

NOW

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NOW
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Cayce Gordy Van Horn

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a creative work comprised of two short stories preceded by a critical introduction. Both of the stories deal with difficult transitions in the lives of young women; details and images play an important role in portraying their struggles. The introduction is an exploration of how and why I write.

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TOWARD AN ENDING

I never drive alone to an unknown place without a map. In fact, I never drive to an unknown place without a map, two sets of directions, and a phone number to call in case I get lost, and I don't get into my car until I've logged onto weather.com and checked the hour-by-hour forecast to see if and when I might get caught driving in the rain—not because I would cancel my trip if it were going to rain, but so I would at least know rain was coming. I like to know what's coming. I like to have a reference point for every situation I encounter. I'm a direction-follower. This is why working intensively on my fiction thesis has been such a challenging, difficult, interesting, and rewarding experience—because good writing, true writing, isn't planned, and there are no concrete directions to follow or rules that can't be broken in order to achieve a more sincere truth.

I'm beginning to see now, after working on my thesis for a year, that that is what all writing has to get at in order to be effective—truth. In her book, *If You Want to Write*, Brenda Ueland says, “Everybody is original, if he tells the truth, if he speaks from himself. But it must be from his *true* self and not from the self he thinks he *should* be.” It sounds obvious, this search for truth, and I've heard all about it before, but I'm only starting to understand what it really means, and that I can never write truth on a page, and find truth in my characters, until I discover my personal truth, and learn to trust myself. And learning to trust myself, my instinct and intuition, and letting them guide me instead of forcing them to work toward whatever end result I have planned, is so much harder

than I ever thought it could be. Because of this, the process of writing my thesis, and even graduate school as a whole, has been more a process of personal growth than anything else—and not an easy one.

Not that I expected it to be easy. I'm not really sure what I expected when I applied to graduate school or what I wanted to get out of it. I knew I loved to read and write and I thought I might like to teach and I didn't really know what else to do after I finished my undergraduate studies, and since I had gotten used to going to school, I figured it couldn't hurt to go some more until I figured out what I wanted to "do." So I wrote a very detailed statement of purpose that made it sound as if I had a good plan—I'd gotten pretty good at making up good plans, since everyone wants to know what you want to "do" when they find out you are going to school—and I came to Auburn, a reasonable choice because it is only forty-five minutes away from my hometown.

When I registered for my first semester of graduate school classes, I decided to do something I had never done before—take a fiction writing class. As an undergraduate, my teachers had always encouraged me to try creative writing classes, but the classes offered were workshops—a word that implied far too much social interaction for me, especially involving something as private as my writing. I wanted to try it, though, and finally registered for a creative writing workshop the last semester of my senior year, but withdrew after the first day when the teacher vehemently insisted to our class of seven males and six females that there was no room for timidity in his class, that we would all share our writing with each other by reading out loud in class, that we would all criticize each others' work publicly, and that if any of us couldn't handle these things, we shouldn't come back. I didn't. But every time I thought about the class, I wondered if I'd

cheated myself out of a useful experience just because I was scared. When making the transition from undergraduate studies to graduate studies, I told myself that I had to try something new, and I signed up for the Fall 2003 fiction writing workshop. Again, I was worried about participating in a workshop-style class, but I didn't want to miss another opportunity to improve my writing skills.

When I walked into the first class, I was prepared to hear another "you will do this or you don't belong here" speech. I was prepared to lose participation points because I'm a quiet, private person, and I expected to be misunderstood because of that. I was so relieved when the class did not match my expectations at all. We were given inspirational quotes about writing. We watched a movie that showed us the importance of detail in setting and characters. I quickly saw that the class was about understanding that writing is hard, and that sharing it is hard, and that we would work through the difficulty of it all together. Our class was one of beautiful, patient women who offered support and constructive criticism, who were compassionate with emotional subjects, and who, most important of all, really listened to each other's stories. It was in this classroom that the first version of "Almost Home" appeared, and where I first learned to use concrete details to lead into the truth of a situation.

I learned the importance of detail through a writing exercise we were given in which we were supposed to think of a character in a particular place, doing something, and make it real. It sounds simple enough, but because it was so open, I felt paralyzed by all of the possible choices I could make—any character doing anything. I stressed over it for a few days, sitting at the computer during my designated writing time, "plugging in" different people doing different things, and not writing anything I felt connected to. I was

ready to give up and had decided the exercise wouldn't work for me, when one evening, after I had just made the one and a half hour round trip drive to my parents' house, I had a feeling—a kind of mixture of loneliness and tiredness and like I was missing something—that wouldn't allow me to concentrate on any readings or homework for other classes. I flipped open a notebook and started trying to put into words what I felt, thinking I might write a poem, and the first paragraph of “Almost Home” came out. I realized that without over thinking it, I had come up with a character doing something in a specific place, and it felt real to me. It was the first time I understood that, because I could not just write *Anna misses home* and have it convey any substantial meaning, I could put down all the things that mean home to her, and show the reader how important home is to her, and how painful it is for her to observe it changing. Showing the reader that Anna's old yard, which “her mother had always taken pride in mowing. . .into a quilted pattern of precisely formed squares” had become “overgrown from the afternoon rains,” and that “the newspaper rack [had been] moved from its old spot near the kitchen entrance into the living room beside the couch,” presents a more powerful image, and shows a deeper truth, than telling the reader that things are different than they used to be.

