"LIVING NEAR THE SEA," THE START OF THE NEW SEASON," "SECOND CHILDHOOD" THREE SHORT STORIES ALONG WITH A CRITICAL AFTERWORD

by

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Living Near The Sea

Carlene and her three children were walking along the beach. It was a bright, cool morning in late June. Carlene was carrying a pile of towels and an old yellow blanket in her arms, a large canvas bag draped on her shoulder. The kids were a little ways ahead. The oldest child, nine-year old Margaret, was holding Matt, the two-year old, on her hip. Margaret was singing, jumping up and down, first on one foot and then on the other. Matt was leaning back and laughing, his hands making swift, sharp gestures in the air.

"My God," Carlene said. "Margaret, for God's sakes, be careful!" she yelled. She said this at least a dozen times a day.

Jimmy, Carlene's five-year old, turned around and said, "Hurry up!" He had a green plastic pail in his hand, plastic flip-flops on his feet. Every time he took a step, glittering clouds of sand rose up at his ankles.

Carlene took the kids to the beach almost every day in the summer. Being near the beach was the best thing about living in a town like Plymouth. Even on the gray, chilly days, she would bundle them up and head for the ocean. It was easier to be with them down here. At home they tore through the tiny house that she and Adam had found so charming when they bought it ten years ago. Now it really couldn't hold them all. Sometimes when she stood in the kitchen, bent over the stove cooking dinner, the noise seemed almost like a tangible thing that took up space. Even at night when the house was quiet and Adam was sleeping beside her, she sometimes felt crowded, unable to sleep. The world seemed to be shrinking all around her.

Inside the canvas bag on Carlene's shoulder, there was a letter from her friend Rosemary. Rosemary had married a man who worked for the government doing land surveys, and they moved to Wyoming two years ago. The night before Rosemary left, Carlene and Rosemary sat for hours in Bert's, the restaurant near the beach. They sat in the bar and drank, promising that nothing could threaten their friendship, which had been set in motion way back in fifth grade. Carlene missed Rosemary in a quiet, constant way. They tried to keep in touch, but it was difficult. Even though they wrote regularly, it was beginning to worry Carlene that the past was the only thing holding them together.

In her letters Rosemary often sent photographs. And while it was comforting to see the smiling face of her friend, these photographs only increased Carlene's sense of distance from Rosemary. These pictures usually showed Rosemary standing in front of a remarkable scene of some kind — mountain ranges, canyons, or vast golden spaces of emptiness that stretched to the horizon. In all these photographs Rosemary smiled steadily at the camera. Carlene always imagined her turning and striding off into whatever magnificent vista beckoned as soon as the picture was taken.

At home on her dresser Carlene had a picture of herself and Rosemary that had been taken years ago when they were still in high school. They were skinny and unconcerned, standing close together, shoulder to shoulder. They were hamming it up for the camera. Their hands were deep in the pockets of their cotton shorts. They were leaning forward, lit by a mysterious brightness, a belief in something. There was a playfulness in the arrogant stance they struck before the camera that made them look vulnerable to Carlene now.

Carlene no longer had any close friends. There were people she knew and liked. People who came for dinner or sometimes spent the weekend here on the beach. She had friends to talk with about the kids or the shock of last winter's utility bills. There were clear, unspoken boundaries built into all her contacts with people now. One summer when Carlene was a child a hurricane had ripped along the coast and left the beach utterly changed. The same elements were there: the sand, the water, the sky, but the shape of that world was forever altered. All the old, familiar angles were gone. Carlene was experiencing the same kind of disorientation now that she had felt then. Nothing had prepared her for the emptiness of adulthood. It had sneaked up on her until she saw that life was a constant, almost imperceptible, process of loss.

Years ago, when this realization first came to her, Carlene asked Adam if he felt this, too. But if he did, he pretended not to understand. "We have friends," he said. He meant his friends at work, his colleagues. Adam was an engineer at a large Boston firm. Carlene and Adam socialized regularly with the people he worked with, but these social gatherings made her nervous. For some reason when she was with people now, it always seemed like so much work to think of things to say, to smile. And it wasn't just with these people that Carlene had trouble connecting, feeling a part of things. The disturbing thing was that she felt this with Adam, too. They seemed to have accomplished everything they had set out to do, but they forgot to continue making plans along the way. It was as if they had suddenly found themselves on a quiet, desolate plain. Neither of them had any idea where to go from here.

When Carlene and Adam first met they were both working at the Plimoth Plantation, a historical reproduction of the original settlement. It was Carlene's first summer after high school. Adam was a sophomore at Boston University. Carlene's job was to lead tourists through the reconstructions. It was all very authentic. She really felt as if she were in another world there. Her job required that she be dressed in typical Puritan clothing. Carlene loved sweeping through the village in her long linen skirt, stopping to have her picture taken by visitors. The only thing that she disliked about the job was how heavy and hot the clothes felt on the really warm days.

That summer Adam was helping to build a stockade like the one that had surrounded the original colony. Every weekend there were parties at the beach house where Adam and some of the other employees lived during the summer. It was a dilapidated, neglected house. Everything in it seemed to be slightly tilted; it was literally falling down. This was where Carlene first met Adam. They started spending all their free time together. On her lunch break Carlene would walk over to where he was working on the stockade. At the time he had long, light hair that brushed the tops of his shoulders. They would sit on the grass near the stockade, Carlene in her dark cotton skirts and Adam in his faded jeans and no shirt, eating lunch in the sun. A few weeks after she met him, Carlene moved into the beach house.

They got married that fall. Carlene continued to work at the Plantation while Adam went to school. During Adam's last year of school, when they were really struggling financially, they were able to live in one of the reconstructed houses during the months the Plantation was closed, from

December to April. That was the winter when Margaret was conceived. They lived in Governor Bradford's one room house. Carlene and Adam felt like pioneers that winter. At night they sometimes walked down to the beach, the snow crunching under their feet as they traveled down the quiet, empty street. And although Carlene knew it was all made up, it was just an imitation of a world that was past — it felt very real to her then.

When Carlene took her kids to the beach, they always headed for the same spot. Margaret and Matt were standing there now, waiting for her to catch up. Jimmy was running toward the water. As Carlene approached, Margaret began to swing Matt around in little circles. Carlene was about to call out and tell her to be careful, but she stopped herself because it was so obvious that Matt was enjoying himself. Margaret had on a peach-colored sundress over her suit, and its skirt fanned out like a scallop shell around her knees. Carlene was proud of her daughter's beauty. Carlene and Margaret looked a lot alike. They had the same green eyes, the same dark hair. Carlene wore her hair in a thick, straight braid that hung down her back. Margaret's was loose on her shoulders and pinned back at the sides with two pink plastic barrettes. When Carlene watched her children at a distance like this, she always felt guilty for being so impatient, so frustrated with them so much of the time.

