complaining to them.

"He's beating me up again!" I sputtered. "I'm trying to leave. My babies are going with me!" Just believe me for once, I was screaming inside. Open your eyes and see!

Maybe it was my determination that finally registered with them. I had made up my mind and I was going for good this time. No thinking about it for days and planning

what to take and leaving when he wasn't home and listening to some dumb preacher tell me that I was a bad wife because I didn't want to get punched around every day and talking me into coming back "for the good of the family." No. This was it. Thinking was over. Movement was the thing today. Call me any name you want. Go ahead. I dare you.

I don't remember what words were said then. I only remember the sight of three men sitting on the couch: my father-in-law sitting on one side of Kevin and his brother on the other side. Somehow they willed Kevin still. No one moved then but me. I didn't even look at my mother-in-law's hurt face. I put my purse and my two sons in the car. You take care of your sons, I'll take care of mine, I was thinking. I buckled my little boys in. The diaper bag was still in the car, because, of course, Kevin wouldn't have thought to bring that in. I probably could have gone in the house for some clothes and stuff, but I wasn't going to tempt fate. Me and the kids and the car. That was enough. I turned the key in the ignition and drove away from that house. The car that just a little while ago had been my torture chamber became our ride to freedom.

1982

Ohio

“Is Alicia O’Day there?” a voice I don’t recognize is saying. I have picked up the phone in bewilderment and this had made it worse. Who would be calling me under my maiden name? I am a divorced mother of two children, two boys who are running around the living room in that crazed freedom frenzy time of the day: we are home from daycare, Mom is home from work and we are about to get fed! The idiots at the phone company had given me a number one digit off from American Airlines and after forty-eight calls in one hour I called them and demanded they give me a new number. There had been a few days of silence until everyone caught up with my new number. So who was this, anyway?

“O’Day?” I repeat, stupidly.

“Alicia? C’mon, you wrote me a letter!”

“Oh, my God, Jeffrey, is that you?”

“Yeah! You scared me for a minute, not recognizing my voice.”

“It’s been a helluva week. Sorry.”

“Is that the sound of wild boy one and two in the background?” he asks politely.

“Why, yes, that would be the little angels, themselves. They’re hungry,” I lamely apologize.

“They’re not always that bad...”

“Sometimes they’re even worse,” I finish, and we both laugh. Kind of.

“You didn’t sound so good in that letter.”

“I know. I’m bummed. My life has turned to crap. Again.” I look around at the crummy apartment secretary’s wages affords us. Not exactly my little house in the country on four acres. I love my kids, I had fought to get custody, but I’m tired all the time, working all day, then into the night at home—side jobs, laundry, dishes, shopping, breaking up brotherly scuffles, picking lamps up off the floor.

“Hey, what’s the matter?”

“Nobody to talk to. No adults, anyway.”

“I thought you were in customer service,” J says sweetly, trying to be serious, then snorts, then I start laughing, and neither of us can stop for a good two minutes.

“All right, shut up!” I say, finally, in between giggles.

“What were they thinking? Someone who only wants to be a recluse? They give you customer service?”

“The people need me. I listen well.”

“Ok, then, what’s the problem?” J is trying his best to turn this around.

“Nobody listens to me. I listen to people bitch all day, people I don’t even know, but nobody’s around to listen to me—and I have a lot to bitch about!”

“*I’m* listening,” he says, quietly.

“They’re sucking my strength! Then they go on to bigger and better things. They’re feeling great. I feel like shit. I have enough to contend with without listening to them all day!”

“Change jobs.”

“We’re in the middle of a recession here. There are no jobs! Why do you think I took this sucky job to begin with?”

“Ok, ok.”

“My kids like to eat. Every damned day, they want to eat. Over and over. I don’t know what’s wrong with them. I try to tell them that Daddy hasn’t paid the child support for three months and practically my whole paycheck goes to the daycare so I can go to work and make enough for the rent and maybe the electric all in the same month!”

“Whoa, whoa, slow down. It’ll get better.”

“The bastard just bought a boat.”

“What?”

“With the child support money, probably.”

“Go on welfare.”

“I can’t. I have a job. If I go on welfare they’ll pay enough for my rent. That’s it. What good will that do? They act like electric and heat are luxuries.”

“Alicia...”

“All I do is work. Everything is business, business, business. Nobody cares if I live or die. I’m totally alone. The kids want me to feed them, buy them toys, take them to McDonald’s. If I can’t do that, I’m useless to them, too.”

“Alicia!!!!!!” J yells, then whistles into the phone. When I get quiet, he says, calmly, “Ask your parents to watch the kids, go to a bar, get wasted, let somebody take you home.”

“Oh, you’re a big help!”

“I mean it.”

“My parents are in Florida.”

“The nerve.”

I let out a big sigh.

“I’ll wire you some money for a babysitter. Though you’d think they’d take MasterCard by now.”

“Right.”