Once I started to understand how to use detail to show instead of tell, I felt as if I had some tools to work with, but I knew I had a long way to go to become a good writer, one who can let her story write itself. This is the part of writing that I struggled with the most throughout the thesis-writing process, and I still struggle with it now. As a student, I had always tried to plan and organize, make an outline, decide the logical order of my thoughts and list them in the appropriate categories in order to write a good academic paper. I am familiar with bulleted lists—I never write a research paper without dividing

all of my information into categories and subcategories and applying headings to map the document. When writing fiction, however, I learned that anytime I had a story in mind, a complete beginning, middle, and end, and I sat down to write it, the product was always dull and trite, and disappointing. I couldn't seem to get into the story everything it needed to work as I'd envisioned it. "You're too much in your own head," a classmate told me, and I knew she was right. I just didn't know how to get outside of it.

"Almost Home" was a challenging and interesting story to write, but it came to me more easily than "Now," the writing of which has taught me so much, not only about writing but about myself. I spent more time on "Now" than any other part of my thesis, and more than any other story or paper I have written. The first draft of the story and the draft that appears in my thesis are so different—the story transformed from a piece titled "Black Coffee" about a woman involved in a love affair into a story about Helen, who must learn to deal with the changes imposed upon her life when her husband is killed in a car accident. In the first draft, written in August 2005, the most visible truth was within the character of Helen herself, her thoughts and beliefs, and I had to learn to use those, along with the details I'd put in, to write her story. The story went through seventeen revisions, each of which I kept a copy of, some major, some that involved adjusting smaller parts so that the larger meaning could be revealed. I learned to delete chunks of the story that had taken days to put in; I learned not to get attached to any particular words or phrases, because there is almost always a better word, a clearer image, a more precise meaning. In relation to revision, Anton Chekhov said, "My own experience is that once a story has been written, one has to cross out the beginning and the end. It is there that we authors do most of our lying—one must ruthlessly suppress everything that is not

concerned with the subject.” I found it difficult to keep myself from lying, not intentionally, but covering up the truth of the story by filling in what I thought should happen.

Even though most of the story became increasingly clearer over the course of eight or nine revisions, it took the majority of the seven months I worked on this story to figure out the ending, with “my head” interfering most of the time. I had to learn how not to intellectualize the ending and instead to go back to the crucial moments of the story, the moments when Helen was contemplating her own truth, so I could find my way intuitively back into the story. I got closer, but the story never seemed quite finished; I never felt like anything had been resolved for Helen. I tried having Helen’s revelation about the coffee come in the end during a conversation with Rob. I wasn’t sure exactly how close Helen and Rob had been or should be. I didn’t know whether she should tell Rob about Brandon’s accident, or not. I tried all of these in different ways, and Judy helped me identify the places where I was “telling” too much, and the places where the story lost perspective, and the things that just weren’t working. “You’re putting the right things in,” she said, “you just haven’t figured out how to make them work.” The story kept changing. During this process, the title of the story changed from “Black Coffee” to “Coffee,” then to “Beams,” which I’d forgotten about until I sorted back through my stack of revisions, then again to “Proverbs,” then “Eleven Minutes,” and I kept trying to find my way to the end.

I kept feeling as if I couldn’t find the right words to express the truth of Helen’s story; I didn’t know how to show her struggle, to clarify her emotions though I had a sense of them, which caused me to struggle. I had a feeling about it, and I knew I wanted

to write it, but I couldn't get the words in the right order. This struggle with inexpressible feelings is a familiar for me as a person, as well as a writer. I had previously thought that writing was the only way to alleviate them. It is a kind of pain I get, like when I drive past a wide-open, browning field with two rusting barns on either end, or when I stand at the shore of the backwaters and stare across the brown water into a thick of moss-entangled pine trees on the opposite side, and I want to look long enough and closely enough to note every detail, each shadow and angle of light that make up the color of the scene, the way the air smells and the way the wind feels on my arms, because I want to be able to keep it, have it, and go back to it. It's the feeling I get after I read a good book or watch a good movie—the kind that stays with me for days and I find myself recalling characters and scenes when I'm driving or folding laundry. But in transforming powerful images like these into words, I have had to learn to be true to the scene itself; in “Almost Home,” for example, instead of telling the reader that to Anna, her mother's yard smells like home, I have to show that home smells like Alabama dirt and wetness and humidity, a swampy yard and a flooded septic tank. That, for Anna, is truth.

If detail leads to truth, then it makes sense that a concrete detail finally led to the conclusion of “Now.” Instead of telling the reader that Helen experiences a moment in which she realizes the impact of her husband's death upon her life, instead of adding in new details that complicate the story, I had to learn to, as Judy says, “shop in my own closet” by using a detail that already existed in the story to show the reader what Helen is feeling. I learned to make my own details, the ones that were already there, work harder—they got into the story intuitively as I was writing, and I had to trust them, and get rid of other, irrelevant details. In several revisions, I tried having the climax of the

story come in dialogue at the end, and it just wasn't working. In the final version, Helen stops before entering the barn and looks back at the car she and her husband bought together, and she is overwhelmed with feelings she has avoided during the first part of the story. It is the undeniable existence of the car that finally breaks into Helen's closed world, just as it was the concrete detail of the car that allows me, the writer, to get to the truth of the story, which is also the moment of truth for the character. Flannery O'Connor has pointed out that fiction's least common denominator is "the fact that it is concrete. . . the beginning of human knowledge is through the senses, and fiction writing begins where human perception begins." The truth of any emotion or realization is complicated, contradictory, illusory—the complexity of human nature causes distortion. Interestingly, it only occurs to me now how relevant a detail the car is, and how powerful it would be for Helen, and how true to her situation, because it was in a car that her husband died.

I am always surprised at how much of myself I find in my characters, in my stories. Georgia O'Keefe once said, "I find that I have painted my life—things happening in my life—without knowing." I never intentionally put any aspect of myself into a story, but because I want to tell the truth, and my truest knowledge comes from my own experience, parts of myself and my memories are infused in the details I write. I hadn't thought about it much, until a member of our fiction workshop, after reading one of my stories, asked, "How much of you is in that character?" And I had to admit that there was a lot. It seems strange to me, because I spent my childhood creating stories for myself in which I was anywhere but Alabama, and anyone but me, but now, it seems like every

story I write not only reflects parts of myself, but helps me get closer to my own truth; in writing my thesis, I have discovered the validity of the words of C. Day Lewis: “We do not write in order to be understood, we write in order to understand.”

