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Recycle Bin: A Collection of Interconnected Sudden Fiction

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RECYCLE BIN

A Collection of Interconnected
Sudden Fiction

By

Kathleen Brewin Lewis

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In Professional Writing

At

Kennesaw State University

August 2011

College of Humanities & Social Sciences
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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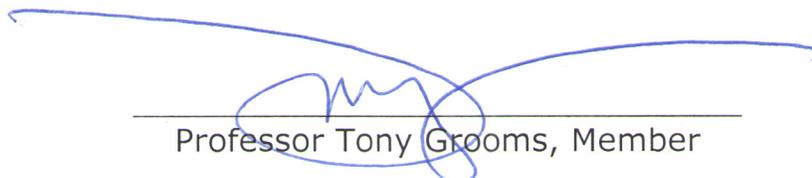
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At the ~~May~~ 2011 graduation
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Capstone committee:



Professor Melanie Sumner, Member

—



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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction: A Case of Compression and Connection	4
<i>RECYCLE BIN:</i>	
<i>Routine Matters</i>	11
<i>Nosy</i>	16
<i>Starry Night</i>	21
<i>Baby Steps</i>	28
<i>The Refusal</i>	34
<i>Premonition</i>	40
<i>Tear-Down</i>	47
<i>Makeovers</i>	53
<i>Call of the Wild</i>	59
<i>Pot Luck</i>	66
How and Why I Wrote <i>Recycle Bin</i>	74
Works Cited	85
Author Biography	87

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Finally, I want to express my love and appreciation to my family: my husband Jeff; my children, Ben and Rosalee; and my mother, Norma Brewin Ward. They were so enthusiastic and supportive of my efforts here, as well as forgiving of my sometimes inconvenient preoccupation with this mid-life literary quest.

Introduction: A Case of Connection and Compression

My thesis for my Master of Arts in Professional Writing at Kennesaw State University is a collection of ten short stories entitled *Recycle Bin*. I had several goals, both structural and thematic, in mind when I began to write. First, although I wanted the stories to be able to stand alone, I wanted them to build upon each other and link together as a whole. Second, I planned to limit each story to less than 2,000 words. In other words, I set myself the task of writing within the parameters of connection and compression.

To connect my stories, I set all of them in the fictional suburban neighborhood of Country Cove Estates. Although most of the stories do not specify an area of the country as the setting, two of the stories, "Premonition" and "Tear-Down," specifically mention Atlanta, and a few more stories have a Southern flavor to them, have characters whose personalities might be identified as Southern, or include some Southern vernacular in the dialogue. Most of the characters appear in more than one story, and every family of characters is mentioned or present for the final story in the collection, "Pot Luck," which I call the ensemble piece.

But the most distinctive connection within the collection is the recycle bin that appears in every story. In eight of the stories, the bin is an actual, physical entity. In one story, "Starry Night," the recycle bin referred to is the one on the

main character's computer screen. And in another story, "Makeovers," a character refers metaphorically to "the great big recycle bin in the sky," a passing reference to reincarnation. In some of the stories - "Routine Matters," "Nosy," "Starry Night," "Tear-Down," "Call of the Wild," "Pot Luck" - the recycle bin is a significant plot element, while in others - "Premonition," "Baby Steps," "Makeovers," "The Refusal" - it is merely mentioned.

I selected the recycle bin as a recurring symbol, representing the opportunity for a second chance, renewal, possibly even reinvention. I had read many contemporary short stories over the last year and was struck by how dark some of them were and how many of the characters seemed hopelessly addicted to alcohol, drugs, random sex, electronics or meaningless consumption of material goods. My goal was to write more hopeful fiction, as well as fiction that took place within a community. I wrote about the world I know, the everyday life of the housewife. It's not a glamorous world, but it is one filled with relationships and connections among family and friends. It's concerned with endings, like death and divorce, and beginnings, like babies taking their first steps. And it's a world busy executing small tasks: driving carpool, cutting the grass, walking the dog – and putting the recycle bin out on the curb each week.

The characters in *Recycle Bin* are not simply given a second chance and a happy ending; they are merely presented with the *opportunity* for a second chance. Whether these characters take the opportunity or not is up to them – and is not a part of the story. It is left to the reader to consider the characters' future.

Will Robert in “Nosy” stay sober? Will Pratibha get a spanking, or will her father relent in his expectations of her in “The Refusal?” Will the Dorsetts in “Tear-Down” eventually divorce? Will Noah from “Starry Night” reconcile with his father and go visit him in California? Will the Board of Directors fire Carl Patton?

To reinforce the recycling theme, I selected two quotations as an introduction to the collection. The first is by Voltaire: *It is no more surprising to be born twice than it is to be born once.* The second quotation is by former President Bill Clinton: *The God I believe in is a god of second chances.* And the collection is itself a cycle: it begins and ends with the image of a recycling company truck pulling into the neighborhood.

As far as the length of the stories is concerned, I selected the model of “sudden fiction” for my stories. “Sudden fiction” is a term coined by editors Robert Shapard and James Thomas in their 1983 anthology of the same name. Shapard and Thomas chose to define sudden fiction as short-short stories of approximately 1,500 words (Shapard, xiv). I have chosen to define sudden fiction as stories that fall between 1,000 and 2,000 words in length, which would make them shorter than the traditional short story and longer than flash fiction. Flash fiction is the term used to classify short-short stories that have been compressed into 1,000 words or fewer.

The stories in *Recycle Bin* are all short-short stories and compressed in some fashion. In the short-short story, some of the elements of traditional fiction

- plot, setting, characterizations, dialogue - are streamlined or even eliminated in order to achieve these abbreviated lengths. The shorter the story, the more elimination. But in addition to resulting in a shorter story, these reductions tend to intensify the elements of the narrative that remain. This tendency accounts for the particular potency of the short-short story, what John Gerlach refers to as "voltage" (Gerlach, 76). Frederick Reiken, in his essay, "The Legacy of Anton Chekhov," wrote that "the main requirement of a story is that of compression, a sharp focus and fluid distillation of events" (Reiken, 24). And because shorter fiction leaves more to the reader's imagination, the reader often finds the story lingering in his or her mind long after the reading is complete.

When I wrote my stories, I focused on character development. Some stories include minimal or interior dialogue, but others have a significant amount of dialogue. I was, in a sense, recycling the setting of the stories, so I did not spend a great deal of space describing or repeating the details of the setting. What I chose to reduce was the plot intricacy. Although two of the stories, "Premonition" and "Makeovers," as well as the closing, ensemble story, "Pot Luck," could be considered plot-driven, the majority of the stories are character-driven.

I have attempted to depict a slice of a character's life in each story, making the story long enough to engage the reader, but keeping the story short enough to require and encourage the reader to imagine what might happen to the character after the story has concluded. The endings themselves are

compressed, consisting of a simple, single thought or action, rather than exposition.

The closing story, “Pot Luck,” breaks my 2,000-word limit by 91 words. I had cut the story in an effort to adhere to the length limitation I had set, eliminating some small details and descriptions of the main character’s actions. But I eventually restored the portions I’d cut. “Pot Luck” is my summation, my little invented community come full circle. Within this final story, I’ve included all of the individuals and families from the previous stories, resolved a conflict from the second story, “Nosy,” and closed the collection on a hopeful, positive note.

RECYCLE BIN

An Interconnected Collection
of Sudden Fiction



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*After all, it is no more surprising to be born twice
than it is to be born once.*

--Voltaire

The God I believe in is a god of second chances.

--Bill Clinton

Routine Matters

DeeDee awoke when she heard the cascading clatter of glass and tin cans, a reverberation that fell somewhere between euphony and cacophony, jingle and crash. It was the sound of a recycle bin being emptied into the side of a Green Planet Recycling truck.

“Jack forgot to put our recycle bin out on the street,” she thought. That’s not like him.” She rolled over to say something to him, but when she did, she saw that the bed was empty. And then she remembered: Jack died on Saturday. His funeral was two days ago.

She rolled on her back and sunk into the mattress, a sickening feeling spreading from her stomach to her chest. “My job from now on,” she said out loud. “Make sure the recycle bin is out on the curb by 7:30 every Thursday morning.”

“What else do I need to remember?” she wondered. “What other routines?” She already paid the monthly utility bills. She wasn’t helpless.

DeeDee walked to the dining room window and watched the truck drive off. She could see that the kid across the street was out taking his morning run.

She’d lost track of how old he was. Twenty, maybe, twenty-one. He had learning disabilities of some sort, she knew. He lived with his parents and couldn’t drive a car. He was a little different, but he was always polite. Jack had paid him to mow the lawn once when they were between lawn services. He ran every morning like clockwork, even if it was raining.

Sometimes he disappeared down the street, on a distance run, she guessed, sometimes he jogged around his parents' front lawn, and sometimes he ran up and down the big hill right in front of her house. That's what he was doing this morning. Today was Thursday; Thursday must be hill day.

She knew he wasn't mentally retarded, just a little slow, but she couldn't help but notice that he carried himself with an air of confidence and dignity. He had an impressive physique, and his calves had such a muscular shape to them, becoming striated with veins and sinew when he ascended the hill.

Jack had stayed fairly slim throughout his 67 years and their 41 years of marriage, and he hadn't smoked in over 30 years. So his death had come suddenly and surprisingly. He had had something like a seizure one day, and after a week of tests, his doctors had identified a benign tumor in his brain. He was still in the hospital while they decided upon the best course of treatment, when his kidneys failed, and his lungs filled with fluid, and he simply slipped away. DeeDee and their two married daughters sat helplessly beside his bed, stunned, disbelieving.

"It's a new day," she thought that morning, "God help me."

The following week was filled with the paperwork that comes after a death: finding the will, changing the name on the bills, filing the probate forms, writing thank-you notes. Before she went to bed the next Wednesday night, she remembered to set her alarm for 7:00, but when it went off the next morning, she

couldn't remember why. She looked out her bedroom window and saw her neighbor stretching before his run, then recalled the recycle bin.

DeeDee got up, went to the bathroom, brushed her hair and teeth, and slipped on her old blue bathrobe. She tied it snugly at her waist. She'd never had a big stomach, but her hips were wide and soft. She'd always wished her breasts had been larger, but now that she was older, she was glad not to have them hanging around her waist like her grandmother's had. She looked briefly into the mirror, into her own dark eyes, and acknowledged her existence. A new and singular existence.

She walked through the kitchen, opened the carport door, and tossed yesterday's newspaper into the bin, on top of the milk carton and a couple of empty wine bottles.

She hoisted the bin up and started walking down the driveway, when the boy looked up. "Oh, ma'am," he said, "let me help you with that!" And he rushed across the street and reached to take the bin out of her arms.

"Why, thank you," she said, relinquishing it to him, turning her head so that he could not see the warm flush that had suddenly bloomed across her neck and cheeks. Nor the tears that had sprung to her eyes.

The next Wednesday night DeeDee decided she would put the recycle bin out on the curb before she went to bed. She didn't want the young man to think she was expecting him to carry it out for her every Thursday morning for the rest of her life.

But she kept up the habit of setting her alarm for 7:00 a.m. on Thursdays. She'd get up when it went off and turn on the coffee, something else Jack used to do. Then she'd sit at the dining room table, a few feet from the window, with the mug warming her hands, and watch the boy run his hill sprints. There was something about the way he moved when he reached the bottom of the hill and turned to run back to the top, something about the way his calves strained and stretched as he made the transition.