Carlene tried to spread out the blanket, but the breeze was too strong. The blanket waved crazily in the air like some kind of signal. Margaret grabbed the free end and they finally settled it on the sand. Carlene lay there on the blanket while Margaret, Jimmy, and even Matt ran around collecting stones to hold down the corners. Carlene was thinking about

the argument she and Adam had this morning. They had this particular argument all the time lately. He thought that they should move closer to the city. He hated commuting; the traffic was impossible. It took him over an hour to get into Boston every morning. Also, they often had to go into the city during the evening. Tonight, for instance. They were going to the symphony with another couple. Carlene knew that it was only a matter of time before they found themselves living in an over-developed suburb on the outskirts of Boston.

Later Carlene sat on the edge of the blanket, her toes digging into the rough, warm sand. She watched some sandpipers running in circles nearby. The looked funny. They were so nervous and alert. Every once in a while they lifted their wings and Carlene expected them to wheel across the beach. But for some reason their wings would waver and then fold back in close to their sides. The kids were busy in the sand a few feet away from where Carlene was sitting. Matt stopped playing and stared at the birds. He started walking towards them slowly, trying to take them by surprise. At first the birds inched their way across the sand, but when he got too close they took flight.

"I made them fly!" Matt said.

The astonishment in his voice made Carlene laugh. She looked up at the black and white wings scissoring their way into the sky. They were so comical on the ground and yet so graceful in the air.

Jimmy was filling up dixie cups with wet sand and turning them upside down. Each time he lifted the cup and there was a perfect sand tower underneath, he called proudly to Carlene. The sun was very bright; delicate gold streaks shone in Jimmy's short, dark hair. The dixie cup towers

were everywhere.

"Great!" Carlene called back in an absent-minded, distracted way each time he called to her. She was waiting for someone. A week ago she had met a man and his daughter on the beach. The first time she saw him, she had been down at the edge of the ocean with Matt and Jimmy. Margaret was on a little raft out in the distance, riding over the waves. Carlene was sitting in the shallow water with Matt on her lap. Jimmy was standing out a little deeper. Each time a new wave crested, Jimmy would pretend to try and escape it, but at the last moment he would collapse, disappearing into the creamy foam. Carlene and Matt would cheer each time Jimmy reappeared.

While she was sitting there, Carlene had noticed a man and a young girl of about seven playing in the water nearby. The man had a large, smooth rock in his hand. He would throw it high into the air, and when it dropped into the sea his daughter searched for it. Carlene noticed how patiently he skimmed his fingers over the surface as his daughter searched below. His face had a soft, sleepy expression that appealed to Carlene. He was standing waist-deep in the water. Each time his daughter emerged from the waves he gave her a slow, lazy smile and tossed the rock into the air.

That day Carlene had watched them leave the water and head up the beach. She noticed where they sat, and the next day she set up her own blanket in that spot, hoping that he would come back. She assumed that he was a tourist. Most of the people who lived here year-round were familiar to Carlene. Also, there were almost no men on this beach on a weekday. So when a stranger showed up, especially a man, chances were that he was renting one of the cottages along the sea wall.

Most of the time he simply sat in a green and orange beach chair, reading magazines and smoking cigarette after cigarette. At first Carlene expected a wife to appear, but after a few days she assumed that he and his daughter were here alone. Carlene positioned herself so that she could watch him. There was no real purpose to this. She didn't expect anything, but he interested her. After a while she began hoping that he would notice her. Because she knew he was a tourist, she began to worry that each day might be his last. He could vanish at any moment.

She wondered about him. She wondered who he was and why he was alone. Sometimes when his daughter was playing in the surf, Carlene could hear her call to him. "Dave!" Carlene would hear her yell. Then he'd get up and walk down to the water. He usually wore a pair of maroon running shorts. Carlene watched him walk toward the ocean. He was tall and had a long, slender back. She enjoyed watching him. When he got to the water he didn't hesitate; he was one of those people who jumped right in. He didn't stand there getting used to it, splashing water on his shoulders the way Carlene did.

Gradually his daughter, whose name was Nina, had begun to play with Margaret. Carlene noticed how naturally this happened, how unselfconscious her daughter was about including someone else in her private world. She envied Margaret this privilege, the right to approach strangers who interested her. The day after Nina and Margaret began playing together Carlene spoke to Dave for the first time. She had been down at the water trying to rinse the sand out of Matt's suit. Matt was sitting on the sand, naked, screaming. Carlene was swishing the gritty suit in the water.

"Is something wrong?" she heard someone ask.

Even before Carlene looked up she knew it was him. He stood next to her, his dark, curly hair slicked back from his face, tiny beads of water and sand glistening on his shoulders. He had very deep-set eyes the color of pewter. She didn't say anything.

"Do you need some help?" he asked, looking in Matt's direction.

"He's all right," Carlene said. "His brother buried him in the sand and he's finding the consequences hard to live with." She smiled at him, unsure of what to say next. But then they both looked at Matt and laughed. Dave picked Matt up and carried him back to where Carlene was standing. He dipped Matt gently into the water to clean off the sand and then held him while Carlene put his suit back on. Dave handed Matt back to Carlene, and they stood there silently for a second, the waves uncurling at their knees.

"This has been great for Nina," he said. "I think that she finds Margaret much more interesting than me."

"Most of Margaret's friends are away right now, so it's good for her, too," Carlene said. Matt began to squirm so Carlene put him down. He began to run up the beach toward the blanket. He ran, taking short, uneven steps, high up on his toes. The both laughed again.

"I could watch him if you want to swim," Dave said.

"Oh, thanks. I don't think so," Carlene said. It was hard not to keep looking at him. She thought he was very attractive. Up close like this, she was able to see things about him that she had been unaware of before. At a distance she had estimated him to be about her own age, thirty-one or so. But now, seeing him so clearly, she thought he might be a little older than that. He had fine, deep lines around his eyes and a tiny scar

shaped like a half-moon in the center of his right cheek.

"I don't mind," he said, staring directly into her eyes. "I'd like to." He turned around and followed Matt up the beach.