For a long time, I thought that writing was only about creation and imagination. As a child, I was always told what a big imagination I had because I was always involved in an imaginary adventure surrounded by imaginary friends—which is one reason why, when I was older, I thought I would enjoy fiction writing. As William Faulkner said, “[T]here is nothing that can match the pleasure of creation,” and this took a very concrete form for me, growing up.

When I was eight years old, my brothers, then fourteen and fifteen, told me that I had several more brothers and sisters whom my parents kept in the attic of our house. They informed me that these less fortunate siblings hated me, because I got to live downstairs in my pink bedroom and eat fresh meals in the kitchen with my parents.

“How do they eat?” I asked.

“You know when Daddy brings in the ladder and climbs up through the crawlspace?”

I nodded.

“He gives them crackers and food scraps—whatever they can scrape off your plate when

you finish eating. You better stop eating so much or they’ll starve. He only feeds them a few times a year.”

I was terrified and would lie in my bed each night, wondering when the children in the attic were going to come down and take me up to live with them—or worse, get rid

of me so they could sleep in my bed. The smallest ones, I figured, could fit through the hole in the air conditioner vent if they unscrewed the metal piece from the inside. I began sleeping with my head under the covers and never shut my bedroom door.

I also elaborated on the story—I envisioned exactly what the children looked like, knew how many boys and girls there were and their ages. They were very pale, of course, from lack of sunlight, and they were skinny and could only see in the dark. One of them was a red-haired girl named Sally, who was my secret twin, and who didn't want to hurt me because we understood each other even though we had never met. I told the stories to any of my friends who came over; we would scare ourselves even in daylight and we would have to run outside into the backyard and up to the highest part of the hill in order to be "safe." I wrote about them in my "Special Writing" folder for school. I started leaving extra macaroni and cheese or chocolate pudding on my plate at dinner as a special treat for Sally.

I scared myself with these stories, in both a good and a bad way, until my mother read my journal. She was upset and didn't find my brothers' story entertaining at all. She decided that any bad dreams I had been having or any strange behavior I had been exhibiting must have been a direct result of the stories, and my brothers were punished (grounded for what my mother described as "an indefinite amount of time"). The worst punishment, however, ended up being mine. My parents explained to me that there was nothing in the attic at all, that when my dad brings the ladder inside, he is only changing out insulation and checking on the turbines on the roof. The attic, it turned out, wasn't even a real attic; it was hardly more than a crawlspace, and my dad couldn't even stand all the way up when he was inside.

They made me climb the ladder with my dad and look around as he held up a bright lantern. There was nothing there but wooden slats and yellow looking fluff. It was empty.

I cried and did not know how to explain myself.

Now, I understand that it takes more than creativity and a good imagination to write fiction. Those things are part of it, but once a good writer has a vision, she has to have the skill to bring it to life, to make it true for herself, for the characters, and for the reader. In order to do that, she must trust herself to put in the details that help create her vision, and let the details provide clues that write the story for her. A story writes itself when the writer has put in so many details about the character, place, and situation that the details of her own life recede, and there is nothing left but truth and vision—as William Carlos Williams said, “The story is in the details. The truth is in the details. No ideas but in things.” It was easier when I was younger, making up stories for myself, because I hadn’t yet been taught to always think ahead, to always know exactly where I was going. Sally could be my twin sister one day and my archenemy the next, and I didn’t have to explain it or have a reason. As I got older, and started feeling pressured to conform to the rules of others in order to make friends, have a boyfriend, get a summer job, I lost a lot of my ability to create freely; I joined the choir and drama club and always had something to practice or perform. Even when I was alone, I kept myself busy doing things other than writing, and by the time I was a junior in high school, the binders full of poetry and stories that I had written were boxed up and shoved far underneath my bed. I

was too busy being the person I thought I should be to explore who I really was. Buddhist academic Reginald Ray has written:

Most spaces we find ourselves in require us, without even realizing it, to narrow ourselves down and reduce our persons in order to ‘fit in.’ We sense the subtle expectations of our environment and we turn down the flame of our awareness, often until it is barely flickering at all. We are always intuiting others' expectations of who we should be and what we should see and not see, and we adapt—not just how we act, but more importantly what we permit ourselves to experience.

I kept myself busy doing all the right and normal things people do—I graduated, went to college, got a job, bought a car—without thinking much about what I wanted to do. It wasn't until I got to graduate school and was surrounded by other students who seemed so sure of themselves, who knew exactly what they wanted to get out of the experience, how to get it, and where it would lead them, that I started to question myself, and finally, to listen to myself. It has been hard for me to realize that I am different from many of my peers; I'm not sure what I will be doing in five years, or ten, or ever, because the plan that I have been following is not one that came from following the truth inside of me, it was one that I thought should work and imposed on myself, and desperately tried to make work. And the fault wasn't in the plan itself, because it could have worked for someone else. The problem with it was that it left out the truth about me.

When I'm writing fiction, I am closer to myself than any other time. It seems strange that I have to create a fictional world before I can find truth. There is something in the separation between myself and a character that allows me to get inside a feeling or

a situation that I would otherwise turn away from. And yet, I still haven't learned to let my stories write themselves completely; I'm getting closer, but it is hard for me to let some situations evolve on their own. I'm an emotional but not an expressive person; people often say to me, "I don't know how to read you." There are parts of myself that I don't let others see, that I'm not ready to see, to write, to share, and at times, that stops me sometimes from finding the truth. Because of this, it is sometimes hard for me to give my characters enough emotional release. I've learned that when I'm not honest with myself, it is hard to write honestly. Sometimes, when I can't figure out exactly what a character would do, I feel as if it is because I'm not totally sure of myself yet, and who I am, and what I want to be. But I'm getting closer to finding out.