She couldn't put her finger on this feeling.

September turned the corner into fall and the boy started running about 45 minutes later each morning, so that there would be more daylight, she guessed. It had been six weeks since Jack had died, and the change of seasons reignited her grief. She had started crying again when she got into bed each night; she simply opened a can of soup or microwaved a Lean Cuisine for supper and spooned these things into her mouth.

She supposed she should figure out how to order some firewood, and was grateful that Jack had had a gas starter installed in their fireplace a few years ago. They always had a fire on Sunday evenings in the fall and winter.

Thursday morning rolled around again and she was back at her place near the window. Her neighbor emerged from his house with a fleece vest over his T-shirt, but he still had on the running shorts that left his calves exposed. He seemed to be talking to himself a bit, gesturing with one hand. He started his stretches, straightening his arms and pushing his palms against a pine tree while

he placed one leg behind him and pressed his heel into the ground. He switched legs and repeated the movement, then bent a knee, grasped a foot by the ankle and pulled it up behind him, holding it there for a few seconds. He bent his head for a few minutes, and she thought he might be praying.

When the boy finished, he walked over to face the hill. He glanced up at the sky, and DeeDee caught a flash of blue from his eyes. He began his drill, straining to reach the top, then jogging down, turning back, and flexing his calves. Up, down, up, down. She lost count of his efforts. And then that feeling crept over her again, that feeling that she could not quite define.

Is it desire? she asked herself. It felt something like desire. But not sexual desire. This feeling was different, but in the same family. She watched him reach the bottom of the hill once again, then turn, like some graceful, efficient animal, to run to the top. It was a miracle really, this guileless vitality, despite all that could go wrong in the world. And she found herself wondering - my goodness - if the feeling was hope.

Nosy

From his kitchen window he could see that Alice McAdams was at it again - snooping through everybody's recycle bin. She was peering nonchalantly into the one on the curb across the street, while that ridiculous little dog of hers pranced around it and trembled as if he were really the one that was interested in its contents.

He bet Alice especially loved those early Thursday morning walks with her pale, skinny Italian greyhound, Fabio. He could just imagine her clattering train of thought: *You can tell so much about a person and his or her household by seeing what is in the recycle bin on their curb each week!* She was discreet, of course. *Diane Crumpler must be on a diet again, owing to the large number of Slim Fast cans in her bin. The Cappuccino Delight flavor looks to be Diane's favorite, with the Extra Creamy Chocolate running a close second. She must have tried the French Vanilla once or twice, but decided she didn't like it; there are only a couple of cans of those in the bin. Maybe she, Alice, should try Slim Fast. Lord knows she could stand to lose some weight!*

Oh, and the Steeles' bin is full of Wall Street Journals, which must be read only by the wife, who is forced to be the breadwinner in the family because the husband is so worthless. The Hirschbergs' bin has nothing but the New York Times in it because the Hirschbergs are Jewish, which means that they are probably Democrats, and Alice's husband says the New York Times is a liberal rag, so that all made sense. To her feeble mind, he thought.

He saw Fabio go right over to the Indian family's recycle bin, put his paws up on it and very obviously sniff it, which he was sure Alice found embarrassing. It was all the cooking spices, he reckoned, the empty jars of mango chutney and cans that had held things with curry and chili in them.

Fabio, get down before you get something on your sweater!, he imagined her saying to the dog. Fabio was cold-natured so Alice put a little sweater on him for the early morning walks. He probably had a half dozen of them, which Alice kept clean and folded in a little plastic hamper in her laundry room.

Oh, of course, he imagined her saying at the Patton's curb. *Their recyclables look like they're for sale – jars and bottles washed and lined up in a display on top of the neatly folded newspapers. I wish I had me a Brazilian housekeeper.*

When she got to the Carriker's house, she would see the four empty half-gallons of Clorox in the bin. *What in the world have they been doing with all that bleach?* She'd think to herself. She would puzzle over this for a while. *Lots of dirty linens? Mildew in the basement? Pressure washing around their pool? She hadn't noticed that going on.* She'd conclude they must have a mildew problem of some sort and hope they were getting a handle on it. She'd make a mental note to check the ceiling over the shower in her basement when she got back home and make sure she didn't have a mildew problem herself.

Now she had arrived at his house.

Robert Neill's bin was loaded with bottles – wine, beer, liquor, green, brown, clear. He'd made an attempt to stack them neatly, like firewood, at first,

but ended up mounding them, so that several bottles balanced precariously at the top of the pile. He had had to set the bin on an old red kid's wagon and pull it down to the curb, it was so heavy and cumbersome.

Robert could practically guarantee that Alice was clicking her tongue on the roof of her mouth when she saw the contents, and narrowing her eyes. *Oh, for the love of God*, he bet she was thinking to herself. *This man is shameless. Shameless and hopeless.*

Robert watched her face out the window and smiled without parting his lips. He knew what she was thinking. His drinking habits were well-known around the neighborhood, thanks to an indiscreet and indiscriminate ex-wife and an unfortunate event at the neighborhood Christmas party two years ago, which he had capped off by anonymously crashing into DeeDee and Jack Hart's mailbox on the way home.

After that, he'd taken to just drinking at home alone.

The chips had fallen where they may.

He hadn't talked to either of his kids in five, six, seven months.

A few nights ago he was up late watching an old movie, a brandy snifter balanced between his index and middle fingers. The movie was *Papillon*, with the late, great Steve McQueen. *Papillon* was in solitary confinement in a tiny prison cell in wretched French Guiana because of repeated efforts to escape the life sentence he'd received for murdering a pimp. He hadn't actually killed the

pimp, but because he was such a low life--drinking, gambling, and stealing things--nobody cared to prove him innocent.

Crazed with isolation and hunger, Papillon was hallucinating about his trial and sentencing. In his mind, a judge stood in the desert in a billowing red robe, flanked by twelve seated and immobile jurors. Papillon yells that he is innocent of the murder, but the judge tells him that's not really his crime. "Well then what is it?" he asks

"Yours is the most terrible crime a human being can commit. I accuse you of a wasted life."

"Guilty," Papillon responds in a resigned voice, "guilty."

When Robert heard that, he sat up straight. The brandy snifter slipped from his fingers and crashed to the floor. As he bent to pick up the pieces, one of the shards sliced his finger, and the smell of the brandy rose up into his nostrils and sickened him. A drop of his blood floated on a small pool of golden liquid.

He decided he had had enough.

So it wasn't what she thought, the fat bitch with the emaciated dog, it wasn't what she thought at all. Sure, he'd emptied all of those bottles, but this time, he'd emptied them into the sink. He'd gone through the refrigerator in the kitchen and in the basement and the liquor cabinet. He'd taken the bottle out from under his bed and the liqueurs off of the wet bar in the den. He'd even grabbed, by the throat, the last three bottles from the case of Villa Mt. Eden Pinot Noir he'd given himself for his birthday.

He'd made a kind of ceremony of it all. First, he'd removed the corkscrew and the bottle opener from the drawer, then lined the bottles up along the kitchen counter. He'd gone down the line and opened each one of them, placing their caps and corks into the right pocket of his bathrobe. When he finished doing this, he said out loud, "Let the pouring begin."

One by one, he emptied the contents of each bottle into the sink. When he came to the bottle of 23-year-old Pappy Van Winkle, now actually 25-year-old bourbon, he paused for a minute, remembering the last time his brother came to town. They'd opened the bottle, cooked steaks on the grill, and laughed about old times, instead of commiserating about them. Just an inch and a half of liquid remained, but he dumped that bottle out, same as the others.

So, he thought to himself as he watched Alice McAdams out the window, you've got the wrong idea this time, you don't know me, you can't read people's garbage like tea leaves. He watched her shake her head, give Fabio's leash a little tug and turn to walk away, but when she did her eyes landed right on his. She got the sheepish look on her face of someone who's been caught in the act. Robert took a big drag on his cigarette, blew out an immense puff of smoke, then waved and grinned at her with one side of his mouth.

He was laughing as she hurried on down the street, but when he held his cigarette under the faucet in the sink to put it out, he saw how badly his hand was shaking.

Starry Night

Noah Crumpler was lying on his bed in his chili pepper pajama pants when he heard the car pull into the driveway. “Ah, the Pufferfish has returned,” he thought, “Long live the Pufferfish.”

He was pissed at the Pufferfish. The Pufferfish would not let him get a tattoo, would not A) sign the parental consent form the tattoo parlor said he had to have since he wasn't 18 (he wasn't even 17), and B) give him the money for the tattoo. He had the \$70 bucks or so it would cost for a design about the size of a poker chip, but what he really wanted was to ink his arm, in a couple of colors. He thought that might cost around six or seven hundred dollars. Which he did not have.

“Tattoos are a form of self-mutilation,” the Pufferfish had said to him, “and I can't support that, can't let you do that to yourself.”

“Mom!” was all he'd said back to her, but what he wanted to say was this: “Give me a fuckin' break. This from a woman who appears to be an expert on self-mutilation.”

He was pretty sure she'd had a boob job last summer when he was off at camp. He could live with that because she hadn't overdone it, she wasn't too obvious about it. But last month she'd gotten something done to her lips, some sort of injection, he guessed. She looked like a clown with her lips blown up that way. It was embarrassing. She looked like a Puffer fish. Hence, the new name. He could hardly stand to look her in the face.

She was being a hypocrite.

He really wanted that tattoo.

He wanted a tattoo in the form of a big, fat rattlesnake, one that would curve around and around his right arm. He wanted its mouth to be open and its fangs showing, he wanted a long rattle on its tale. And right over the snake's head, he wanted the letters, "FUDAD," for "Fuck You Dad." Next week would make it a year since his dad left him and his mom to go live with his secretary, and Noah wanted to commemorate their mutual anniversary.

At first, before he knew why his dad had left, Noah had slept in the tree house in the backyard. His dad had built the tree house for Noah's ninth birthday. Noah took his sleeping bag up there, along with a flashlight and his Boy Scout canteen full of water. His mom let him sleep there because it was warm, almost summertime, as long as he sprayed himself with insect repellent. He'd count fireflies and hope to see a falling star. But when he found out why his dad had left, he quit sleeping in the tree house and moved back into the house, where he was forced to listen to the sound of his mother crying late at night.

He'd never heard a sound like that before. It made his skin go all clammy; he felt nauseated. And so he vowed he would never speak to his father again.

His dad had called him a lot at first on his cell phone. Noah hit the reject button every time, then finally blocked the calls. One day his dad just showed up at the house on Country Cove Lane and came up to Noah's room. He sat on

the foot of Noah's bed while Noah just stared straight up at the ceiling, which was covered in glow-in-the-dark stars. His dad had glued those stars up there when Noah was little. In the day time, you could only see them faintly; they were almost the same creamy white as the ceiling. But after dark they seemed to float fluorescently over his head in the blackness, and this used to comfort him, like a night light.

"This divorce has nothing to do with you," his dad told him, "I haven't stopped loving you; I'm still your father; I still want to be your father more than anything. I'm moving to California, and I want to come back in the spring for a couple of your track meets. I want you to come spend the summer out there." But Noah had just stared up at those pale plastic stars and neither looked at nor spoke to his dad until finally his dad left.

"More than anything, huh?" he whispered to himself. "Well, I'm quitting track." And then he'd bounced up and down on the bed, grabbing and pulling down plastic star after plastic star.