“You need to get out, girl.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying, every once in a while, everyone needs a good old disrespectful passionate smooch.”

“Right,” I say, gloomily, “and where can I order one of those?”

“You should have stayed with me,” he says, forgetting that we were never really together. “I would have never beaten you,” he said, archly. When he wants to be, he can be cruel, reminding me of the gross errors of my life.

But I refuse to be baited. “You were always too drunk to know where I was,” I remind him.

“Oh, yeah,” he says, absent-mindedly.

And once again, I feel like I’m the only adult on the premises.

2005

Martha's Vineyard

I am sitting with J on his deck, looking over the woods that surround his little home. I have been coming to the Vineyard for the summer these last two years and now that I'm again not an "islander," not an insider, he has decided to tell me things he's never told me before.

Somehow we have gotten onto the subject of my first visit here, when he partied and drank through the whole week, until I gave up and left. Somehow I have mentioned how I really thought our days at college and our days here on the island were going to be the start of something.

"Like what?" J asks, being obtuse.

"A relationship."

"We have a lifetime relationship."

"A friendship."

"Right."

"But you said things, that..."

"Alicia. I know you never did drugs but quit being so stupid."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you remember things that I don't."

"You don't remember that we meant anything to each other?"

“I don’t remember a damned thing I said for fifteen years.”

I am staring at him in shock.

“I was drunk, I was stoned, I was high.”

“You were so out of it you don’t remember what you said?”

He is shaking his head.

“You didn’t remember *me*?”

“I remembered your face. Your voice,” he says, quietly.

I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. All those years. All those intimate moments where I thought he and I were communicating with or without words—they were all in my head, or if not, they may as well have been, because only his body was there all those times--not his mind, not his will, not his emotions. “Huh,” my voice breaks on a sob. “What about all those calls when I was going through my divorce?” I ask.

“You were lonely; I was lonely....”

J can’t look at me. So I look out over the woods again. My cell phone rings and I try to clear my throat so I can talk to whoever is on the line. It’s a friend, asking if I’m still meeting her at the movies. “Yeah. Be there in fifteen,” I say.

2005

Wherever

(Doesn't matter!)

Epilogue

My wedding band was white gold. It looked to be silver, but it was gold. Supposedly. The band was way too wide for me. It smothered my finger. I remember going to the doctor to find out why the skin under my ring managed to be red, raw, and dry all at the same time. It itched. It hurt. It burned. And I wasn't supposed to take my \$50 band off—it might hurt my husband's feelings. But I was obviously allergic to it. I left it at the house, the day I left my husband. Set it on the sink, like I'd washed dishes and forgotten to put it back on. The divorce papers said I was supposed to get it back, but he said he'd thrown it into the woods behind our house.

In between the day I left and the day my divorce went through, he threw out just about everything I liked. I wound up with a lot of ugly old lamps and appliances he had cut the cords off of. Everything had to be rewired. Just like me.

I remember two items I had in the bedroom while I was married. At the time, I was unaware of how symbolic they were.

One was an idealistic bronze-look statue bought at a garage sale for five bucks, its nicks touched up with paint from the art supply store. It was of two young lovers, sitting face to face, their legs in opposite directions from the other's, wearing only adoring expressions. Ah! The idealism of young love. I do not know at this point, they are saying, how you fart under the covers and think it's cute.

The other objet d'arte was a pen-and-ink drawing cut out of a magazine and framed. It pictured an older couple, their bodies stretched out and saggy, a little overweight, lying on a bed. The perspective was slightly distorted, the view being from the end by their feet, their feet taking up proportionately more of the drawing than they should have. The bodies were foreshortened, but this only added to their interest. The couple seemed content to be lying next to each other, with each other, like they'd been married forever, knew everything about each other, and hadn't found anything that particularly bothered them too much. They were no longer disturbed by each other's imperfections. They felt sure the other would be there forever, and that was a good thing. There was no fear in this relationship. The adoration was, perhaps, over with, but comfort was clearly there in its stead. I see his fat and his flaws and it's all right, she has decided. He has wrinkles like an old walrus and it's okay. Their aged fat lay in unflattering folds where taut young skin used to be—a drawing that would have undoubtedly horrified the idealistic young couple cast in fake bronze.

When I moved, after ten years of being divorced, I found the statue in the garage. It was dusty, cracked, and in need of another touch-up on the fake bronze. Yet the two idealists still sat in their affected pose adoring each other. I threw the statue in the garbage stacked on the curb—upended, upside down in a box of raked-up dead leaves where no one would be offended by their unabashed infatuation with their nude selves.

Once in awhile I regret that I threw the idealistic couple out, especially when I realize I've never had anyone look at me that way for more than a week. Then I remember that that is precisely why I threw the damned thing out.

But the drawing—I've hung that back up. The thought of someone lying next to me content, undeterred by my stretch marks, wrinkles, or gray hair—that intrigues me. I think I'll look for him instead.