The most important thing, though, that I've learned about truth in this process, is that what is true for me, and for my characters, at one point, may not be true in a later revision. Brenda Ueland wrote, ". . . remember always that the true self is never a fixed thing. . . do not try to be consistent, for what is true to you today may not be true at all tomorrow, because you see a better truth." I believe that fiction writing is always a search for the truth of the moment; that's what makes it special, and beautiful. It may be the only way there is to capture and keep an image, a feeling, an insight, that may otherwise only exist for a moment.

ALMOST HOME

Anna hesitated before she shifted to park and sat, car running, unwilling to turn the key and give up the relief that the blasting air conditioner provided from the sticky Friday evening August heat. Through the windshield she could see past the crepe myrtle and through the rusting fence as her headlights skimmed the yard. While Anna was growing up, her mother had always taken pride in mowing the lawn into a quilted pattern of precisely formed squares, but now, in the twilight, the car lights spread a strip of pale yellowness across grass overgrown from the afternoon rains, the soggy willow stump, the metal storage building that had almost disappeared beneath grasping vines of ivy. Without rolling down the windows she could smell it—the Alabama dirt and wetness and humidity, a swampy yard and a flooded septic tank. It was 23 years familiar, but even though she could make her way across the concrete path, up the cracking steps and through the house without consciously thinking about where she stepped, she never crossed the doorway anymore without slowing to close the door carefully behind her; she was always surprised to see the new curtains in the dining room and pictures hanging above the sewing table where they had never been before. A little less than a year ago she had still thought of this house as home, but each time she drove the fifty-five minutes from her new home in Echo to visit her mother, another small change—a bud vase on the coffee table, the newspaper rack moved from its old spot near the kitchen entrance into the living room beside the couch—reminded Anna that this place was no longer hers.

As she cut the engine, Anna watched the trail of light disappear from the yard, leaving the unkempt grass in dimness. She got out of the car and began to walk toward the door, running her hand along the wood siding of the house as she moved up the walkway. Chips of brown paint cracked and fell away, spotting the ground and sticking to her fingers. She paused at the end of the walk and brushed each speck of paint from her hands, one piece at a time, and wondered whether Garrett would be home by the time she left her mother's and traveled back to Echo. He was working with his uncle's construction company building several installments of a large chain hotel throughout cities in south Alabama; he was currently working four hours away in Union Crossing, too far to commute every day, so he only came home on the weekends. Anna stayed busy; she worked in a used book store five days a week and took night classes at a local college Monday through Thursday, but she hated every night that she spent alone in the tiny apartment she and Garrett had moved into after they got married last September. Every evening during the week, she distracted herself as long as she could with chores and homework; she washed and folded clothes into neat stacks and placed them carefully into drawers, she read classic British novels, she worked out algebra problems, and she always kept the TV on so she could hear people speaking to each other. She never fell asleep until after midnight, even though she had to get up early to open the store, and she often lay awake wondering if she had been ready to get married at all. Her mother had tried to convince her to wait another year, or two, at least until she was finished with school, but Anna had been restless, ready to change something about her life, and marrying Garrett had seemed like a reasonable thing to do.

Anna stopped picking at the paint on her hands and brushed them against her jeans. Before pulling back the screen door, she wriggled her thumbnail into a crack in the siding and peeled away a long strip of brown, wondering how it got so old so quickly. When she drove up she had seen the windows glowing and knew she would find her mother on the sofa, as she always seemed to be now, watching TV and wearing no makeup. Her hands and knees were always swollen; the rheumatoid arthritis and fibromyalgia that she had been diagnosed with seven years ago left her in pain most of the time, and when Anna had called earlier from the bookstore, her mother had told her that she hadn't even felt like cleaning up the house or going to the grocery store. Anna had stopped pricing books and said quietly into the phone, *If I was there, I would do those things for you.* She brought her hand to her face; it smelled like the stale mildew that had grown on and then faded from the pages of the old books she was constantly touching. *You have other things to do,* her mother had said, then a customer had come in and Anna had had to hang up.

As she turned the knob to go in, Anna opened her fingers to toss the paint onto the ground, then changed her mind and put it into her pocket as she stepped inside.

As soon as she opened the door, Taylor was scratching at her clothes, jumping and throwing himself against her legs. She knelt, talking softly to him, and rubbed behind his ears until he calmed down and rolled over onto his back so she could scratch his white stomach. The tan and white Jack Russell terrier was almost a year old now; Anna's mother had insisted on getting another dog immediately after Anna moved out,

taking her own dog with her. *I just can't sleep with both of you gone*, she had told Anna over the telephone two weeks after she moved to Echo, a couple of towns west. *It's bad enough without you.*

Anna stopped to pull open the refrigerator as she walked through the kitchen. A tin foil packet of leftover hamburger patties lay alone on the second shelf under a pitcher of sour tea, some cans of Diet Check cola, and a nearly full gallon of milk dated two days earlier. She let the door fall closed and leaned against it to seal it shut, careful not to leave fingerprints on the cool white metal.

The only movement in the house other than Taylor was the flicker of the television. First it glowed bright white, then gray, then white again in silvery flashes that lit up the living room and cast snatches of light down the hallway. In the dimness, Anna could hardly see the four doorways that led from the hallway into the bathroom and each of the three bedrooms that made up the tiny house on Bailey Drive—a house that had always seemed too small when she and her three brothers lived there, but later just right for Anna and her mother. Although it was filled with things her mother had collected over 53 years—the cherry table that had belonged to her grandmother, the wall tapestry Anna had brought home from a study trip to Europe, family portraits matted and framed in gilded gold and brass—it felt large and hollow. It was empty without being bare.