After that visit, after he moved, his father started sending him emails with letters attached to them. Noah opened each attachment long enough to read the words, "Dear Noah," across the top, before deleting it. "Do you want to move this file to the Recycle Bin?" the computer would ask him, and he always clicked "Yes." But he didn't empty the Recycle Bin. He thought maybe he'd get around to reading the letters in five years or so, sometime when he needed a good laugh. Maybe. But after a while, after about thirteen letters to

which he never replied, the emails had stopped coming. Which was what he expected.

He heard the Pufferfish open the kitchen door and come into the house.

“Hey, Noah,” she called up the stairs, “Can you come help me with the groceries?”

“If you’ll let me get that tattoo,” he called down, “Maybe.”

“Oh, Noah, for God’s sake, get down here and help me.”

He went. His mom looked kind of pretty from the back, her auburn hair pulled back into a low ponytail, her silhouette trim in the black yoga pants and a black top. All of those exercise and yoga classes she’d thrown herself into had paid off. But when she turned and came toward him to kiss him good morning, the hyper-extended lips startled him anew and he jerked his head away. She sighed.

“Okay,” she said. “Look, next week it’ll have been a year since your father left.”

“I’m aware of that,” Noah replied dryly.

“So we’re going to get our acts together,” she said, “We’re gonna set some new goals and we’re gonna commence the next spectacular phase of our lives.”

“The only goal I’m setting is to get a tattoo,” he replied.

“Oh, Noah,” the Pufferfish sighed again. She began to fill the fridge with strawberries, Greek yogurt, turkey burgers, bags of romaine, and cans of Slimfast. “Tomorrow night we’re going to have a cookout,” she decreed.

On the eve of the one-year anniversary of The Day His Father Left, Noah sat at his computer clicking and re-clicking on "Check Mail." He wondered if his dad had any idea of what day tomorrow was. He also wondered if his dad had any idea what he'd done to them: turned Noah into a perpetually pissed off person and his mom into the Pufferfish.

And then there it was: an email from Evan Crumpler, no attachment this time. He clicked on it.

"Dear Noah," it began. "I don't know if you ever even read my emails and letters, if I'm wasting my time or not. But I'm not giving up on you. I want you to know that I am here for you. And I really want you to come stay with me in California this summer."

"Here, where?" Noah said, under his breath, and deleted the email, same as all the others. He got up and threw himself down on his bed. After a few minutes, he got back up and went back to the computer. He sat down straight and square in front of the screen. He clicked on the Recycle Bin, then one by one, in chronological order, he read the letters his dad has sent him over the last year.

"Dear Noah, how are you? Dear Noah, I want you to know that I miss you. Dear Noah, I want to take you camping, just the two of us, Dear Noah, how's life been treating you?, Dear Noah, I hope one day that you will forgive me."

One letter he read twice. It was a letter about what his dad called the best night of his life. It wasn't about Noah's birth, something hokey like that. He'd

have quit reading from the start if it was. His dad wrote about a night he'd taken Noah outside in his arms when Noah was about two. He'd wanted to show Noah the enormous full moon gleaming through the bare trees in the back yard.

"I whispered to you, 'See the moon, Noah, see the moon?' And your eyes got big, and you got very still, and you pressed your left cheek against my right cheek, then you rested your little hand on my chest. That," he wrote, "was the most peaceful feeling I have ever known."

By the time Noah finished reading all the letters, it was after midnight. The Pufferfish had gone to bed, and the house was dark. He turned the light off in his room, walked quietly down the stairs, and slipped out the door into the backyard.

The night was still and clear, and Noah lay down on the grass. The lawn made for a damp and prickly bed, but it steadied him to have the earth beneath him, as if it were holding him up.

The black sky was full of stars, but there was only a sliver of a moon. Noah began to make shapes out in the sky, began to recognize the constellations his dad had taught him. "There's Orion's belt," he thought, spotting the trio of white light points. "That's our family," his dad had said once, "You, me and Mom."

Ursa Major, Big Bear, the big dipper. Ursa Minor.

He saw the haze that was the Milky Way and followed it south and down with his eyes to spy Sagittarius the Archer. Aquila the Eagle, he remembered,

Cygnus the Swan, Lyra the Harp. Old friends. And it struck Noah how the constellations were like tattoos, how the sky above was really one mighty inked and illustrated arm.

Baby Steps

“What the hell!?” Patterson exclaimed, as he turned his Audi onto Country Cove Lane. He swerved a bit. The suburban street was straight and quiet and linear, concrete driveways leading from each house down to the curb, mailboxes standing like sentinels.

At the end of each and every driveway was one of these bright green . . . things, these emerald rectangles, some of them upside down, some on their sides. He squinted and shook his head like a wet dog, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. When he realized the green things were recycle bins, he busted out laughing. He was laughing so hard, he had to pull the car over for a few minutes.

And he kept laughing as he pictured himself as some giant, Incredible Hulk-type character, thundering down the street, hitting one of the green bins with each fist as he walked, sending each of them flying into their owners’ backyards.

Yessirree, there was nothing finer than being stoned out of your gourd at 8:00 on a weekday morning. No finer way, that he could think of, to start your day.

He pulled away from the curb and continued down the street, flicking his cigarette butt out the window onto Chuck Carriker’s lawn. This was a ritual for him, something he loved to do as often as he could. See, Chuck had this perfect lawn, all edged and weed-free because he spent all week-end out there working

on the fuckin' thing, sometimes with his shirt off, so that he could show off his flat abs. Patterson loved to think about Chuck walking around his precious domain in the evening, spying the butt, and bending down to pick it up off of his pristine green carpet of a lawn. He enjoyed imagining his neighbor saying to himself, "Where do these damn things keep coming from?" Hell, it was worth living, Patterson decided, just to get to imagine that.

He drove about a quarter of a mile more down the road and into one of the driveways. He checked his eyes out in the rear view mirror and noted their hue, then took a deep breath before he opened the door of the car. He picked up the bag on the passenger seat and walked into the house.

"Diaper Man," he yelled, as he entered the back door, "Fresh disposable diapers, as requested." He flung the pack of Pampers and his keys down on the kitchen counter and breezed through the den and down the hall.

His wife was standing at the end of the unlit hallway holding the baby in her arms. "What took you so long?" she asked, her voice hard and flat as a river stone.

"Long line at the CVS, long line. There was a run on Pampers or something." He stifled a snort.

"Look," she said, "I have to leave for work in 30 minutes. You need to pull yourself together. Take a shower or something, and drink a cup of coffee. Magdalena can't get here until 9:30 today. You'll have to watch Sally for about an hour. One hour. Your own child. I need you to be responsible. I need you to

take a turn at that," she said, as she swiveled on her heels and walked back into the bedroom. Sally's head bobbed over her shoulder.

"Yeah, yeah," he said. He walked back into the kitchen and fixed himself a bowl of cereal, which he found delicious, and poured a mug of coffee.

"If you'd get out of the bathroom," he yelled, "I could get that shower."

Still carrying the baby, she walked into the kitchen in a navy blue sheath of a dress, with bronze pumps and a single gold bangle bracelet on her left wrist. Sally sucked on part of a second bangle. His wife kissed the eleven-month-old baby on the forehead and bent over and sat her in the playpen. Sally just kept sucking on the bracelet.

"Hurry. I need to go."

Patterson pulled his sweater off over his head as he walked and kicked his loafers off in the bedroom. He let his jeans drop to the floor. His heavy belt buckle made a loud, hollow clunk on the hard wood.

The shower felt great, he had to admit. He let the warm water run down his back and over his head and he soaped and lathered up the brown hair that covered his chest and spread down to his stomach. He felt like laughing again, but knew better than to be noisy about it.

He got out and dried off, took his plaid bathrobe off its hook and pulled it on. He toweled his hair until it quit dripping. Then he toweled it some more, rubbing his head as hard as he could.

He walked back into the kitchen and poured himself another cup of coffee.

“Okay, go,” he said.

She leaned over the crib again and gently extracted the bracelet from Sally’s mouth, then slid it over her own wrist to join the other bangle. “Bye, sweet baby,” she said to Sally, the bracelets clinking as she turned to leave.

To him she said, “You or Magdalena call me at work as soon as she gets here please. And do I need to remind you to be vigilant?”

“You do not,” he said.

“Don’t smoke around the baby.” And she was out the door.

He plopped down on the sofa and automatically reached for the remote control. The efficient voices of the morning newscasters greeted him, and he flipped the channels until he came across a shapely weather girl.

Sally sat in the playpen jabbering to her stuffed animals. She sat a couple of them up against the netting on the sides, then leaned one over to kiss the other. After a few minutes she said, “Up. Up.” And she pulled herself to her feet and held her arms up.

Patterson looked over at her and her upturned palms, the chubby wrists, the expectant face. He walked to the playpen, bent over and picked her up.

“Hey,” he said softly, “hey, Monkey.” But she squirmed to get down, more strongly than he would have imagined she could. “Okay,” he said. He deposited her on the floor and returned to slouch on the sofa.

Sally flipped over on all fours and crawled over to the black end table by the fireplace. There was a small brown stuffed dog on the table, with a red bow around its soft neck. She used the brick hearth to pull herself up, then, with one hand still on the hearth, reached for the dog with the other. Patterson watched, mildly fascinated, as she removed her other hand from the hearth to help hold the dog. "Oof," she said, "Oof, oof," making little bobbing movements with her neck and head. Patterson realized she was trying to make barking sounds and he laughed.

She stood alone and swaying for a few seconds by the table, sucking on the dog's tail, unaware of her daring feat.

She was a beautiful child, he realized. Her hair was dark brown and curly like his, and she had a pink bow of a mouth. Her skin was pale, fair except for her cheeks, which looked like someone had turned a red colored pencil on its side and shaded them in.

Sally glanced at him and dropped the stuffed animal. Then she got a wry look on her face and locked eyes with his. She took a small and timorous step. She opened her mouth in a round, pink O of concentration, but did not take her eyes off of Patterson's. She took another step toward him, while he sat up slowly and leaned forward. A trill of glee escaped from her throat, but something caught in his. In the instant between the time in which the baby caused to catch her balance, then positioned herself to take her third step, Patterson had a

double-edged flash of understanding. At first and suddenly, he knew that he was garbage. But then it came to him: he was being given a second chance.

The Refusal

The shiny black Lexus GX pulled up at the curb at Hanover Day School and the kindergarten teacher with the long gray hair called out a number, "228!" Pratibha Ganesh, her best friend Rachel Hanson, and Leah Hirschberg stepped forward and climbed into the car, Leah in the front seat next to her mother, the younger girls in the back.

"Hello, everybody!" Mrs. Hirschberg called out cheerily through her glossed lips, "How was your day?"

"Aah, it was Earth Day," replied her daughter, "And it was *so* boring."

Leah was a year ahead of Pratibha and Rachel, fifth grade to their fourth, a tall and skinny crane of a girl. "We had an assembly with some man talking about the Ganges River and how he was trying to help clean it up, then we sang a bunch of songs, like 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' with those stupid hand motions that the kindergartners think are so fun, and then Mr. Windom the janitor planted a tree while we just watched. And the bossy sixth graders kept walking around all day long saying, 'Reduce, reuse, recycle and refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle, and refuse.'"

"Well, that doesn't sound so bad to me," said Mrs. Hirschberg, winking at Rachel and Pratibha in the rear view mirror. Pratibha looked up at her, smiled, and shook her head."

"Well, it was," said Leah.