Carlene stood there, watching him chase after her son, her heart hammering crazily in her chest. He took long, loping strides across the sand towards Matt. Carlene cupped some water in her hands and splashed it on her chest. It felt cold as it slid down her blue bathing suit. She looked up and saw Dave walking with Matt on his shoulders towards Jimmy. Margaret and Nina were lying on the blanket. Carlene turned and faced the ocean. She could see a little sail out on the horizon, and although she knew that it must be moving, it seemed frozen there. She dove into the water, came up, and floated on her back, slipping effortlessly over the waves. She skimmed across the water, aimless, drifting wherever it carried her.

After that day they began sitting together on the beach. Dave and Nina were always there in the mornings, but sometimes in the afternoons he took Nina on day trips. They had been to Boston, to Provincetown. When he found out that Carlene had worked at the Plimoth Plantation, he asked her to give them a guided tour. So on one afternoon they all walked over. Carlene pushed Matt in the stroller. Dave carried Jimmy on his shoulders when he complained about being tired. She showed him where she had worked. They all went inside the Bradford house and Carlene told them how she and Adam had lived there one winter.

"I was born here," Margaret said to Nina.

"No, Margaret. You weren't actually born here," Carlene said.

"That's what you and Daddy said," Margaret insisted.

"No. We said that you were, well. . .that this is where I got pregnant,"Carlene said. She could feel herself blushing as they all stared at her. Dave smiled at her and then looked over at the bed in the corner of the room.

"Whatever," Margaret said as she turned and walked out.

Dave never said too much about himself. Carlene knew that he lived in Michigan and was here for two weeks. He never said anything about his ex-wife, but it sounded to Carlene as if he had been divorced for years. Once he explained his job to Carlene, but she didn't really understand what he did. He worked for a company that sold home-owners insurance or something like that. He wasn't a salesman. He told Carlene that he gave some kind of seminars for the people who did the actual selling. The truth was, she didn't care about his job. In fact, she preferred not to think about the world outside the beach, either her world or his, when she was with him.

He was late today, and Carlene kept looking in the direction he usually came from. She found it disturbing that she was counting on his arrival. There was something very adolescent about the whole thing that embarrassed her. She took Rosemary's letter out of the canvas bag and opened it. There was no photograph, but Carlene still pictured her searching for adventure somewhere on the western slopes. She thought about writing to Rosemary and telling her about this. Rosemary would probably enjoy it. This is the kind of thing they used to share in the old days. But almost as soon as the thought occurred to her, Carlene dismissed it. She knew that she would not tell Rosemary or anyone else. Nothing had happened, and nothing would happen.

When Carlene looked back she saw them approaching, walking along

the sea wall in their bare feet. Nina was in front taking quick, light steps. Dave was walking carefully behind her, his arms out to the sides. He held his shoes by the lacings, one in each hand. Like tight-rope walkers, Carlene thought. That's what they reminded her of, cautious and confident at the same time.

Dave sat down on his beach chair next to Carlene. As soon as he sat down, Matt crawled up on his lap. For the first time Carlene realized that people passing by would assume that they were a family. For a moment she felt vaguely guilty. She had mentioned Dave and Nina to Adam in a casual remark or two, emphasizing how well Nina and Margaret played together. Actually, despite this morning's argument, she and Adam had been getting along better during the past week. She reminded herself that she hadn't done anything to hurt him, but as she looked at Matt snuggled against Dave's chest, a wave of guilt began to engulf her.

Carlene leaned back on her elbows and watched the kids, trying to forget about Adam for now. Margaret, Jimmy, and Nina were playing water tag. They looked clumsy trying to run in the deep water. Suddenly, Carlene felt exhausted. She lay back on the blanket and closed her eyes, her arms lying straight by her sides. After a while she felt Dave stroke her shoulder. He picked up her hand, but she held still and kept her eyes closed. He turned her palm up and began to run his own fingers carefully over it. She had imagined him touching her many times, but now the intensity of it hurt.

Carlene opened her eyes and lifted her hand out of his as she sat up. Matt was playing with Dave's Sports Illustrated.

"He'll wreck that," Carlene said, just as Matt crunched a page in his fist.

"I don't care," Dave said. "It's okay."

"So," he said, "when you live near the sea where do you go when it's time for a vacation?"

"We stay here," Carlene said.

Dave took out a cigarette and lit it. He smoked quietly for a while, flicking the ashes methodically in the sand. Carlene felt a dull pressure in her head, as if she were under water.

"We're leaving the day after tomorrow," he said.

Carlene thought about what this meant, how temporary they both were in each other's lives. "We'll miss you," she said.

Dave was stroking Matt's back. "You're lucky," he said.

"Why is that?" Carlene asked, watching his hand move in small, slow circles on her son's back.

"You've got a great life. A genuine happy family, right?" There was an element of sarcasm in his voice that made Carlene nervous. She knew this was an invitation, an opportunity that would soon be gone.

"You are a happy family, aren't you?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," she said, pretending to be distracted by Matt, who was crawling over her legs now. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"You and your husband. What's his name?"

"Adam," she said, taking a cracker out of her bag and giving it to Matt.

"Well, are you and Adam happily married, as they say?" He wasn't looking at her. He was staring out at the ocean. Carlene watched his face. She could see a small muscle twitching slightly near his eye.

She thought of telling him that happiness had nothing to do with it.

How once she had been content, but now there was always something dark in the background, a restlessness and desire she was ashamed of. She thought of telling him that her life was out of her control; she felt surrounded on all sides. "Most of the time," she said finally.

Carlene invited Dave and Nina to come home with them for lunch. Carlene's house was an untidy, weather-beaten cottage that had been winterized years ago when people leaving the city began looking for other places to live. It seemed unfair to Carlene that this place she and Adam had chosen because of its distance from the city had turned out to be too far away.

When they arrived at the house, Carlene began to babble about its condition, about the changes they hoped to make. She didn't mention the fact that Adam wanted to move. Down at the beach, inviting them back for lunch had seemed like a good idea; now she felt uncomfortable. She felt exposed, selfconsicous standing there in her bathing suit. There was a mason jar on the window sill filled with campion and silkgrass that Margaret had picked on the way home from the beach the other day, and Carlene stared at it while Dave looked around the room.

"This place is great," he said, smiling at her.

"Thanks. Here, sit down," she said, pointing toward an old wicker chair covered with shiny chintz cushions. "I'll be right back."

When she walked into the kitchen she remembered that she hadn't done the breakfast dishes yet. The sink was full of cereal bowls and dirty glasses. The floor was covered with Jimmy's matchbox cars. Margaret had taken Nina up to her room. Carlene could hear them laughing and jumping above her head. Margaret had turned her radio on. Carlene picked

up Matt and put him in his chair. He had one of Jimmy's cars in his hand and immediately started to bang it against his tray. Jimmy stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the sunporch, staring at Carlene. The phone began to ring.