The last door on the left, though almost completely darkened by shadows, held the clearest view for Anna. All of her furniture was still there, but she and her husband Garrett planned to take it as soon as they could afford to buy a house of their own. In the corner was her old beanbag, blue and shaped like a star, where she used to sit and write and think and grow. But it was the bed that she missed the most; she and the double

mattress had shifted and molded to fit each other and 20 years of salt had soaked through sheets just below the headboard and was now embedded within the blue quilted pad. It hadn't occurred to her, really, that the night before the wedding would be the last night she slept in her bed, in her room, as herself. Always in a hurry to move forward, it usually didn't occur to her to consider things until after they were done.

Turning the corner into the living room she found her mother there, propped up against the far corner of the couch, small among the cushions and pillows. A *Seinfeld* rerun glowed at the front of the room, and the odd gray and white flickers of light shone across the framed pictures that covered the end tables: Anna in her wedding dress; she and her mother, the bride and matron of honor, together at the reception; less recent photos showed her brothers and their wives, aunts and uncles, and her nephew waving from inside his Power Wheel Jeep.

"You're hungry," her mother said when Anna stepped into the room, and she stretched her arm out from the blankets and reached out her hand. "There are some hamburger buns in the—"

"No, I'm fine, Mama. How are you?" Anna took the offered hand in her own and examined her mother's face, looking for the new wrinkle that she could always find beside an eye or beneath a corner of her mouth.

"Not too bad. Not too good, but I think the new drug is helping. See, I can almost close my left hand. It makes me feel so guilty, though, taking that chemo in the clinic with all those other people. They're a lot worse off than me; most of them would

gladly go there just to treat rheumatoid and fibromyalgia. It should make me feel like I can't complain . . . Now let me get you something to eat. I've got some chicken and rice in the freezer that won't take a second to—“”

Anna stopped her again, shaking her head and saying, “I'm not hungry.” Letting go of her mother's hand, Anna turned and sat down on the floor facing the recliner and pressed her back against the rough floral pattern. To the left of her spine, she could feel the prickling pressure of jagged edges where her own dog had satisfied the needs of his puppy teeth by gnawing the wire out of the rounded piping along the couch seams seven years ago.

“Okay, you're not hungry. So then what *are* you? You look tired.” Anna could feel her mother's eyes on her back as she asked the question. “Your hair is getting so long now.” She felt her mother's hand on the back of her head, the coldness of her fingers trailing lines down her scalp. It wasn't an uncomfortable kind of cold.

Anna swallowed without ease and looked up at the ceiling. “I'm fine,” she said, releasing as little breath with her words as possible.

They watched TV together, sometimes talking and sometimes not, almost laughing at Jerry, Elaine, and George but most of all at Kramer, and Anna kept looking at her watch, knowing she had a lot of things to do at home, but she did not rise to leave. Taylor came trotting in with his red ball in his mouth and rolled back and forth across the floor with it, nudging it with his nose then pouncing on it and rolling again. No one moved to get the ball, and after watching Taylor for a moment, her mother began talking.

“When I was first married, your father and I lived over on the north side of town, less than a mile from Georgia, in an apartment behind the grocery store your great-grandmother ran.”

“The Corner Store,” Anna said quietly.

“So you remember that.”

“Not the place but the name.”

“I’m surprised,” her mother said. “This was a long time before you were born. I used to stop by her store on my way home from working at the kindergarten and she would give me a bag of roasted peanuts or green plums to take home, and instead of saving them to share with your father, I would eat them myself while I was cooking.”

“Did you?” Anna said. The dog was under her feet now, holding the red ball between his paws and chewing on it sideways, but she wasn’t paying attention to him. She was listening more closely to her mother than she had in a long time.

“They were for me,” her mother said. “That was how I thought of it. From my grandmother to me, the way it always had been.”

“Well, that makes sense,” Anna said.

“In a way it does,” her mother said. “I just wasn’t an us yet. You know?”

The red ball had rolled between the couch and the end table and Anna picked it up, but instead of rolling it, she held it in her hand. “It’s just that there are these trains,” she said, speaking without really knowing why, and stared straight into the blackness of the windows. “The tracks are a mile away from our apartment and they come by every night, all night. I liked them at first—I mean, I said I did. I told Garrett that I liked them. But I don’t. I don’t, really.”

After a moment her mother nodded. “Well, trains . . . they have their purpose, too. Somebody somewhere needs something and sometimes a train can get it there.”

“They wake me up.”

Her mother looked down at her hands, rubbing the knuckles of one hand with the thumb of the other. “Sometimes when I wake up to a noise like that,” she said, “I don’t know where I am. It’s part of getting old, I guess.” She said this as if she meant it to be funny but forgot to laugh or even smile.

“They always let me know where I am,” Anna said. One comes by every morning at seven, after Garret has left for work, and I wake up alone.” The sound of that train rushing over the tracks seems to last and last. Sometimes I think it might not stop. I think it might keep stretching on, with one end where it started and the other end where it stops and the middle touching every place in between, until it’s stretched across two states.” Anna pulled off her glasses hard enough to hurt her ears and began using the bottom of her shirt to rub away the fresh spots. If she rubbed hard enough, she thought she could smear all the spots into one big dirty cloud that was clear enough to see through. Her mother’s hand was on her head again.

“Anna, trains don’t stretch” her mother said. “They start in one place with a job to do and they stop in a new place and get it done. Then they start over again—that’s what they *do*.”

Anna put her glasses back on. “I know,” she said quietly. “I know. But I like the thought of it.”