Pratibha was deep in thought, pondering the chant of the sixth graders and picking at the hem of her khaki uniform. “Reduce, reuse, recycle, and *refuse*. What the heck does that mean?” She actually knew what all of those words meant. Words were her life, as her father liked to say. Pratibha was going to be a contestant in the Lawton County spelling bee and her father had been helping her study the Consolidated Word List, as well as the prefixes, suffixes, and roots of words for months.

The prefix “re” meant “again, go back, do it over.” Reduce meant make small again, make less, so, okay, have less stuff. Reuse, duh, use something again. Recycle: put your old newspapers and tin cans and Coke bottles in the recycle bin. But she couldn’t make sense of the word “refuse” in the context of the slogan. She thought of the anti-drug ads she’d seen: Just Say No. Maybe that was it.

But what was she supposed to refuse, to say no to? Not knowing this bothered her. She felt the muscles on her forehead rise and bunch together in a tangible display of consternation. She felt grumpy.

“If my mom says it’s okay, do you want to come over later?” Rachel whispered, so Leah couldn’t hear.

“No,” said Pratibha, simply.

“Oh,” said Rachel.

“My father’s drilling me on my spelling words tonight and I have to study,” she said matter-of-factly and by way of apology.

The Lexus turned into Country Cove Estates, then pulled into the Ganesh's driveway.

"Thanks for the ride," Pratibha called out in a sing-song voice, as she got out of the car and smoothed her dark and wavy hair behind her shoulders.

"You're welcome, hon," Mrs. Hirschberg replied. Pratibha waved to Rachel, then walked up the steps to her house and through the front door. Her mother was sitting in the living room watching television in a jade green sari, her black hair in a tight, thick braid, with Pratibha's baby brother on her lap. The house smelled spicy; their dinner-to-be was simmering on the stove. The baby held the tassel of the braid in one of his hands and sucked the thumb on his other hand. Pratibha walked over and gave them both a kiss.

"Would you like some nankatai?" her mother asked. Nankatai were the Indian cookies that Pratibha loved, sweetly scented with ground almonds and a pinch of saffron.

"No," said Pratibha.

"No?" her mother said, partly in surprise and partly as a reprimand.

"No, thank you," Pratibha replied, as she walked up the stairs to her room.

There was a note from her father on her dresser beside a stack of bright pink index cards. The note said, "Be a good girl and WORK HARD on these words." There was a single word on each fluorescent card, words her father had

made her copy down over the week-end to study. She picked them up and looked through them.

“Aborigine. A-B-O-R-I-G-I-N-E. Centripetal. C-E-N-T-R-I-P-E-T-A-L. Declination. D-E-C-L-I-N-A-T-I-O-N.”

She picked up the phone and called Rachel, who answered on the third ring.

“Rachel, what do you think it means when they say ‘reduce, reuse, recycle and refuse’? What do you think we’re supposed to be refusing?”

“I’m not sure,” said Rachel, “Maybe it’s like when I give something up for Lent.”

“Well, I’m Hindu,” Pratibha huffed. “And I’m already a vegetarian.” She hung up. She picked up the cards again.

“Grievance. G-R-I-E-V-A-N-C-E. Inoculate. I-N-O-C-U-L-A-T-E. Conscientious. C-O-N-S-C-I-E-N-T-I-O-U-S. Sacrificial. S-A-C-R-I-F-I . . .” her voice trailed off.

She sat down and opened the turquoise and gold brocade journal her Aunt Pritti had brought her from India and wrote, in neat block letters, “SACRIFICES I COULD MAKE.” First on the list she wrote: “nankatai.” And then, “kulfi with pistachios, playing with Rachel, getting new PE shoes, taking long showers, buying a book every week at the Scholastic Book Fair, dancing in front of the mirror, sleeping late on Saturday, going to birthday parties, watching a DVD on Sunday afternoon.” When she stopped and read through her list, she

decided the only thing on it that might really, truly help the earth was to quit taking long showers, so she underlined those words and resolved to shorten her baths and conserve water.

And then she realized that her father's study plan for her had taken care of a lot of the other things on the list over the last several months. She was already sacrificing "playing with Rachel," "dancing in front of the mirror," "sleeping late on Saturday," "going to birthday parties," and "watching a DVD on Sunday afternoon," so she drew a line through those items.

It seemed that words really *were* her life.

She looked over at the pink cards. "Plateau. P-L-A-T-E-A-U. Automaton. A-U-T-O-M-A-T-O-N."

Her father came home from work at 6:00 and Pratibha was called downstairs to greet him. The four of them gathered around the table for dinner, the baby in his high chair, with a little bowl of peas on his tray.

"So," her father said to her with a small, stiff smile, "How is the studying coming?"

"Fine," she replied.

"Did you go through the entire stack of cards?"

"Not quite," she said.

"Well," he said sternly, "I believe you know what you need to do to succeed. This spelling bee is just the first step. There are state competitions, then

the national one. If you want to stand out, you must distinguish yourself. You want to go to an Ivy League college, right?"

"I think so," she said.

"You *think* so?"

"I mean, yes." She bowed her head. Her hands lay curled and squirming in her lap like newborn kittens.

Her father wiped his mouth with the napkin, patting his slim mustache with the cloth. "All right, Pratibha," he said, "Set the table off for your mother, then come up to my study immediately and we'll begin the spelling drill."

Pratibha glanced at her mother and sat up straight in her chair. "No," she said calmly, shaking her head and fixing her eyes on the dark line above her father's mouth, "N-O."

Premonition

In Carl Patton's dream, the wings of the airplane had become encrusted in ice and the plane was falling through the sky. The people on it were screaming, the most wretched sound he had ever heard. One woman in particular kept wailing, over and over again, "Annelise, Annelise!" And he could see the newspaper headlines smeared across the sky: 233 DEAD IN CHRISTMAS EVE CRASH. In the photo of the wreckage, he saw his airline's logo; in the caption, the words "New York to Atlanta flight."

When he awoke, he was drenched in sweat and shaking. But the feeling of relief that normally comes when you awaken from a very bad dream and realize that's all it was did not come to him. He arose, ashen, to shower and dress for work, and when his wife asked him what was wrong, he told her, in an unembroidered fashion, that he had dreamed about a plane crash.

"Honey, it was just a dream, a nightmare," she said, patting his arm sympathetically, but it felt like something more to him. He turned away from her and placed the folded newspaper in his briefcase.

His driver picked him up from his Country Cove Estates home at 8:00 a.m. to deliver him to the airline's headquarters. The car came to a halt about two blocks from the house while a school bus loaded some children. Patton glanced up from his newspaper, annoyed at the delay.

When he arrived at the office, he only nodded, unsmiling, as he passed by the receptionist. His feelings of dread were mounting. He sat down at his desk,

and without reading any of the messages on it, picked up the phone and called the airline's chief operating officer.

"Steve, what's the weather report for tomorrow?" he asked.

"It's not too good. Considerable snow and ice predicted to move in tonight and increase in the morning up and down the eastern seaboard as far south as Georgia. West Coast, mid-West expected to be business as usual. Could be a big mess on the East Coast, though."

"I want to cancel all our New York to Atlanta flights for December 24th," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"Cancel every New York to Atlanta flight from 12:00 a.m. tonight to 12:00 a.m. tomorrow night. And increase the flights on Christmas morning so that our travelers can get to their destinations. Get the news out as soon as possible so that the customers can make other plans."

"Carl, this is premature. This decision will affect thousands of travelers and their holiday plans, not to mention personnel. It could be a public relations nightmare, not to mention a financial fiasco."

"Steve," Patton replied. "I need you to make this happen."

"Carl, we've weathered risks like this before, no pun intended. We have significant de-icing and salting equipment. We have procedures in place to deal with weather issues. There may be long waits, we may have to cancel some flights at the last moment, but we can deal with it."

Patton massaged his right temple with two fingers, "I feel strongly about this. Make the announcement. Set the ball in motion."

"Boston flights, too?"

"No, just New York."

"Just New York."

Patton was fractious all morning, and when he returned from lunch and found a message on his desk to call his wife, he ignored it.

The evening newscasters had a heyday with the cancellations, interviewing outraged travelers and puzzled skycaps, recounting the airline's press release about "preventive measures" and "the best interest of our customers," noting that no other airlines had followed suit.

Around 8:00 that evening, Patton's Blackberry lit up with a call from the airline's chairman of the board, Arnold Greenberg. He took a deep breath before answering.

"Arnold, hello," he said, and braced himself.

"Carl, what the hell? Stock went down to \$7.16 today. \$7.16. All because of your knee-jerk reaction to a weather report. What's the deal? What were you thinking?"

Patton let out a long sigh. "Arnold, I know this is going to sound strange to you, but it was a gut feeling. A pretty strong gut feeling."

"A gut feeling," Greenberg said flatly, "a gut feeling." His voice rose with sarcasm.

“Yes,” said Patton.

“Well, I’ve got a gut feeling that we need to have a board meeting early next week,” Greenberg said, and ended the call.

Christmas Eve day dawned cold and clear up and down the East Coast and angry calls began to pour in. The Vice President for Communication texted the Chief Information Officer on his cell phone, “Goddamnit. The man is crazy.”

But by noon the skies were almost purple, and the snow began to come down in Atlanta, as well as New York - big, dry flakes of white - while the temperature dropped into the teens in Georgia. The size of the flakes and the way they wafted through the air like leaves, alighting soundlessly on the ground, seemed like something that would happen in a science fiction movie.

But Carl Patton was fairly silent throughout the day, avoiding eye contact with the people in his office that morning and speaking only when spoken to when he returned home to his family in the early afternoon. He stood at the window in his study watching his lawn grow whiter, the stacked firewood and the recycle bin by the garage become covered with the soft snow. And then the snow turned to sleet.

“Carl?” His wife appeared in the room. “You’ve been so quiet since you told me about your dream yesterday morning. Is something wrong at the airlines? Are you angry with me for some reason?”

“I have a lot on my mind,” he responded, “I’m sorry.” But he did not turn away from the window.

By 6:00 pm, the Patton's driveway and Country Cove Lane was brittle with black ice. The chief operating officer called to let him know that other airlines had had to cancel many of their afternoon and evening flights, stranding passengers in New York, Boston, even DC, but a few flights, significantly delayed, were coming through without incident.

"What do you think?" his wife said, walking back into his study, "Do you think we can make the Leonards' party tonight? Do you think the midnight church service will be cancelled?"

"I don't know," Patton said, feeling exceedingly weary. He poured some bourbon into a small glass. "I don't know anything anymore."

And here was the thing he would not know: On Christmas morning, a gray-haired woman with swollen legs and a round, furrowed face crested the rise on the escalator to the South Terminal baggage claim in the Atlanta airport. She had spent the night in the LaGuardia airport after her Christmas Eve flight was cancelled. Her flat corduroy shoes created a scuffing sound as she walked away from the escalator, the sound of a weary, slightly heavy woman walking.

Her eyes scanned the waiting crowd until they rested upon the young couple she had come to see, and on the small bundle in the man's arms. Her face lit with pleasure and she made a sound that was suspended somewhere between laughing and sobbing.

She quickened her pace, and the couple rushed to her and enfolded her in an embrace. When they broke the embrace, the old woman held her hands out.

The man gently placed the bundle into her stout arms. As if unwrapping a present marked “fragile,” she carefully pulled the soft pink blanket away from a tiny face. Then she spoke tenderly, as if chanting something sacred.

“Annelise,” she murmured to the baby, “Annelise.”