"Hello," Carlene said.

"Hi!" It was Adam. "Did you get a sitter for tonight?" he asked.

"I'm trying," Carlene said. She had forgotten all about the symphony.

"We need to leave the house by seven o'clock at the latest."

"Okay. Don't worry. I'll have everything under control."

"You were late," Adam said. "You're usually back from the beach by twelve." Carlene looked at the clock. It was after one.

"It was nice down there today," Carlene said. "The kids were really enjoying themselves."

"Well, I guess that's all I called for, to remind you about tonight. Did we get any interesting mail?"

"A letter from Rosemary. I haven't had a chance to read it yet."

"You could try that high school kid that babysat a few weeks ago. Did you try her?"

"I'll take care of it," Carlene said. "Don't worry."

When she got off the phone Jimmy started to fuss. "I'm hungry," he said. "I want a sandwich."

"Don't whine, Jimmy," Carlene said. She picked up a pile of Adam's dress shirts that she had dumped on the floor to be washed. She opened the lid of the washer and threw them in to get them out of the way for now.

"I want lunch," Jimmy said accusingly. "I'm hungry."

Carlene walked over to the refrigerator. She opened it and took out a package of cheese. "Here," Carlene said, handing a slice to Jimmy. "Go play while I fix you something." She watched him walk into the living room and turn on the television. When she turned around Dave was standing in the doorway, leaning against the woodwork.

"Sometimes," Carlene said, "sometimes I get so tired of this."

He stared at her and didn't say anything. She stood there in her bathing suit. Her heart began to beat with a heavy, dull regularity, pounding against her chest.

"I'm sorry," Carlene said. "I've asked you to lunch and this place is a mess and there's nothing here." She turned and opened the cabinet, staring at cereal boxes and a grimy peanut butter jar, almost panic-stricken.

"I have a can of tuna fish," she said. She took it out of the cabinet and for some ridiculous reason showed it to him.

"Come over here," he said. "Come here for a minute." He looked very calm, leaning against the wall in his maroon shorts and gray T shirt.

Carlene stood very still in the center of the kitchen. She looked over at Matt playing happily in his chair and put a piece of cheese on his tray. Then she began to walk across the room. She was conscious of each step.

"How did you get that?" she asked, touching the small scar on his face, the one she had noticed that first time they spoke on the beach. When the tip of her finger touched his skin she felt a sudden fluttering in her stomach.

"I stuck my head through a broken window when I was a kid," he said. "A piece of glass caught me."

He leaned over and began to kiss her on the neck and shoulders. He kissed her tentatively, his lips brushing delicately across her skin. Far off, Carlene could hear the music upstairs, the television droning in the distance, the baby playing in his chair. Dave pressed his face into the hollow of her neck and stood there, motionless. There were hours before Adam would be home. Margaret and Nina were singing along with the radio; any minute now Matt or Jimmy might begin to complain.

She began to kiss him back lightly on the mouth, keeping her eyes open, anticipating an interruption. Each time she tried to close her eyes she thought she heard something, the kids running down the stairs or someone calling her. But there was no one there. She imagined the front door opening and Adam walking in. Dave was saying something to her in a low voice, but she couldn't really understand him. Carlene could feel the breath of his voice against her ear; she could hear the kids dancing and playing overhead. Matt was beginning to fuss slightly. She lifted her face and Dave started to kiss her deeply on the mouth. And for a moment, she allowed herself to be submerged in a distant, secret place, unknown to him or anyone, free as a woman in a dream, a dream in which anything might happen.

The Start of the New Season

Janice and her husband Sam are driving to her mother's house in Dennis on Cape Cod. Janice's eighteen year old brother Frank is lying across the back seat of the Honda, his knees bent, his bare feet braced against the glass of the window. The radio is playing, and the windows in the front are down. It's April. Sam is singing along with the radio in a loud, tuneless, happy way. Frank taps his feet against the glass and tries to sing along with Sam, but he really doesn't know the song. Sam has found a station that's featuring a Beach Boys revival. "California Girls" fills the car. Sam knows all the words. He leans toward Janice as he sings, smiling.

As they drive along Route 3 through Plymouth, Janice begins to look for signs of the bridge. When she was a kid, crossing the bridge was the highpoint of the trip. It meant you were there, on the Cape. When she was a kid and her family made this trip, her father always gave a quarter to the first person who spotted it. As she stares into the distance, anticipating the silver gleam of steel, Janice begins to feel slightly sick. It's not bad yet, just a slow, suspicious heaviness in her stomach. She's two months pregnant and driving makes her nauseous. She closes her eyes and tries to concentrate on not throwing up, but it's difficult because Sam keeps nudging her, trying to make her join in.

Janice leans back in her seat and puts her hands on her knees. "You'll be nice, won't you?" she asks. Everyone knows that she's talking to Frank. "You won't upset Mom?"

"I'm always nice," Frank says.

"Are these guys great or what?" Sam asks, turning up the radio.

Frank pulls up into a sitting position in the middle of the back seat, leans forward and says, "These guys are fantastic." His thin, angular face is just inches away from Janice's own. She opens her eyes and notices the pale gold freckles on his cheeks and nose. She looks out the window and sees the silvery shadow of the bridge. Janice waits for Frank to see it and call out "Bingo," the way they always did when they were kids, but no one says anything.

Sam puts his hand on Janice's thigh. Her head is aching because the sun has been shining so relentlessly. It doesn't help that Sam has said (at least three times), "If you'd get a pair of sunglasses, you wouldn't have this problem."

Janice looks over at Sam. He stares ahead at the road, inscrutable in his own sunglasses. Sam is an actor and belongs to a small repertory company in Boston. He also works three nights a week as a disc jockey at an all-night bar in the city. Janice used to go to the bar at least one night a week to listen to him. She'd sit at a small table near the booth where Sam worked. But after Janice got pregnant, she suddenly felt too tired to go there anymore. Janice works five days a week as a claims adjustor at an insurance company in Kenmore Square, and now all she really wants to do at the end of the day is sleep. Sam has been very understanding. When she stopped coming, he didn't seem to mind. It's just a job to him. Still, it bothers Janice that her presence there made so little difference to him.

Last week someone left a pair of sunglasses on a table near the bar, and Sam wore them home as a joke. He's been wearing them off and on ever since. As she looks over at him, Janice suddenly realizes that she

hates those glasses. The square lenses are tiny mirrors. Whenever Sam turns toward her, and Janice looks at him expecting his wide brown eyes, she sees her own anxious face instead.