Her mother was rubbing one of her hands with the other again together again to ease the painful knots caused by the rheumatoid. She did not reply.

“I need to go now,” Anna said. But she did not move.

NOW

It happened at her sister's house, three weeks after her husband's funeral. She—Helen—was dropping off her son, Kyle, when Libba handed her a cup of coffee and Helen ended up crouched on the bathroom floor, breathing deeply to keep from vomiting, saying to her sister, "I'm not pregnant, if that's what you're thinking," and got up to rinse her mouth, then was on her way out the door before her sister could ask, "What is it, then?"

Helen worked at the Ramsay Public Library, on Mississippi Avenue across town, close to the Alabama state line. She was responsible for the Periodical Room, and though this was to be her first day back she was still going back to work too soon, according to Libba, according to their mother, according to everyone Helen talked to, really, all of them using words like 'the accident,' and 'the funeral,' and referring to Brandon as 'gone.' Everyone around Helen talked about Brandon's death without using any form of the word death, and she avoided those words, too, when she talked about it to other people. But when she was alone in bed at night she would whisper the words "Brandon. . . my husband, dead. . . widow. . . ," the last word leaving her feeling old, *older*, in a way that getting married or even having Kyle had not made her feel.

She was twenty-nine, and while the words didn't make her feel physically or even emotionally old in most ways, they made her feel as if she had been forced to grow into a larger part of herself than she was ready to command. Without Brandon, she could not

ignore herself as easily. She and Brandon had been married for seven years, and—though it was hard for her to admit now—she had not loved him for several years, and was beginning to realize, with even more difficulty, that maybe she had never been in love with him at all, she was used to him, used to keeping herself close inside the familiarity of Brandon-and-Helen.

This—all of this—was what she was thinking once she was outside her sister's house. Helen stood in the driveway beside her green Saturn sedan and faced the street for a second, looking at the yellowing leaves and gray bark of the red maples that lined the sidewalk. The Monday morning was overcast; the dull grayness and the thick mid-September humidity promised rain. As Helen opened her car door, Libba leaned partway out of the front door of her house and called toward the driveway, "I called the library. They said don't come in."

Pretending not to hear, Helen started the car and backed out of her sister's drive. But she had heard, and the idea of not going to work stayed with her as she headed down Lance Street. At the end of Libba's street was Ramsay Elementary, where Kyle would start school in two years, when he turned five. At the thought of him, Helen quickly glanced into the backseat at his navy blue car seat. His toy steering wheel with its blinking lights and yellow gear shift lay under the limp harness belt in the empty seat; when he was riding he liked to play-drive. He had been asleep on that last rainy Saturday in August—exactly three weeks and two days earlier—when Brandon lost control of the car going around the slippery exit ramp on the way to Helen's parents' house. Kyle had begun crying immediately at the jolt of the accident; he was shaken and scared in his car seat, but safe. Helen had ended up with only a sprained wrist and several bruises on her

right arm and on the skin covering her ribcage. But the driver's side of the car had slammed into a lightpost—and Brandon's head had smashed into his side window. Dead on impact, the paramedics had told her, but before that, immediately after the wreck, it was Kyle and not Brandon she was terrified of losing. "Please let Kyle be okay," she thought. "I can't live if he isn't all right." And he was all right. But when the paramedics told her Brandon was dead, the words didn't seem real, even though she had heard them. Dead on impact. Helen understood the meaning of the word dead; she knew it meant that Brandon would not be coming home with her that day, and he would not be in their bed that night, or any night again. Helen knew these things, but she did not feel like she could believe them.

Two Saturdays before the accident, on that same highway, Brandon had noticed the new lampposts that the city had lined along the highway median. "Look at that," Brandon had said, his mouth twisted down on one side. "What are they trying to do, look like a big city? Why can't they leave things plain and green?"

Helen replied without any commitment in her voice, "I think it looks nice."

Nice. In the hospital after the accident, she thought of that conversation. It had been such an insignificant moment, that exchange, Brandon complaining in his usual way about change, and she only paying enough attention to disagree. It was one of those everyday moments that she participated in without thought, when she could observe herself from outside of herself as if she were two people. She watched as the other Helen, the one everyone else knew, expressed discontent in a controlled, almost disinterested way. At such times, Helen knew that she was behaving just like her mother did toward her father—though Helen would never admit that to anyone but herself. She did not

really prefer the lightposts to the earlier lack of lightposts along the highway; she just wanted to feel the opposite of what Brandon felt, to say something out loud that made her different from him. “This is why,” she had wanted to say. “This is why people can’t just leave things alone.”

As Helen crossed Main Street, a few sprinkles of rain began to dot her windshield, but not enough to cause her to use her windshield wipers. She drove down Livingston Avenue slowly, looking at the white and yellow houses surrounded by sweet gum trees and indigo bushes and wax myrtles just beginning to show their grayish berries. As she drove, she passed Ramsay First Baptist, Brandon’s childhood church and the church where she and Brandon had gotten married. Helen read the weekly quote on the church message board as she passed: “As he thinketh in his heart, so is he.” –Proverbs. She thought about those words while she drove, but she couldn’t make clear the meaning of them. She felt as though the message did not hold any truth—what could her heart think without her head directing it? It did not make sense; the message was meant for people who did not believe they had control over their actions. Helen did not believe that her heart could bring about an action. Wasn’t everything that happened really a matter of timing and reason?

That was how she’d lived—directed by time and reason—since she graduated from college. It was how she had decided to marry Brandon—a practical choice. He was smart and neat and businesslike; he made lists and checkmarks and he accomplished goals. He didn’t have a lot of money, but at twenty-six he had gotten a job teaching at a community college, and he knew how to manage the money he earned. According to her

calculations, they would have a house of their own within months of their marriage.