Tear-Down

Chris Dorsett gazed over the old Taylor place like a man in love. The arc of yellow daffodils that had cropped up on the hill out front dazzled him, as did the cardinal he saw fly into the branches of one of the many old-growth magnolia trees on the property. The clothesline out back, the black rocking chairs on the wide porch, the dark green shutters that framed every paned window gave him the contented feeling that someone had come before and prepared a place for him.

Inside the house, he was impressed by the window seat on the stair landing, the sturdiness of the whitewashed kitchen cabinets, the artistry of the gray stone fireplace. The hardwood floors were buckled a bit in places, but they were solid and shone with warmth. Once or twice he had simply gotten down on his knees and stroked them.

Just three weeks ago, the old Taylor place had become the new Dorsett place. Chris and his wife Lorna had bought this prime piece of real estate in one of the nicer neighborhoods in town with the intent of tearing it down. For this reason, they hadn't really looked that closely at the house and outbuildings before they purchased them, just at the lot itself. They'd gotten a surveyor and an architect to visit the site and draw up the plans for their dream house – the place they planned to raise children, entertain clients, and throw big, talk-of-the-town parties.

He'd worried about being the first black couple in an established white neighborhood, but everyone he'd met so far had been friendly. One of the women who lived down the street had come by with a bottle of wine and a loaf of homemade bread during the first week, and a guy named Patterson Steele had ridden by and rolled down his car window to shake hands and introduce himself. Two little girls rang the doorbell yesterday to ask if they had any children.

"Not yet," Chris said, "But by the time we do, I think you young ladies will be just the right age to babysit." The girls had grinned, nodded their heads excitedly, and cut their eyes at each other. He imagined it was probably their first job offer.

The Dorsetts had bought the old white clapboard house because it stood on a two-acre rise and looked down on the neighborhood. This property was all that remained of the farm that was parceled out to develop Country Cove Estates twenty-five years ago. Old Mr. Taylor, a widower, had lived there until two years ago, when his daughter had to put him in a nursing home. He had died in January, and the Dorsetts had bought the property as soon as it went on the market.

They planned to live in the old house until Chris got his end-of-the-year bonus from the financial consulting firm where he worked, then they'd start building a five-bedroom, five-bath brick house in front of it. As soon as the new

house was completed, they'd be tearing down the old one. They'd put a pool where the Taylor house had been.

"Oh, crap!" Lorna had exclaimed as they'd knocked down the cobwebs on the front porch with a broom they'd found around back. "This'll be interesting," she said, as she opened the door to the old gas stove, rolled her eyes, and sighed heavily. But other than some dust and the cobwebs, everything about the house was immaculate. Then Chris discovered the workshop, about 300 feet back behind the main house.

The workshop looked like a cottage, nestled next to the dogwood trees and azalea bushes, but when Chris opened the door, he was amazed to see two long handmade wooden tables, a well-organized work bench, and walls covered with every type of tool or implement you could imagine. On one wall were antique farming tools: old plows and rusty scythes and what looked like a collection of metal rug beaters. On another were lawn care items, rakes, clippers, and shovels, as well as an old-fashioned lawn edger. And on a third wall were smaller tools, shears, scissors, and different sized hammers and pliers, each of them on its own hook or nail. The work bench was lined with half-pint Mason jars, all labeled with the size of the nails or screws they held. There was even an old green bottle full of buttons.

Mr. Taylor's daughter had mentioned something about leaving her dad's tools behind, just in case, he, Chris, was interested in them. "If you're not, just call me," she said, "And I'll come back and haul 'em out of there."

But he *was* interested in them. He was fascinated. He wanted to know what each of them was for, wanted to feel the heft of them in his own hands. All around him he was discovering evidence of competence and care and orderliness – and it pleased him.

Chris had never seen anything like this place. He had grown up with his mom and little brother in the projects in Detroit, gone off to college and played football at Howard in DC, attended MBA school at Wharton in Philadelphia – all big cities. He hadn't spent a lot of time in the countryside anywhere. Hadn't lived somewhere that bore the marks of a man's skillful labor.

Lorna, on the other hand, was from LA - Lower Alabama. They'd met at Howard, then she'd attended law school at Temple while he was at Wharton. She'd taken him home to meet her parents and "see where she came from," but although her family's concrete block house was neat and comfortable, the land around it was hard red clay, covered in spindly pine trees and wiregrass.

They were married in Philadelphia, then moved to Atlanta where they'd both been offered good jobs. Lorna was sleek and sophisticated, the kind of wife you liked to show off. And she had big plans for them as a couple: certain kinds of cars, certain kinds of clothes, certain kinds of friends--a certain kind of house.

That night, after they'd made love and were about to fall asleep, he whispered in her ear, "I love this place."

"What place?" she whispered back.

“This one. This house, this land. The easy feeling I’ve had since we moved here. I don’t want to tear it down anymore.”

She sat up straight in the bed and turned on the bedside lamp.

“What?” he said, “Why not?” And he shielded his eyes from the light.

“Oh, no, Mister,” she said. “We made a deal. We bought this house to tear it down. We are building a new house here, we are building a *new* house.”

“Settle down,” he said, “we’ll talk about it another time.”

“No,” she said, “this is the end of that discussion.”

The next day was Saturday. Chris went downstairs first to make the coffee. When Lorna came down, she was dressed to go to the gym. “Hey,” she said flatly, and turned her cheek to the side for him to kiss.

“Look,” he said, “I want to talk about this some more.”

“Well, I *don’t*,” she replied, picking up her purse. But before walking out the door, she turned to him.

“Chris. My great-granddaddy was a sharecropper, my granddaddy grew peanuts, and my daddy cleaned the equipment in a peanut processing plant. I’ve been determined to get as far away from the farm, the fields, the crops, and the country as I can. I married you because you were a city boy, because I thought we had the same ideas about the kind of life we wanted. I am not living in some old white man’s farmhouse for the rest of my life, planting tomatoes and collard greens and corn in the back yard. I got no fantasies like that. We are sticking to the plan, you hear me? We are sticking to the plan!”

She slammed the back door. When she backed out of the garage, she cut the BMW too sharply and hit the recycle bin, which made a cracking sound. Then she drove off. Chris picked the bin up and carried it to the workshop. He sat it upside down on one of the tables and examined the damage. He turned to the wall of tools and found what he was looking for: an old roll of black duct tape on a nail beside some coils of wire. He kept looking until he found a pair of red-handled kitchen scissors, then he cut and pressed the tape down on the cracks in the bin to hold it together.

He walked out of the workshop and sat down slowly on an old garden bench next to a concrete birdbath. He had to think about all this. He pretty much let Lorna have her way about everything, but this time they'd have to work out a compromise. He'd make a proposal to her when she came back: They wouldn't tear the house down, but they would renovate it. They would keep the stone fireplace, the window seat, the porch, and the wooden floors, and the workshop would stay exactly as it was. Lorna could rip out and change the kitchen any way she wanted to, and the bathrooms and the whole upstairs could be completely done over. But he didn't want any of the old trees cut down.

Chris would give her time to consider the proposal, to get used to the idea. He hoped that the longer they lived here, the more she'd come to appreciate the spirit and the bones of this decent place. He walked over to a bush loaded with dark pink camellias. With the scissors still in his hand, he cut three of them, then went into the house and set them floating in a blue and white

bowl of water. He placed the bowl carefully on the kitchen table and poured himself another cup of coffee. Then he sat down to wait for Lorna's return.

Makeovers

Erica Hirschberg was able to pinpoint if not the exact moment she and Mary Jane Hanson had become friends, then the approximate hour. They were at a Country Cove Garden Club meeting at Diane Crumpler's house on the morning of October 26th, shortly after the Hirschbergs had moved into the neighborhood. The speaker was a flower-arranging expert and State Garden Club officer who was showing the club how to make the perfect Thanksgiving centerpiece.

The speaker had an affected accent, almost British, even though she'd been introduced as a native of Dothan, Alabama, which Erica recalled was "The Peanut Capital of the World." The woman took herself so seriously. "Do *not*," she admonished the club members, "use flowers in your arrangement that are all at the same stage of development. *Never* cut your flowers or greenery straight across. *Always* cut the stems at an angle before placing them into the water. This one act alone is *critical* to the endurance of your arrangement."

But every time she turned around to work on the centerpiece, her audience could see that her slacks were caught in the crack of her ample rear end. Erica was sitting near Mary Jane, when she let out a little sound that could have been a hiccup, but was really a stifled snort of laughter. Then Mary Jane's shoulders began to shake, and the two women, feigning coughing spells, slipped out of the living room. They both ended up in the den, where they struggled to compose themselves, their eyes shiny with tears of mirth.

“Talk about getting your panties in a wad!” Erica whispered, and Mary Jane had to clap one hand over her mouth and press the other one over her stomach to contain herself.

And so their gleeful bond was forged, and the rendezvouses at Starbucks, guess-what-happened-to-me-today phone calls, and power walks commenced. After a while, the husbands were included in some of their activities, like dinner and a movie, or attending the school auction together.

Erica was from a prominent family in Sarasota, Florida, fond of prestige purses and regularly manicured nails, and had never cooked an entire meal in her life. Mary Jane only wore make-up to parties and church, bought her shoes at Target, and always signed up to bring homemade cookies or chicken salad sandwiches for her daughter’s school events. Where Erica was tall, with long and glossy dark hair, Mary Jane was short, her light brown hair threaded with gray, and simply cut. Erica drove a late-model Lexus, Mary Jane a five-year-old minivan. And as much as Erica liked to shop and play tennis, Mary Jane spent her spare time volunteering: counseling the residents at the women’s shelter at her Presbyterian church, delivering Meals-on-Wheels to old folks, coordinating Health and Safety Week at the school.

After about three months of friendship, what they discovered they had in common, besides appreciating a good laugh and each other’s company, was an impending 40th birthday. The two of them had actually been born just four days apart in April.

“Oh, my God, I can’t believe it!” Erica enthused when they’d figured it out. “How are we going to celebrate? Shall we make our husbands throw us a big party together?!”

“Maybe,” said Mary Jane. “I was thinking about working on a Habitat for Humanity house to mark the occasion, that way I could point to something tangible I’d done to commemorate the year I turned forty.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Mary Jane!” Erica said. Then she raised her hands excitedly in the air, as if someone were holding a gun on her. “Let me give you a makeover for a 40th birthday present!”

“What do you mean?” said Mary Jane.

“Well,” said Erica, clapping her hands together, “I think we should get your hair colored or highlighted, some new eye make-up, a sexy party outfit, and a better bra!”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Mary Jane said, not offended.

“Come on, girl! You’ve got a good figure and these great cheekbones, but you wear those khaki capris all the time as if they were your uniform. You’ve got to maximize yourself, darling. Do not ‘go gentle into that good night.’ Dazzle your husband and the world while you’ve still got it.”

For a moment, Mary Jane looked startled, then she smiled and said, “Okay, have at it!” Erica looked at her dreamily, like a sculptor studying a block of marble. “But,” Mary Jane added, “think about working on that Habitat house with me. We need to do lots of good deeds and accumulate some good karma in

this life of ours. Increase our chances of being plucked out of the great big recycle bin in the sky.”

“Wait - is that what you believe?” asked Erica.

“Nah,” said Mary Jane, “It’s just the World Religions major in me coming out.” Erica pulled her cell phone out of her pocket. “I’m calling Jason at Salon Savoir Faire to see about your hair appointment.”