The roads they're traveling on are muddy because it's so warm; there are puddles everywhere. The windshield is covered with swirls of dirt. Sam turns on the windshield wipers, but it only makes things worse. "Damn," he says calmly. His calmness in the face of all obstacles, large or small, was one of the reasons Janice fell in love with him. Now, for some reason it irritates her to see him sitting there so carefree, so unconcerned. She looks down at Sam's hand resting on her thigh. His fingers are tapping lightly on her leg in time to the music. It's annoying, but still she feels an affectionate impulse to cover his hand with her own. Janice resists this urge and presses her eyes shut tight.

They have been driving on sandy back roads for almost forty minutes. The blue disc of the ocean shimmers behind boarded-up gift shops and cottages, and then it disappears as the road becomes enclosed by birch and pine woods. The hot, strong smell of pine and ocean, a smell Janice has always loved, intensifies her feeling of nausea. She tries to breathe carefully, taking in slow, shallow sips of air.

Frank rolls down his window and sticks his head out. "Wasn't that the turn?" he asks.

Sam slows the car down and asks, "Did I miss the turn?" He stops the car and looks back. "Was that the one? I can't remember," he says, pushing the sunglasses against his nose.

Janice thinks that this is pathetic. They've been to her mother's house dozens of times, but he can never remember. He has no sense of

direction.

"You look awful in those things," Janice says.

"What do you mean?" Sam asks, examining his face in the rear view mirror.

"Why do you keep wearing them?" she asks.

"Protection," Sam says. "To cut down on the glare."

"I hate them," Janice says. "I can't even see you."

"I'm still here, " Sam says, pushing the glasses up on top of his head and sitting back in his seat. "I'm not kidding," he says. "I don't know where we are."

When they arrive at the cottage, it's ten o'clock in the morning. As Janice starts up the thin trail that leads to the house she feels comforted by the profound familiarity of the place. It's like one of those deja vu experiences where suddenly a lost, hidden world breaks through and asserts itself. Janice turns and looks back toward the car just in time to see Frank sprint off down the path toward the beach. She calls his name, but either he doesn't hear her or pretends not to. He disappears.

Janice can see Sam, who is peering into the trunk of the Honda, trying to decide what to lug up to the house on the first trip. She always enjoys watching him. Even now, after four years of marriage and despite the fact that she's irritated with him, just the sight of him doing something ordinary like emptying the car can create a genuine longing in her. Sam picks up a green duffel bag and one of the suitcases, and then he carefully swings the door shut with his foot. He has a natural grace that Janice

has always admired. Slowly he walks toward her, puts down the suitcase and squeezes her wrist. Janice is holding a bag of groceries in her arms.

"Why did you bring all this stuff?" Sam asks. "You know they'll have enough here to feed the entire state for a week."

"I have to bring something. It's like a sign. Food and love are connected."

"You'll have to demonstrate that for me later," Sam says. He lifts Janice's hair up off her shoulders with his free hand, twists it into a coil and holds it above her head for a second.

"It won't be too bad," Janice says.

"I'm not worried," Sam says, patting Janice's stomach.

"I'm talking about the visit," Janice says, looking down at Sam's hand.

"I know," Sam says. "So am I."

Helen and Richie are at the top of the hill in front of the house, waiting for them. Helen is Janice's mother, and Richie is the man she plans to marry tomorrow. It's still early, but Richie already seems a little drunk. Janice has mentioned this tendency of his to her mother before. The last time, Helen got angry and told Janice to mind her own business, so now Janice keeps quiet.

"Well, look who's here," Richie hollers, even though by now they're all within inches of each other. "Hey, how are you, buddy?" he asks, shaking Sam's hand and simultaneously encircling Janice's shoulders with his other arm. "You're looking great, sweetheart," he says.

"Where's Francis?" Helen asks, shading her eyes with her hand and

squinting toward the car.

"He walked down to the beach," Janice answers. She, too, stares at the car as if Frank might suddenly materialize.

"You'd think he could say hello first," Helen says, picking up Richie's hand.

They all sit on the sunporch and sip gin and tonic, even though it is not yet noon. Janice hasn't really touched hers; she still feels sick from the car ride.

"It will be such a nice change," Helen says, holding onto Richie's arm. "We'll be living in a condominium. What do they call it, Richie? They have this special name for it," she says to Sam and Janice.

"Self-contained community," Richie says.

"We'll have everything we need right there. Stores and everything," Helen says, squeezing Richie's arm.

Janice's stomach begins to lurch in an alarming way. She leans back against her chair and tries to breathe slowly.

"A swimming pool," she hears Richie say. "A sauna, too."

"I guess the only drawback will be the heat," Sam says.

Richie begins to fidget next to Helen on the couch, and after downing the remains of his drink he says, "Now, there's where you're wrong, Sam. That's a popular misconception. Actually in the winter Florida has the optimum temperature for human habitation. Absolutely optimum."

"What about the summer?" Janice asks.

"What was that, honey?" Richie asks, leaning toward Janice.

"Janice wants to know if you've considered what Florida is like in the summer," Sam says.

"Sure. Yes, we've thought it out in detail. In detail. Don't worry, Jan. I'll take good care of your mother." Richie pours himself another drink and winks at Janice who has suddenly noticed a high, persistent ringing in her ears.

"Anyway the summer only lasts a little while. We'll have central air," Helen says.

"Central air," Richie repeats.

The screen door in the kitchen slams. Janice notices how Helen suddenly sits up straight and pats her hair into place. They all sit silently for a moment, listening to Frank in the kitchen. Finally, he walks into the sunporch, carrying a glass of water. It surprises Janice to see that he is all wet. His short spikey blond hair sticks straight up. He looks skinny with his T shirt and jeans plastered against his skin.

"Hi," he says to no one in particular.

A nervous smile flickers across Frnak's face, disappearing in a way that makes Janice want to get up and hug him.

"Francis, you've been swimming," Helen says, shocked.

Frank looks down at his feet where a small puddle is forming.

"How about a drink?" Richie asks.

"No thanks," Frank mumbles.

"You're going to refuse a drink?" Richie bellows. "What kind of teenage boy refuses a drink?"

"Don't I get a kiss?" Helen asks. "I haven't seen my son in months and I don't even get a kiss hello?"

Frank takes a drink from his glass of water and walks over to where Helen is sitting. Helen lifts her face, tilting her cheek toward him. Janice

notices that as Frank kisses his mother he closes his eyes for just a second. "There. That's better," Helen says.

In the late afternoon Janice and Sam go upstairs to take a nap. The upstairs is an open loft containing several cots and twin beds. Frank is already there, lying on one of the cots, listening to the first Red Sox game of the season on a tinny transister radio and smoking a joint.