Helen's calculations had been right—they had bought a three-bedroom house days after their five-month anniversary.

Helen was twenty-two when Brandon proposed, and even though most of her friends were still single, she was ready to be finished dating. She had had a passionate, uncertain relationship with a philosophy major during her first three years of college, a relationship that ended quickly and hurtfully, so that the relaxed comfort that she felt around Brandon was welcome and made her feel as if she would always know what was coming. So she said yes, and they married within three months. Helen hadn't wanted a long engagement; she had wanted to move forward, start something new. They had a small ceremony in Brandon's church. Helen was not nervous when she walked down the aisle; she was unmoved when she noticed Libba, her only bridesmaid, blotting her eyes before the tears could ruin her makeup. While the preacher read from Corinthians, Helen had planned which flowers she would plant in the front-yard flowerbeds of the house they had discussed buying. She liked morning glories and moonflowers; they seemed more alive to her than other flowers, opening themselves to allow the outside in for only the beginning or the end of the day, then shutting themselves away again until the next right time. She thought she would like to have them climbing her fence.

After the wedding, they had a short reception in the basement of the church and then they went back to Brandon's apartment; he thought a honeymoon would be frivolous compared to their using the money to help buy a permanent place to live. Until the day of Brandon's funeral, their wedding day was the last time Helen had been inside Ramsay

First Baptist, though she passed it often while driving, and once a month parked across the street from it when she paid her insurance bills at the agency located in a small office building directly across from the church.

Helen thought of her recent visits to the insurance company as she flipped on her blinker and sat at a stoplight, waiting to make a left turn onto Haywood. She had been efficient, businesslike with the funeral arrangements and the insurance forms. She had felt as though she were watching these events happen to someone else; the explanations she made to her son and the concern her family voiced to her surrounded her, but did not seem to break into her, inside of her. She felt as she had felt before when faced with death or sickness. When her grandparents died, and when her father suffered the heart attack that almost killed him, she knew that it was frightening; she could have said out loud that things would not be the same, and that her daily life would not include the same routines, but she could not feel it change her, just as now she did not feel empty, as she expected she should feel, as she suspected others thought she felt. Helen did not feel as though she'd lost any sense of herself when Brandon died; she still ironed clothes and dressed Kyle every morning, read books to him and cooked spaghetti on Thursday just as she had for years, even though there was one less person at the table. There was more space in the house, more quiet, but she was the same. If she wanted to, she could explain her complacency by saying she had to remain calm for Kyle, to convince him everything would be all right; however, Helen knew that her lack of emotion was not contrived. She could not think of a time when she had felt as if she needed Brandon to make herself whole.

As the number of trees and houses lessened and Helen came to the end of Haywood Avenue, the busy road that led to the library, she thought about how used to working she was, and how ready she was to sit in her desk chair behind stacks of library books so she could feel normal again. She slowed as she got to the library entrance, and when Sander's Coffee came into view, the coffee stand across from the library, Helen felt her stomach tighten. She looked at the steaming cup painted on the awning, and before she could push them away, there were the memories from the morning of the accident at the front of her thoughts, and she surprised herself by releasing the brake and driving past the library parking entrance. As the library passed into her rearview mirror she was unable not to think about the part she hadn't told anyone.

That Saturday morning she'd woken up a few minutes late and had gone straight to Kyle's room to help him get dressed instead of going into the kitchen to fix a pot of coffee. When they—Brandon, Kyle, and she—got into the car to leave, she asked Brandon to make a small detour on their way out of town so she could get a cup of coffee from the doughnut shop near the interstate. He'd argued—it would take them out of the way, it was a waste of time—but Helen had insisted. It had been such a colorless day, cloudy and dull, and she'd needed something to help her wake up. So they went, and she got her coffee; the whole detour only took about eleven minutes. Now, as Helen drove past the little downtown area, not sure yet where she was going, still focused on her own thoughts, she wondered how much eleven minutes really mattered. She knew that, logically, she hadn't caused the accident to happen—she did not control the rain that had

caused the car to hydroplane—but still, she had wanted coffee that particular morning, and they had driven eleven extra minutes to get it. Wasn't it possible that timing could be, in some situations, the only factor?

These thoughts made Helen feel unsure about what she knew and understood. She did know that she wasn't going to work now; instead, she drove over the railroad tracks and past the Ramsay city limits, taking County Road 14 into Center Star, the small neighboring town that was eleven miles outside of the Ramsay city limits. It was barely a town; the tiny post office was run by one old man inside an aluminum outdoor utility building that sat next to Center Star's only restaurant, the Bar-b-que Pit, whose sign stood beside a white metal pig painted with black spots. On the other side of the pig was a sign on which the words West's Antiques were printed in Old English style lettering. Beneath the letters, an arrow pointed down a dirt road. She had been here once before, nearly a year ago, to buy two vinyl topped barstools like the ones she and Libba had sat on during mealtimes while they were growing up. Helen didn't know why, but she felt drawn to the antique store now, like she needed to come to this place, as though she could uncover something about herself or her life in a stack of chairs or box of candleholders that other people no longer needed or wanted.

Helen turned onto the dirt road, and as she drove she thought of her parents. They were worried about her. Although their marriage had been problematic as long as Helen could remember, they had never had to live without each other, and they were afraid that Helen might fall apart without Brandon. Her mother wanted Helen and Kyle to move in with them for a while. "Just until you feel yourself," her mother insisted. "It won't be too far for you to drive for work, and it would be good for Kyle." But Helen did not want to

rearrange everything, did not want things to seem any more different than they already were. And she did not want to live with her parents; she had gotten married partly so that she could move away from them and her hometown of Greenville. She had chosen to move to Ramsay, forty miles east of Greenville, far enough to free herself from the constant dissatisfaction and disapproval that her mother felt towards her father and from the indifference with which her father suffered her mother's complaints. One night during Helen's second year of community college, when she was still living at home, Helen returned from an evening class to find her father's closet standing open, empty. "He's leaving," was the only thing her mother said. But he did not stay gone; a week later he was back, apologetic, and continued to settle back into his recliner and fall asleep watching TV every evening, just as he had before he left.