Mary Jane’s appointment was set for March 16th and the two women decided to make a day of it. They went to an early lunch at The Salad Place. Erica regaled Mary Jane with stories of her daughter Leah’s efforts to get some fifth grade boy to notice her.

“So, I asked her,” Erica recounted, “What’s so great about this guy? Why do you want him to like you? And here’s what she said to me, *very seriously*,” Erica sat up straight in the booth and put her right hand over her heart.

“‘Because I think he’s going to be extremely successful when he grows up.’ Can you believe that?! I don’t know if that means I’m raising her right or if I’m overdoing it! I think it means I’d better dial it back a bit.” And the two friends laughed.

At the salon, Erica was in on the color consultation between Mary Jane and Jason. “I think,” Jason said, “that we ought to go for overall color, something not too dramatically different than her natural hair color, but something that will put some more golden tones in her hair and cover that itsy

bitsy bit of gray that's in there." The women agreed, and Erica suggested a cut that would frame Mary Jane's face and add some soft bangs.

Jason went into the back of the salon to mix the color. Just as he did, a large, ruddy-faced woman called out to Mary Jane, then rushed over to pull her up out of the chair and into an embrace. "Hey, hey, hey!" she said, "You look terrific! You look happy and healthy!"

Mary Jane introduced them. "Roselyn" she said, "This is my good friend and neighbor, Erica. Erica, this is Roselyn Zirkle."

"How do you two know each other?" Erica asked.

"We're bosom buddies!" said Roselyn.

"Bosom buddies?"

"Breast cancer survivors," said Roselyn, "We're in the same support group at Live Oak Wellness Center. Mary Jane just celebrated her second anniversary of being cancer-free, and I'm just a little bit ahead of her, closing in on my third. This woman is a saint, you know? A beautiful person."

"Yes, she is," Erica said softly. The room seemed to spin around her. Mary Jane wasn't looking at her, she was telling Roselyn good-bye, promising to call her.

Mary Jane turned around and faced her.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Erica said, still stunned.

“Because.” Mary Jane said kindly. “Because of the way you’re looking at me right now. Because I don’t want the shadow to fall on my children. Because my chances are good and I’m living my life. .”

“You must think I’m terrible,” said Erica, “A shallow, insensitive fool.”

“Erica, I think you’re wonderful. As far as I’m concerned, you’re just what the doctor ordered.”

Jason returned and Mary Jane sat back down in the chair. He draped the plastic cape around Mary Jane’s shoulders and began to apply the developer lotion to her head. Mary Jane seemed so small sitting there, her hair plastered down by the chemicals. Erica watched for a few minutes, then looked away.

Call of the Wild

Whenever Michael Carriker went out for a run, he saw signs posted on telephone poles and stop signs around the neighborhood. Usually the signs were for missing cats, although there were occasional photos of beloved dogs. Some of the posters looked like they had been made by a child, with plaintive, hand-lettered wording that read, *Please help us find Biscuit!* or *Have you seen this cat?* And then the animals were described: *gray, black with white feet, blue collar, answers to the name of JoJo.*

The signs made him feel like he had a cold stone in his stomach. He loved his dog and knew he would be so upset if Roscoe ever went missing. So when Michael ran he also kept an eye out for pets that looked lost.

At the dinner table one night he said to his parents, "There sure are a lot of missing cats around the neighborhood."

"Must be those damn coyotes," his father said. "If I ever see one I'm going to blow its head off."

"Chuck," his mother said, and gave his dad a look.

"I mean it," he said. "Michael, if you see one anywhere around the house, you let me know."

"Okay," Michael said.

"They can't help it," his mom responded, "Their habitats are being destroyed. Where are they supposed to go?"

"Not in my backyard," said his dad.

“They’re supposed to be wonderful mothers,” she said, winking at her son.

After his dad left for work, Michael went upstairs to his room and pulled a long wooden box out from under his bed. He lifted the lid. The slingshot from when he was a Cub Scout was still there, along with a leather pouch full of stones he’d collected. He slid the box back under his bed, then googled “coyote” on his laptop, just to be sure what one looked like. He’d always heard that coyotes were ugly, but the photos he found showed pretty animals. They had full coats of brown, silver, yellow, black, and white hairs all swirled together, bushy tails, and nice, fox-like faces, he thought. And golden eyes, like the tiger’s eye in his rock collection. Unforgettable golden eyes.

The coyotes in the pictures looked like they were smaller than Roscoe, which was a relief to Michael. Roscoe was part black lab and part boxer. According to *National Geographic*, coyotes traveled in groups and hunted in pairs. Often one coyote would lure a potential prey, such as a protective family dog, into the bushes where the second coyote would be waiting. *Wikipedia* said that litter sizes could range from one to nineteen pups. Nineteen pups! And the females *are* supposed to make good mothers.

It amazed him all the wild creatures you could see in your own neighborhood, even when your neighborhood was a suburb of a large city. He’d seen fat hawks fall from telephone lines to snatch and carry off struggling gray mice. He’d had a raccoon scuttle past him as he sat by the pool after an early

evening swim. He'd often spotted brown bunnies dotting green lawns during his early morning runs. And then there was the striped garter snake he'd found, looped on top of the water meter, sleeping in the sun.

But the possibility of coyotes in the neighborhood, the idea of something so dangerous and extraordinary in his own backyard, thrilled him. He hadn't decided what he would do if he actually saw one.

Michael was an early riser, which wasn't such a good thing when you weren't in school and didn't have a job. The long day hung before him like an empty sack he had to find a way to fill.

He'd been a premature baby and had learning disabilities, so he'd attended a special high school. It really bothered him that he hadn't been able to learn to drive. When he had tried to learn to drive, everything – stop signs, other cars, sunlight, the trees along the side of the road - came at him too fast and he couldn't fold it all together in his head. His mom had tried to teach him, but one day, after he'd successfully navigated Country Cove Estates three times and was turning the corner to head home, he turned too far and, before he could think to hit the brakes, they'd crashed into the iron fence in front of the Ganesh's house.

"That's it!" his dad had yelled at his mom, "I told you it wouldn't work. The driving lessons are over." So now Michael was waiting to begin a job training program at the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation.

In the meantime, he ran twice, in the early morning and the late afternoon, and he read: *Men's Health* magazines, anything about Teddy Roosevelt,

autobiographies of Evander Holyfield and Bo Jackson. His younger sister was off at UNC and he followed the success of the Tarheel sports teams in the newspaper. He surfed the net, watching athlete interviews on YouTube, as well as footage from various Olympic moments, and videos that showed babies laughing.

He spent some time helping his mom around the house, bringing in the groceries, or mowing the lawn. They talked a lot, especially when she was driving him somewhere. Yesterday, on the way to church, he told her how much he wanted to have a girlfriend, someone smart and pretty like his sister's friends.

"I want to do something important with my life, be a success like my dad," he told her. "And how can I ever get a date if I can't drive?"

His mom would always listen, tell him he had a great physique and a good heart, and assure him that "his time would come." But he wanted his time to be here.

It was in the early morning that his longings were the most intense. He'd promised his parents that he wouldn't run until the sun had risen, so he often walked around the front yard deep in thought, stretching or praying, until it did.

One gray dawn after he had stretched, he sat on a low brick wall in the front yard, waiting for some of the early morning fog to lift. He heard a noise out by the curb and looked to see an animal of some sort picking an empty can out of the recycle bin with its mouth. When Michael stood up, the animal

froze – and looked straight at him. When it did, Michael saw the golden eyes. The coyote dropped the can, then turned and disappeared into the mist.

His heart pounding, Michael walked down the driveway and picked up the empty can, which still smelled like dog food. He slowly rolled it over and over in his hands, then placed it back into the bin.

He said nothing to either of his parents when he walked back into the house after his run. “Hey, Michael,” his dad said from behind the newspaper, seated at the breakfast table. “Seen any signs of coyotes around here?”

“No sir,” he replied.

“Well, let me know the minute you do so I can take care of things.”

“I can take care of things myself,” Michael said under his breath.

Several days went by and Michael kept looking for the animal, was vigilant when he was out of doors. Then one afternoon he looked out the kitchen window to see the coyote simply standing next to their swimming pool. And just as it had the other day, the coyote locked eyes with Michael before turning and walking into the strip of woods behind their house.

Michael ran upstairs and pulled the wooden box back out again. He shoved the slingshot into the waist of his jeans, took the three largest stones out of the pouch and put them into his pocket. He rushed back down and opened the back door.

“Stay, Roscoe,” he commanded, when the dog got up to go with him.

The Carriker's lot was a large one and the back of it fell off down a wooded hill that led to a small stream. Michael walked as quietly and as carefully as he could through the thick ivy and fern banks, looking right and left as he did. There were small, fallen pine trees he had to step over and hidden dips in the ground he had to be alert for.

He scanned the tangle of vegetation on his left and was startled to detect a blur of light brown amidst the deep green just a few yards away. He could see it was the coyote and that it appeared to be lying on its side. He took a few steps closer, and when he did, the coyote pricked up its ears. But it did not run away.

Michael approached the coyote slowly, expecting it to rise and run any second. He could not understand why it didn't. And then he saw the pups. The coyote, he realized, was feeding her young.

They looked just like a dog's puppies, small and furry and helpless. He would have liked to have held one of them, but he knew better than to try. The coyote kept her eyes on his face, those wild golden eyes of hers. Michael watched a little longer, then began to slowly back up the hill toward home. She never took her eyes off of him.

That night, after his dad had put the recycle bin out on the curb, Michael slipped out of the house and placed two of Roscoe's bone-shaped dog biscuits on top of the newspapers.

He was in the carport tying his running shoes the next morning when he heard the rumble of the Green Planet Recycling truck in the distance. He ran to the curb and peered into their recycle bin. The dog biscuits were gone.

He knew that he and this wild animal were connected now. She had let him watch her nurse her young, and she had taken the food that had his scent on it. The skin on the back of his neck prickled, as if a feather had brushed across it. He would not tell his father about this.

Pot Luck

Every Labor Day Alice McAdams organized the Country Cove Estates pot luck dinner down on the cul-de-sac. She used to just let everyone bring whatever side dishes they wanted, to go with the hamburgers and hotdogs. But one year the meal turned out to be a disaster. They'd ended up with four plates of brownies, two of chocolate chip cookies, three bowls of potato salad, two pasta salads, a platter of deviled eggs, one bowl of carrot and raisin salad (which only a few people ate), and a jar of pickles. Hardly a balanced meal and certainly, except for the carrots, not a colorful one. Alice had been mortified. So she no longer left the pot luck completely to chance. She called some of her more reliable neighbors and made specific requests of them.

"Hey, Mary Jane," she said on her first phone call, "You remember that delicious corn and black bean dish you made for the potluck last year? Could you bring that again this year? That would be terrific." "Diane, how are you and Noah? Could you contribute a big green salad to the potluck this year? I would really appreciate it if you could." She left a message on the Carriker's voice mail. "Nancy, if y'all could bring a fruit salad to the Labor Day potluck, I would be so appreciative."

Then she called her good friend, DeeDee Hart. "DeeDee, how are you, honey? How you feeling? Do you think you'd be up for making some of those Congo squares of yours for the Labor Day potluck--although I guess we better start calling that dessert something else now that we've got that new black

couple in the neighborhood! I know Labor Day will be hard on you without Jack," she added sympathetically, "so don't say yes unless you really, truly think you are up to it."