"Mom will smell that," Janice says.

"So?" Frank says, propping himself up on an elbow and holding the joint out to Janice and Sam.

"It will upset her," Janice says as Sam takes the joint from Frank.

"I doubt it," Frank says. "After all the booze she drank today, she'll never notice."

"Who's winning?" Sam asks, lying down on one of the beds.

"No score," Frank says.

Janice lies down on the bed she was always assigned to as a child. She tries to remember who usually slept on the bed where Sam is. Her older sister Suzanne? Probably one of their many cousins. Now she remembers that Suzanne usually slept in the bed across from hers next to the window. When they were kids, Janice and Suzanne used to cuddle together in that bed at night and watch the bats as they swooped from the maples outside. Suzanne refuses to come to Helen and Richie's wedding. Their father had been dead for fourteen months when Helen annnounced her plans to marry Richie. Richie and Janice's father had been co-owners of a real estate business. They had worked together for twenty years.

Now Suzanne insists that Helen and Richie were lovers while their father was living. Janice tries not to think about this.

"Try to be nicer, Frank," Janice says. She stares at the ceiling.

"I'm being nice," Frank says. "My mother's marrying an asshole and I'm being nice."

"He's not all bad," Janice says. "He cares about her. That's obvious."

Frank makes a noise that sounds like a laugh.

"Don't you think so?" Janice asks. The sick feeling in her stomach is coming back.

"It doesn't matter what I think," Frank says. "What difference does it make? Everything falls apart anyway."

"Sam?" Janice asks. "Don't you think so?"

"Sure," Sam says. He sounds sleepy.

Janice listens to the game for a while. It's hard to hear it because the reception is so bad. But every so often a burst of clear sound breaks through. Jim Rice scores the first run of the game, and Frank calls out, "All right."

When they were growing up her father took them to all the home games. They only lived a short drive from Fenway Park. Janice can still picture them in the bleachers — her father, her mother, Suzanne, Frank, and herself. They would be in their summer clothes. Everything seemed light — the air, the sound of their voices floating into the roar around them and getting lost. The ball park was a place where you could do anything. Her father, who was sometimes detached and overtired at home, became infinitely patient and attentive there. Her mother seemed to relax and smile more easily than she usually did.

During those years when her father had first met Richie and the two of them were trying to establish the real estate business, money was tight. Often at night Janice would wake up to the sound of her parents arguing downstairs, usually over money. But at the ball park her father seemed to possess an endless supply of cash, and Janice, Suzanne, and Frank spent most of their time running back and forth between the bleachers and the refreshment stand. Helen sat in the sun, her hair fluttering around her ears in the breeze, reading a magazine. Now that she thinks about it, Janice realizes that no one but her father paid much attention to the game. One time, though, after Carl Yastrzemski had sent a ball sailing toward the expressway, her father stood up and yelled, "Best damn ball player in the world," as Yastrzemski rounded the bases. And then they all stood up, even Helen, and stared spellbound as the ball disappeared into the sky. It's the only moment of pure harmony that Janice can remember.

The other thing her father loved, besides baseball, was the Cape. He bought this cottage once his real estate business took off, and he was very proud of it. "This is what it's all for," Janice once heard him say to Helen as they drove up the sandy road to the cottage years ago. He loved this place. From where she's lying Janice can see her father's fishing rods hanging on the wall above the window.

Janice closes her eyes and thinks about Wayne, another claims adjustor at her insurance company. He is attractive in a bland sort of way, but not, she realizes, as attractive as Sam. Six months ago Janice almost had an affair with Wayne. He had been pursuing her for a long time. It had been exhilarating, in a way. She loved the constant compliments, the intensity of his voice on the phone when he called her at home. Six months

ago, on one of Sam's nights at the bar, Janice went to Wayne's house for dinner. Wayne sent out for Chinese food. They ate it sitting on the floor of his studio apartment.

At first Janice felt very pleased with herself. It all seemed so sophisticated, so defiant. Everything was great until Wayne began to kiss and touch her. Suddenly Janice realized how little her heart was really in this. Even so, she went along for a while, allowing him to take off most of her clothes. But finally it was too much. She just couldn't go through with it. That night when she got home she sat in the living room until Sam came home. She had planned to confess, but at the last minute she pretended to be sick instead. Even though Sam had been up all night working, he sat on the couch and rubbed her back until Janice said she felt better.

Now Janice feels guilty. "Sam?" she calls out into the room. The only sound is the static filled commentary of the baseball game. Janice sits up. Both Sam and Frank are sleeping. Frank is curled up on his side, his face hidden. Sam is lying on his back wearing an old pair of jeans bleached to a pale, almost imperceptible blue. He looks so ordinary, so unremarkable lying there that Janice wonders what it is that makes her love him.

The day after that night at Wayne's, Janice told Wayne that she didn't want him to call her anymore. She meant it, but sometimes it bothers her that she can't indulge herself a little. She suspects that Sam has been unfaithful to her at least once. Janice thinks that a year ago he had an affair with an actress at a summer theater on the south shore. Janice can still picture this woman: small, delicate, with short, fluflfy dark hair that looked incredibly soft.

The only time Janice ever saw them together was near the end of the summer when Janice had come to see the final performance of the season. They were doing West Side Story, and this woman, whose name was Arlene, was playing Maria. Janice had wandered backstage during intermission, and she saw Arlene and Sam standing together. Arlene's forehead was pressed against Sam's chest, and Sam's hands were smoothing down Arlene's soft, frizzy hair. It was a gesture filled with affection, and Janice has never felt quite the same after witnessing it.

Suddenly Janice feels exhausted. She lies down on the narrow bed with Sam and presses against him to keep from falling off. Janice can hear Helen and Richie downstairs, the clinking of dishes as they start getting things ready for dinner, the murmur of their conversation. For a second, Janice worries that they may have heard her conversation with Frank, but she decides that this is unlikely. They seem too immersed in themselves to notice much else. Even in their drunken fog, Helen and Richie seem disturbingly pure to Janice, so self-contained as Richie would say. It troubles Janice to realize that her mother has become the romantic idealist and she, Janice, is the cynical one.

Until Helen began her romance with Richie, Janice never really thought too much about her mother and father's marriage. She had always assumed that her mother was content with the way her life had gone. Now Janice isn't sure. When she thinks back and tries to picture the mother she knew as a child, Janice always sees the same image — a neat, slightly nervous woman in a floral housedress, cleaning. Helen kept their small suburuban home immaculate when Janice was growing up. Janice can remember sometimes feeling like an intruder there, a pest who was always unintentionally

thwarting her mother's quest for order. The thing she remembers her mother saying the most was, "I just want some peace and quiet." Janice, lying next to her sleeping husband, listening to her mother and her lover laughing downstairs, tries to remember the last time she heard her mother and father laughing together like that. She thinks for a long time, but she just can't remember.