Libba, who had moved into an apartment the previous year, had been relieved, then angry, about his uneventful return. She'd come to visit one afternoon while their mother was out shopping and their father at work and had complained to Helen while Helen was studying for an anthropology test in the kitchen.

"Why doesn't she just divorce him? They're not happy," Libba said angrily.

"And then what?" Helen had said in return. "Then what would she do? Work at K-mart? Bag groceries? She hasn't had a job since before you were born. And I won't be here forever. She can't just end up alone."

"That's not a reason," Libba insisted. "Who says she has to end up alone? She could meet someone. She could get married again. Don't you think they could both be happier with other people?"

“They were probably happy, before, when they met. When they were young.”

“That doesn’t mean they can’t start over now.”

“What’s the point of that?” Helen had said. She had been impatient with Libba’s questions. She did not feel as though she needed to judge her parents’ relationship, or anyone else’s. She had noticed that people did hurtful things to each other in order to grasp what they felt was happiness, and that people endured pain when they were afraid of change. She decided it was best to be always on the outside, and observe the actions of others without getting involved in the drama they created for themselves.

Brandon had never understood Helen’s relationship with her parents, especially with her mother; he didn’t see how Helen could feel like separating herself from them, while at the same time being careful not to get too far away. She had been glad to leave Greenville, but equally glad that her mother was still in the next town, close enough for weekly, and sometimes more than weekly, visits. It was when Brandon began saying that Helen behaved just like her mother that Helen had stopped trying to talk to Brandon about her mother. There are worse things I could be, Helen had thought, but did not say. She told herself that Brandon did not have the patience for her talk about family because he did not have any family still living. His parents had died within two years of each other when he was in his late teens, and neither they nor he had had any brothers or sisters. Therefore, most of the people at Brandon’s funeral were members of her family, and a few colleagues and students that Brandon had been close to at the community college.

During the Baptist service Helen had shifted her eyes sideways to watch her parents beside her in the pew as the minister recited scripture. Brandon had been

religious, and though he had not attended church as an adult, he had become angry when Helen doubted his belief in God as the creator of all things. He had refused to listen to her explanation that she was more spiritual than religious; he said she lacked faith, and that spirituality did not exist without religion. As the minister had thanked God for taking Brandon quickly and without suffering into a better place, Helen had wondered how many people in the church believed his words, and how many told themselves they believed them because they couldn't deal with a less comforting truth. "It must be peaceful," Helen thought, "to really believe that the end is the beginning." But she did not envy the believers. She preferred to know what reality to expect so that she would not be disappointed by something unreal, in the end. Helen felt the same way about love; it was better to plan to love someone, she believed, to push yourself into a relationship, and tell yourself that the familiarity and dependency that formed as a result were as close to love as anyone ever really got. That way, you could always have control—you would not risk losing something that contained any real part of yourself.

These thoughts stayed with her as she drove down the dirt road and parked outside the old brown barn owned by Rob West, whom Helen knew a little from the library. He was a tall, dark-haired man—in his late thirties, Helen imagined, or early forties, who came by once or twice a week to use the computers with internet access. From her desk, she could see as he searched for antiques and held auctions on the web; that was how she'd found out about the barstools. She didn't know anything else about him, except that he didn't wear a wedding band—a detail she'd noted without realizing she'd noticed.

She cut the engine and stepped out of the car onto red dirt. The clouds were darker now; the morning hours seemed lost in the dimness and Helen knew rain would fall soon. A rusting old-fashioned stoplight leaned against the side of the barn near the open doors, along with some old gas station signs and a round tin Nutra-Feed sign that must have stood outside a farm supply store sometime in the past.

Today, Helen did not know what she might buy as she got out of her car and walked toward the barn. It wasn't like her, really; she was never impulsive, never acted without a clear purpose and desired outcome in mind. She shopped with lists—she didn't like to search. At least she hadn't until now, she thought, and as she walked from the sunlight toward the dimness of the barn that word *now* stayed with her, and she saw that her life was cut in two—the *then* of it behind her and the *now* of it here, in front of her, and she stopped walking and turned halfway back around and looked at the car, which she and Brandon had bought together—had talked about, had argued over which make and model to buy, and why, and what payments they could afford and what color would be easiest to keep clean and what features were most important to pay attention to.

“Safety,” Brandon had said, and suddenly now, remembering, Helen knew there was no getting away from it: the pain, and the unknown of the now, where nothing could be planned anymore because the unexpected—the what-could-happen as opposed to what-you'd-planned-would-happen—had intervened, and always might, and always could. She didn't move. She could hardly breathe. She couldn't think. Because how could you prepare for what you couldn't see coming?

It wasn't until rain began to fall, slowly for a moment, then increasing in steadiness, that she went into the barn, crossing her arms around herself.

The owner, Rob West, was kneeling on the floor, repairing linen upholstery on a cherry loveseat. “Can I help you?” he said, before recognizing her from the library. “How did you get away from work?” he asked then. “Is it a holiday or something?”

And she realized that he didn’t know, that he hadn’t been to the library lately or he hadn’t noticed she wasn’t there, and that if he’d read about the accident in the paper he hadn’t connected it to her. But the fact that he didn’t know yet didn’t make the truth less real.

“I just took the day off,” she told him.

“Well, maybe I could help you find something,” he said.

But she had no idea what she was looking for.