After she hung up from talking to DeeDee, she thought about how she and Trip and DeeDee and Jack had been the first two couples to buy homes in Country Cove Estates when it was a brand new development. Twenty-five years ago. A quarter of a century. She'd been 38 years old when they'd moved in, and DeeDee had been about the same age. The Taylors, who had sold off most of their land to the developers of Country Cove Estates, but kept their family farmhouse and a couple of acres around it, had invited the two couples and their children to come over for a Labor Day picnic. Mrs. Taylor had fried some chicken and baked two blueberry pies, and Mr. Taylor had sliced up a bunch of tomatoes and cucumbers from his garden. They'd had some of his fresh ears of corn, too. He'd let their kids pick them right off of the stalks, showed them how to shuck them and get all the silk off.

It had been a wonderful day and they'd all hit it off right away - the adults and the children. Even the teenagers had had a good time. She realized with a start that the Taylors must have been about the age she was now on that Labor Day. And now Jack was in the grave. It was all hard to believe.

Robert Neill should be the one in the grave, she thought, with all that drinking and smoking of his. Not Jack. Robert and Katherine Neill had been the third couple to move into the neighborhood. They had a pool at their house, so the

three families and the Taylors had had a cookout there the next Labor Day. Lord, how Robert and Katherine could dance! He had these reel-to-reel tapes of old beach music and he'd crank up the volume and have all of them shagging around the pool. There'd be paper lanterns strung in the dogwoods in the yard, and the lightning bugs would be out, and all of them, even the kids, would be dancing and laughing.

But then Robert started his drinking. He was an editor for the newspaper, until he lost his job. Then he lost Katherine. Turns out he'd had an affair with some trashy woman who tended bar somewhere he'd started hanging out. Katherine moved back to North Carolina, where they'd lived before they came here. And Robert hardly ever even left the house anymore. Alice had seen him through the window one morning when she was out walking Fabio, her little Italian greyhound. She'd heard their son had come out of the closet.

So after everything fell apart with the Neills, and Mrs. Taylor got sick, and the neighborhood grew larger, Alice began organizing the annual Labor Day potluck. With neighborhood association funds, she bought the frozen hamburger patties and the hotdogs, as well as all the fixings, and her husband, Trip, bought the beer and the soft drinks.

On Labor Day morning, Trip iced down the cans and the bottled water. He set his grills out in his driveway and the food tables on their lawn. Then he put one of those little plastic swimming pools in the grassy circle in the middle of the cul-de-sac for the smaller kids and ran the hose in it so the water would

warm in the sunlight. There were several children living in the neighborhood now – and again. Some of the original Country Cove Estate neighbors had moved out over the years and sold their houses to younger couples.

Around 2:00, Alice started putting the red and white checked tablecloths on each table, along with pots of red geraniums, a mustache of sweat forming on her upper lip. She really needed to get some weight off, she thought, and wondered if she ever would. Trip got the coals going in the grills. He'd asked his next door neighbor, Tom Hanson, to come help him cook the burgers since he didn't have Jack to help him anymore. Everyone else had been told to come at 3:00.

Soon the rest of the neighbors began to arrive, most of them on foot and carrying lawn chairs, a couple of the kids on their bikes. Alice stood at the end of the cul-de-sac and waved them on as if she were a school crossing guard. "Hey!" she called out to the Steeles, who had brought a box of multi-colored cupcakes, "Look how that girl has grown!" referring to their daughter, Sally.

"Oh, Mary Jane, thank you!" she hollered, when she saw her next door neighbor set a big bowl down on the food table. "Michael, gimme a hug," she said to the young muscular son, when the Carrikers arrived. "Sister gone back to college?"

"Yes, ma'am."

When she saw her good friend DeeDee, they embraced. "Oh, my goodness," Alice whispered to her, "Here comes that Indian family, the

Ganeshes. I invite them every year, but they've never come before. Lord, I wonder what they brought to eat?!"

The Hirschbergs arrived with their two kids and an elaborate platter of grilled vegetables and couscous. "Erica, you've outdone yourself," Alice said.

"Oh, no, no," Erica replied, "Whole Foods has outdone itself."

More couples, more kids. The cul-de-sac was filling up. The Pattons, of course, weren't there. They always went to their mountain house for Labor Day week-end. They'd recently put a For Sale sign in front of their house and Alice wanted to find out why they were moving. People left the neighborhood because they were either downsizing or upsizing. Knowing the Pattons just the little bit that she did, she assumed they were upsizing.

Alice walked over to the food table and was fixing herself a plate when she noticed that the African-American guy who had moved into the old Taylor place had arrived. He sure was a good-looking man, she thought, noting his perfectly pressed linen shorts and his turquoise Polo shirt. She waved and walked over to greet him.

"Well, hello there," she said, and held out her hand. "I'm Alice McAdams and we're so glad you've come."

"Chris Dorsett," he said, placing his hand in hers. "We appreciate your putting the flyer in our mailbox. Where should I put this?" he asked, nodding at the container of store-bought potato salad in his other hand.

“Right over there,” she said, leading him to the food table. “Let me introduce you around. Will your wife be joining us?”

“I don’t know,” he said, “She has a headache.”

She walked Chris up to meet Tom Hanson, then turned and surveyed the scene around her. Michael Carriker and Noah Crumpler were tossing the Frisbee, and little Sally Steele was splashing in the pool alongside the Ganesh baby, while the pre-teens, Rachel Hanson and Pratibha Ganesh, watched over them. The men were grilling and drinking their beers.

Mary Jane Hanson and Erica Hirschberg had their heads together talking, like they always did. *They remind me of me and DeeDee*, she thought, *when we were about that age*. Even though she and DeeDee were very different, they were like sisters to each other. DeeDee was shy and thoughtful, but Alice had always been a brass band, saying whatever popped into her head. A hot wave of nostalgia washed over her – and just about knocked her down.

She walked into the house and picked up the telephone, dialing a number she was surprised she still knew by heart. It rang six times before someone answered.

“Hello?”

“Robert, it’s Alice.”

“Alice Who?”

“Alice McAdams.”

“And to what do I owe the honor of your call?”

“Well,” she said, “today’s the annual Labor Day potluck and I think you ought to get yourself down here to the cul-de-sac.”

“Oh, you do?” he said. There was a long pause. “I’ll have to think long and hard about that.”

“Don’t think,” she replied. “Just come. The fresh air’ll do you good.”

“I don’t have anything to bring. I’m afraid my pot luck’s just about run out.”

“Just bring yourself,” she said, and hung up the phone.

In about half an hour, Robert O’Neill arrived, looking somewhat thin and pale in his cargo shorts and sandals. He raised a finger in salute when he saw Alice, then walked over to the cooler and pulled out a can of Coke. He joined the men at the grills.

“Well, would ya looka here?!” Trip said when he saw him, clapping him on the shoulder.

“Your wife,” Robert responded with a slight bow from the waist, “was kind enough to include me.” And the next thing Alice knew, the men were all laughing together about who knows what.

Shortly after 7:30, the families began to head home—there was work and school tomorrow. “Thanks, Alice and Trip, for organizing us again,” they called out, “This was so much fun!” “Oh, you’re welcome, you’re welcome,” Alice called back, “It was fun for us, too. Gotta say ‘so long’ to summer!”

“Robert,” she said, “Don’t be a stranger.”

Robert looked at her as if she had said something astonishing. He shook his head. "We'll see," he managed to say, "I'll try." Then he raised his finger in salute once more before heading down the street. Once he turned his head and looked back over his shoulder.

Alice hooked her arm in Trip's and kissed him on the cheek.

"What was that for?" he asked, pleased.

"Oh, I'm just in a good mood," she said. "I'm really happy with the way the day turned out."

Alice hummed to herself as she folded up the checkered tablecloths and looked around at the empty cul-de-sac. This neighborhood meant the world to her. She wished her children hadn't grown up and moved so far away; she wondered who'd take her place as the pot luck organizer when the time came. It was crazy how fast you went from being one of the young couples in the subdivision to one of the old couples. Just crazy.

A bright red Coca-Cola can was floating in slow circles in the kiddie pool. Alice bent awkwardly over to fish the can out, then pitched it into the recycle bin. She could just imagine what the Green Planet Recycling guy would think when he pulled the truck up in front of their house on Thursday and found the bin and the cardboard boxes overflowing with beer and Coke cans and water bottles.

Well, she figured he'd say to himself, looks like somebody around here has been having themselves a big time. She smiled broadly at the thought. After all was said and done, it surely seemed to her that this was so.

How and Why I Wrote *Recycle Bin*

I believe that my story collection and thesis, *Recycle Bin*, represents the thinker, reader, and writer I have become as a result of my time and study in the Master of Arts in Professional Writing program at Kennesaw State University.

I entered the certificate program in creative writing at Kennesaw as my younger child began her last year of high school and my older child became more independent. I intended to focus on creative nonfiction. I had been an occasional essay writer for decades and had some ideas for nonfiction books I wanted to develop. I had begun writing about the year my son with learning disabilities and social challenges spent at a tiny junior college in southwest Georgia, as well as a trip my husband, children, and I had taken throughout Ireland. I also liked to write memoirs about growing up in Savannah, as well as essays about the low country landscape. I thought of myself as a writer, although I had spent most of the last 25 years primarily writing brochures and fundraising materials for nonprofit organizations.

I began my coursework at Kennesaw with Professor Sarah Robbins' intriguing Readings for Writers class on the bestseller, where we studied what made a book – and an author – succeed and sell. After that class, I decided to enter the Master of Arts in Professional Writing program, still intending to write nonfiction and to take applied writing classes as well.

During the first two years I was in the program, I took several classes that furthered those goals: a directed study in environmental writing, speech writing, travel writing, Issues & Research, and creative nonfiction. I workshopped the first chapters of my narrative about the trip to Ireland in Professor Anne Richard's travel writing class, using the meanings of the stitches in the Irish sweater and their parallels to our journey to knit the manuscript together. I decided I would continue to work on this project for my capstone. But then, during my third year in the program, I took two classes that altered my focus and ambitions as a writer. Much to my surprise, I found I wanted, quite ardently, to write fiction.

The first of these influential classes was Professor Melanie Sumner's online Readings for Writers course, which I took during the summer of 2010. Professor Sumner's class was called "Beach Reading for Writers," but the books she selected for us weren't the light, fluffy reads the name suggests. Most of them were strong 21st century works, but she included two 20th century masters – Ernest Hemingway and Pat Conroy – for the lessons they could teach.

In *The Prince of Tides*, Pat Conroy's evocative descriptions of the low country in which he and I were both born and raised inspired me to fill my prose with more memorable imagery, to use all of my senses as I wrote, and to landscape my writing from memory and personal experience. And in *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway laid out the habits of a writer.

Although I don't think that anyone ever needed to suggest to Hemingway that he become more selfish in order to be a writer, someone like Hemingway needed to suggest it to me. I had spent the last twenty-plus years as a freelance business writer, wife, and mother of a special needs child, and had found child-rearing to be an all-consuming task. Hemingway put his family on the back burner, gave himself time to be alone and write, as well as time to meet with other writers and literary aficionados, and to go out into the Paris night in search of experiences. He did just what he wanted in the name of being a great writer, and that's neither admirable nor natural to me. But he made me see that I needed to place a priority on my craft, set time aside and alone for it, and be disciplined about my production. I needed to commit to being a writer.