After a while Janice sits up. She pulls Sam's sunglasses out of his sweatshirt pocket and puts them on. The room seems transformed. Everything is slightly duller, but it's not unpleasant. Janice wants to see how they look, but she hasn't got the energy to get up and walk over to the mirror. She takes them off and examines the lenses. It's interesting that you can see out of them, but not into them. She knows that there is an obvious, elementary explanation for this. But if someone asked her to explain it, she wouldn't know what to say.

Janice and her mother have been preparing food for the wedding since five o'clock in the morning. Sam and Richie are rearranging the furniture in the living room, getting ready for the ceremony. Frank is still asleep up in the loft. Janice watches her mother who stands at the sink washing her hands. Janice is arranging carrot and broccoli sticks in wide bright circles on a cut glass plate.

"Well," Helen says, turning to smile at Janice. "We better get ready. People will be arriving soon."

Janice feels that she ought to say something meaningful and encouraging to her mother, but nothing comes to mind. Instead she says,

"I hope you understand about Suzanne not being here. I did my best."

Helen isn't paying attention, "What did you say?" she asks, still smiling.

"Just that I'm sure Suzanne will get over this," Janice says, putting the final carrot stick into the green and orange wheel she's created.

"Well," Helen says as she leaves the room, "I'm tired of worrying about Suzanne."

As Janice cuts pieces of bread into tiny triangles, she thinks about her sister. When she was nine years old Suzanne almost cut off the index finger on her right hand. Suzanne and Janice had been clipping baseball cards to the spokes of their bikes and spinning the wheels. Janice held up the front of her bike, and Suzanne started the wheel spinning. They sat there watching the cards flash, listening to the sharp, clear snap of the cardboard. Then Suzanne reached out to stop the wheel and caught her finger in the spokes.

Helen, Suzanne, and Janice all went to the emergency room. Helen was pregnant with Frank at the time. Janice can still picture Helen sitting in the emergency room with Suzanne on her lap, her nearly severed finger hidden beneath a blood-soaked face cloth. Janice can still remember how terrified her mother had looked, and how Suzanne, whimpering and pale, sat there in her arms. When Janice was trying to convince Suzanne to attend the wedding, she reminded her about this.

"I'd cut this finger off before I'd go to that so-called wedding," Suzanne had said. She held her finger up in the air for a second, and Janice could see the long slender scar that began under the pink nail and laced around to where Suzanne's finger joined her hand. Suzanne's youngest child, a boy just a few months old, was sleeping on her lap.

"And she'll never be welcome in this house again," Suzanne whispered.

"What good does it do to resist it?" Janice asked. "It's going to happen."

"Do you know what she told me? That day in the hospital. She told me a secret."

"What do you mean?" Janice asked.

"She sat there so pious, saying her rosary while they sewed up my finger. The perfect Catholic mother. She told me she made a promise to say a rosary every day for the rest of her life — every day — if my finger was saved."

"So."

"So, do you think she does?"

"Say a rosary every day? I don't know. Does it matter?" Janice asked, amazed that her sister could behave like this.

"She sleeps with that man, you know. She's the one." Suzanne said, picking the baby up and holding him against her shoulder. "It's her fault, carrying on with that drunk as soon as Dad died. How can you stand being with them? How can you stand watching her carry on like that?"

"She was a good mother," Janice said. "She loved us, didn't she?"

"I don't need her anymore," Suzanne said.

When Janice goes upstairs to the loft to get dressed for the wedding, Frank is still sleeping. Janice shakes him, surprised at how small his shoulder feels. "Get up, Frank," she says.

Frank opens his eyes slightly and says, "Tell me when it's over."

"Come on," Janice says, opening her suitcase. "We have to get ready."

"How did you talk me into this?" Frank asks, sitting on the bed, still in the same clothes he wore yesterday.

"You need to take a shower," Janice says.

"Yeah," Frank says, but he doesn't move.

"It'll be better after this," Janice says.

"Why?"

"Because once things are over there's no use worrying about them anymore."

"What do you think Dad would say?" Frank asks, lying back on the bed.

"That's a stupid question, Frank." Janice walks over to Frank's bed and sits down next to him.

"I wonder if he was on to it," Frank says. "I didn't have a clue. Did you?"

"No," Janice says.

Frank lies motionless on the bed. "I don't feel like I'm here," he says. "This doesn't seem like a place that has anything to do with me."

People start arriving an hour before the wedding. Most of these people are Richie's friends and relatives. Janice doesn't know any of them, and her mother still hasn't reappeared. Finally Richie makes his entrance. Actually, even Janice has to admit that he looks almost distinguished in his pearl gray suit. However, she has seen him drink three straight shots of whiskey this morning. Janice watches him talking to Sam and a group of men in the living room. When her father's cancer got so bad that he

had to be hospitalized, Richie went to visit him several times a week to keep him informed about the business. He'd sit there by the bed, talking about properties and telling jokes. Now, the group of men standing with Richie are all laughing. Richie looks ecstatic. Sam looks handsome and relaxed in his light brown corduroy suit and pale blue shirt. Frank stands behind Sam, young and serious in his three piece suit. The dark blue jacket is too big for him. Suddenly Janice realizes that this suit belonged to her father.

When Helen steps out of her room everyone turns and to Janice's amazement, they begin to applaud and whistle. Helen blushes slightly, standing there in her peach satin dress, holding a bouquet of yellow roses and baby's breath. Her hair is piled high on her head, and there are sprigs of starflowers shining there. Janice tries to connect this woman with the mother she remembers from her early childhood — a quiet, self-conscious woman in a cotton housedress. But it's impossible, the woman Janice sees standing there resembles no one she has ever known. The vague, nauseous feeling that never quite goes away altogether begins to get worse. Janice watches as Richie walks over to Helen and kisses her on the mouth. More whistling. Richie isn't Catholic, and the ceremony is being performed by a minister. Janice watches as Richie and Helen walk arm and arm with great seriousness up to the front of the room where the minister is waiting.

The reception goes on for hours. People are dancing, eating, and drinking. Sam appears to be having a wonderful time, dancing with everyone, charming the ladies. Even Frank seems all right. Janice watches as he dances with Helen, holding her at a distance in his arms. When Sam, who has had too much to drink, approaches, Janice frowns at him slightly, but

he doesn't seem to notice.