Professor Sumner also had us select a writing "tip" from *A Moveable Feast* to utilize and discuss, and I picked Hemingway's assertion that in order to write a novel, you must first write stories, gradually increasing the length of your stories as if you were "train(ing) for a longer race." He described trying to write paragraphs "that would be the distillation of what made a novel," then moving into writing longer stories (Hemingway, 75). This advice enabled me to overcome a stumbling block in my writing. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by the task of writing a novel in order to be a fiction writer, I began to entertain the idea of writing stories. And, inspired by Hemingway's interchapters and distilled paragraphs, I became interested in studying and attempting to write

hint, flash, and sudden fiction, in working to compress a story and to pinpoint its essence.

When Professor Sumner had the class read Elizabeth Strout's Pulitzer-prize winning book, *Olive Kitteridge*, I felt I'd found the model for the kind of fiction writing I wished I could write. *Olive Kitteridge* consists of 13 interconnected stories that come together to create a distinctive and multi-faceted novel. The stories take place over several decades, primarily in a small Maine town, and are told from the points of view of various characters. The title character, the prickly schoolteacher Olive, appears in every story, although in one story she is only passing through a restaurant and in another she is simply quoted by a former student.

I found the 13 interlocking stories and their varying perspectives on the main character brilliant. With each story and fresh point of view, Strout adds a layer to Olive. The reader sees her as bitchy, astute, loud, regretful, pitiable, creative, vengeful, compassionate, heartbroken, loving, quotable, hopeful, impossible, and longing to be loved and needed. In other words, Strout makes Olive come fully alive, fully human for the reader.

Strout also fills the book with small but vivid details, details that by themselves are not particularly meaningful, but that are the stuff that life is made of. I also appreciated how Strout wrapped up her book. The last, lovely paragraph reads: "Her eyes were closed, and throughout her tired self swept waves of gratitude – and regret. She pictured the sunny room, the sun-washed

wall, the bayberry outside. It baffled her, the world. She did not want to leave it yet" (Strout, 270). Strout struck a fine balance here, crafting an ending that was neither pat nor untrue to the character. I liked this eloquent and hopeful ending, one that does not leave the reader hanging, unsatisfied, or bereft.

Strout and *Olive Kitteridge* showed me a way to write a book by breaking it into separate, but interlocking stories, as well as how to craft an ending that would touch and satisfy the reader, while still leaving something to the imagination. Now I had the desire to write fiction and had found the form I wanted to try to emulate, but I still lacked the confidence and the toolbox to embark on such a project.

The following fall semester, I enrolled in fiction writing class, where Professor Tony Grooms re-introduced me to the particular powers of the short story and the methods of some of its more successful practitioners. He presented the class with the theories, the pedagogy, behind the writing of fiction, and I was fascinated. Three particular textbooks we used in that class were illuminating to me: *Writing Fiction, A Guide to Narrative Craft*, by Janet Burroway and Elizabeth Stuckey-French; *The Techniques of Fiction: Method and Madness*, by Leon Surmelian; and *Alone with all that Could Happen*, by David Jauss. I began to accumulate some ideas about fiction-writing as we read and discussed these books.

In the chapter on story form, plot, and structure in *Writing Fiction*, and in the particular section entitled "The Arc of the Story," Burroway quotes novelist

John L'Heureux: "A story is about a single moment in a character's life that culminates in a defining choice after which nothing will be the same again" (Burroway, 264). Surmelian revealed to me the importance of striking the proper balance between scene and summary. And Jauss presented me with so many valuable ideas about writing fiction: the importance of consistency in point of view, the pros and cons of utilizing the present tense, some methods of linking stories together in a collection, and the best uses of epiphany, along with the pitfalls.

Another sentence in Jauss' book also set me thinking about the role of the fiction writer: "I believe that escaping the self, imagining the life of another, is a noble, even religious, act" (Jauss, 7). As I began to write fiction, I found I enjoyed imagining the lives and conversations of others. It seemed more freeing than nonfiction writing; it felt vital to be able to present a character's point of view to a reader in a way that might make the reader empathize. That thought, that sentence of Jauss', made fiction writing seem like a worthy mission, one I've now adopted as my own.

Our readings and discussions of the work of Anton Chekhov and James Joyce in fiction writing class were also interesting. I had read James Joyce extensively before, and was familiar with the literary epiphany. But I had never read Chekhov, and had not learned about his techniques, particularly the episodic story. Professor Grooms explained that Chekhov wanted to give us a slice of his characters' lives, then simply return the characters to their lives when

the story ends. The reader is left to ponder or imagine how the characters' lives might proceed.

In his essay, "Returning Characters to Life: Chekhov's Subversive Endings," David Jauss refers to Chekhov's "inconclusive conclusions," noting the omission of climaxes in his work (Jauss, 26). This style of writing seems more realistic, more engaging to me. Most of us are not blessed with a grand epiphany as we encounter conflict in our lives. But occasionally we are; sometimes an event in our lives seems to be a proclamation. I used both approaches in my stories, although most of them are more episodic, like Chekhov.

The endings of my stories differ from Chekhov's in the possibility for change that they offer, their hints of hopefulness. I am generally optimistic that humans can learn from their mistakes and improve their lives. Jauss wrote that Chekhov was "generally pessimistic about the possibility of change," and that even when his characters do change, the changes either fail to last or they complicate the character's condition in negative ways (28). I write from the perspective of an American and a Christian, rather than of a Russian physician, which I think inclines me toward a belief in second chances.

I also became interested in learning more about the flash fiction I'd been reading about on my own. I selected the short-short story as the topic of my research paper in fiction class. I wanted to read several of these stories as well as literary criticism of them, and to understand what made them effective. I also began to write the first four stories that would become a part of my thesis.

Reading the introductions to several anthologies of short-shorts (*Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories*; *Flash Fiction: 72 Very Short Stories*; *You Have Time for This*; *Hint Fiction: An Anthology of 25 Words or Fewer*), as well as the outstanding *Field Guide to Flash Fiction* published by Rose Metal Press, I was able to define and compare the various forms of short-shorts. The term “sudden fiction” refers to stories of 1,000 to 2,000 words, while flash fiction stories are 250-1,000 words. The newest, littlest kid on the block is hint fiction, mere whiffs of stories of 25 words or fewer.

Reading many stories of these various lengths, I studied what their writers left out and what they left in. In my paper, I concluded that hint fiction was more of a game – an exercise in utter compression. How little could you write and still have a story? Flash fiction seemed to me the most potent; these briefer stories are distilled to an essence, but strong imagery or limited character development or limited dialogue was still utilized. I believe that flash fiction is distinctive enough to be considered a genre unto itself.

But as I began to write my own stories, I wanted to flesh my characters out more, and when I did, I couldn’t help but put words in their mouths. I wanted to, as Jauss wrote, “imagine the lives of others.” I needed more than 1,000 words to tell the stories I wanted to tell, so the sudden fiction format suited me better. Most of my stories fall between 1,300 and 1,700 words, with the exception of the final story.

Attempting to emulate Chekhov's "slice of life" approach helped me to compress my stories. I received some very positive feedback in class from other students and from Professor Grooms, and so I made the decision to write an interconnected short-short story cycle for my thesis.

After I completed the fiction class, I began to read other collections of interconnected short stories and to consider their construction: *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, *You Know When the Men Are Gone* by Siobhan Fallon, *Ms. Hempel Chronicles* by Sarah Shun-lien Bynum, *Ideas of Heaven*, by Joan Silber, and *In Case We're Separated*, by Alice Mattison. I also read, at the suggestion of Professor Sumner, Flannery O'Connor's collection of essays on writing, *Prose and Manners*.

O'Connor wrote what Elizabeth Strout in *Olive Kitteridge* showed me, "... fiction has to be largely presented rather than reported" (O'Connor 73-74). For my stories to work, they would need to show, rather than tell, the reader what the character's world was like.

Fiction writing is in the details, the small details of everyday existence. O'Connor also wrote: "The beginning of human knowledge is through the senses, and the fiction writer begins where human perception begins. He appeals through the senses, and you cannot appeal to the senses with abstractions" (67). On the same page, she also wrote that "the world of the fiction writer is full of matter." These words of O'Connor's reinforced what I had realized. Good writing includes concrete images and sensory details that

lead the reader to an abstract notion. So in addition to including detailed characterization in my sudden fiction, I endeavored to describe the details of the physical world in which my characters lived and the small, seemingly insignificant acts of their days.

Now that *Recycle Bin* is completed, I have set my sights on considering what the “P” in MAPW stands for – professional. I have begun plotting a “better-late-than-never” literary career, submitting individual stories for publication. One of them, “Baby Steps,” was published in the 2011 issue of Kennesaw State’s *The Red Clay Review*, and “Routine Matters” will be published in the December 2011 issue of *Weave* literary magazine. “Starry Night,” “Tear-Down,” “Call of the Wild,” and “Nosy” are currently under consideration by various publications, as are some of the poems I wrote in Dr. Ralph Wilson’s Spring 2011 class. I will be conducting a workshop on the short-short story at the Chattahoochee Valley Writers Conference in September of 2011. And I am working with several other MAPW students as a contributing editor on a new online literary review, *Flycatcher: A Journal of Native Imagination*.

I know, and have begun to sketch out, what I want to write next: more stories – a collection with the working title, *2 for 1 Special*. I envision this collection accompanying *Recycle Bin* in the same volume, a 2 for 1 special in itself.

Instead of having a recycle bin in each of these stories, I want to include some sort of 2 for 1 special in each: an obsessive shopper who goes through grocery stores searching for “Buy One, Get One Free” offers, a middle-aged

woman trying to re-engage her bored husband at a resort offering a free night for every paid night, a couple going through in vitro procedures and hoping to have twins, another woman struggling to recover from a double mastectomy.

I will be creating new characters for these stories, but they will be related to the characters in *Recycle Bin*. The collection will not take place in Country Cove Estates, rippling out instead into the larger world. And I will be abandoning the length limitations I set for the stories in *Recycle Bin*. My plan is to undertake the challenge of expansion – to see if I am capable of running a longer race.

And I'm excited. The Master of Arts in Professional Writing program has been my recycle bin, giving this housewife and mother the opportunity for a second chance as a writer. Through it I've found a way to take the quotidian fiber of my domestic life and make connections with bigger ideas and larger themes. Nonfiction writing has its charms, but in my book, fiction writing provides the chills and thrills. As I enter the last trimester of my life, I feel fortunate to be able to say I am entering it as a woman on a mission, a mission to imagine and write about the lives of others. It is a satisfying undertaking, one that often makes me feel as though I am lit from within. Not unlike Olive Kitteridge, I find myself experiencing "waves of gratitude" at the end of my run here at Kennesaw.

And that's *not* all she wrote.

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Author Biography

Kathleen Brewin Lewis grew up in Savannah, Georgia, and received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Wake Forest University. After working in Washington, DC, she moved to Atlanta to attend graduate school at Emory University, where she studied 20th Century American art and literature. For the last 22 years she has worked as a freelance writer and marketing consultant for nonprofit organizations while raising her two children, Ben and Rosalee.

In 2011 Kathleen received her Master of Arts in Professional Writing degree, with a concentration in creative writing, at Kennesaw State University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Weave* literary magazine, *The Prose-Poem Project*, *The Red Clay Review*, *Georgia Backroads* magazine, *Like the Dew* (an online journal of Southern culture and politics), and Bookideas.com. She is particularly interested in the short-short story, the prose poem, and the lyric essay.

Kathleen continues to write in Atlanta, where she lives with her husband, attorney Jeff Lewis.