"Want to dance?" Sam asks, encircling her waist and putting one hand firmly on her rear end.

"No. I feel sick," Janice says, but she allows him to pull her onto the floor, and she lifts her arms and puts them loosely around his neck. They lumber around the room in a small, clumsy circle. Sam hums in her ear.

"When will this be over?" Janice asks.

Sam looks around the room. "Not soon," he says. He starts to sing the words to the Frank Sinatra song they're dancing to. It amazes Janice sometimes, the songs he knows by heart.

While Helen changes out of her wedding clothes into the cobalt blue linen suit that she bought for the flight to Florida, Janice lies on the double bed, staring at the oak beams that cross the ceiling.

"You looked beautiful," Janice says. She can hear Helen opening and closing dresser drawers.

"Why thank you," Helen says. "And you looked lovely, too." Janice rises up on her elbows. She sees Helen peering into the mirror, pursing her lips into a tiny circle and then forcing them into an exaggerated smile as she applies her lipstick. Janices notices a pair of rosary beads draped across the top of the mirror.

"I'm pregnant," Janice says.

"Why, Janice," Helen says, turning slowly away from the mirror and facing her daughter. "Why, that's wonderful."

"I just found out last week," Janice says. Sitting up has made her feel dizzy.

Helen walks over to the bed and puts her hands on Janice's shoulders. "Well, it's wonderful. I bet Sam's thrilled."

Janice recalls the blank, numb expression on Sam's face when she told him she was pregnant. "We're both a little apprehensive," she says.

"Well, that's natural," Helen says, squeezing Janice's shoulders and walking back to the mirror. "It's quite a big step. Nothing's ever quite the same again."

"I don't know," Janice says. "I'm not sure I know how I feel. We may not be ready for this."

"No one is ever ready, but you get ready quick. On the job training," Helen says. She turns and smiles at Janice. "Are you having morning sickness?"

"I've felt a little sick. On the way down in the car I thought I might throw up."

"It doesn't last long. It goes away after the first few months," Helen says, brushing her hair carefully, trying not to flatten the curl. Then she puts the hairbrush in her makeup bag. Janice sees her reach up and remove the rosary beads from the mirror. Helen drops them into the bag and zips it shut.

"One thing that helps is to eat a little when you're driving in the car," Helen says. "Crackers or something. That always helped me."

After Helen leaves the room Janice lies on the bed, waiting. The

door opens and Sam comes in. Janice knows it's him even though her eyes are closed. She can just feel him there.

"They're almost ready to go," Sam says. "Don't you want to say goodbye?"

For a second Janice pictures Helen and Richie in Richie's silver cadillac slipping through a tunnel of dark trees. They disappear. They're gone. The room has gotten very dark, so when she opens her eyes Sam is just a shape standing next to the bed. Janice sits up; she feels a little lightheaded from moving too fast. She looks at Sam standing there in his calm, patient way.

"Are you okay?" Sam asks, walking right up to the edge of the bed where Janice is sitting.

And to steady herself before she gets up, Janice wraps her arms around his legs and holds on.

Second Childhood

I had a bad attitude toward my sister-in-law Cathy before I ever met her. I disliked the idea of her — a naive, pregnant, nineteen year old woman who saw my twentyfive year old brother Jeff as her chance for happiness. And although I don't like to admit it, I also disliked the affection in my mother's voice when she talked about Cathy and the baby that was expected in August. I first met Cathy the summer she married Jeff. My husband Andrew and I didn't make it to the wedding, but I flew out a few weeks later.

I was thirty-four the summer Jeff got married. The first I heard of it was a phone call in March. Jeff had never been very responsible. He never seemed to know what he wanted, so he depended on me. I was always the sensible one. At the time he was working at a factory in Braintree assembling air conditioners. When he called me that night in March he was panicking; he didn't know what to do. And since he sounded so irrational, and since my own marriage wasn't going very well at the time, I tried to discourage him. "Don't be stupid," I said. "You hardly know this girl." They got married in May.

Andrew and I went back to our home town on the south shore of Boston every summer. Even after we'd lived in Kansas for many years I still got homesick, especially in the summer. The summers were the worst. I missed the water. There's almost no natural water in the state of Kansas, unless you count the miles of muddy rivers. I was used to the ocean. I grew up a half mile from the beach, and I was used to cool summers and clear water. But there were practical reasons for going back every summer, too. My

doctorate was in botany, and my expertise was seashore and salt marsh vegetation. I taught introductory botany classes during the school year and tried to keep up with my own research in the summers. Andrew had a doctorate in botany, too, but he was an expert on prairie grasses. He loved his job.

When Andrew and I first moved to Kansas, it was exciting, an adventure. We'd only been married a month, and even though I wasn't thrilled with my job, I was happy to be with Andrew and ready to go someplace new. Before we moved to Kansas, I lived my entire life in one place. But I had my apprehensions. When we moved out to Kansas we drove a U-Haul and took I-70. Even though I thought I had a lot to look forward to, I was amazed at the way the world changed when we left Pennsylvania. I can remember sitting in the cab of the truck, leaning out the open window, staring at the dark mountains that seemed to stretch forever behind us. And when I turned to look where we were headed, it depressed me a little. For a moment, I couldn't believe what I'd left back there.

We'd been living in Kansas for five years the summer that Cathy and Jeff got married. That summer was a difficult one for me. It was the summer I realized that I was approaching middle age, living in the middle of nowhere with a man I was no longer sure I loved. So that summer I flew back home alone. It was a trial separation, but we didn't tell anyone. We said that Andrew had to stay behind to teach summer school. The plan was for me to look for a job in the Boston area, and if I found something that looked good, I'd take it.

Even though Cathy and Jeff were living with my parents in the old run-down colonial where I grew up, it felt good to be home. The day after

I arrived my mother and I sat in the kitchen drinking tea. Through the window I could see the backyard where my father sat reading the newspaper. It was like a small wilderness out there. The dandelions were full of bees. Almost everyday some new weed or wildflower appeared on the lawn. In the small Kansas town where Andrew and I lived the yards were small and neat. We spent hours in our own yard on the weekends, weeding, pruning, mowing the lawn. In the winter we spent evenings searching through catalogues trying to decide what to plant in the spring. My parents took a more casual approach. They didn't worry about color variation or practicality. My mother simply planted spontaneously, choosing things because they struck her as pretty. And their yard did have a remarkable charm and personality.

That morning my mother stirred her tea in an absent-minded way. There was a pair of binoculars on the table. My mother was a birdwatcher. At the time she was on the board of the local Audobon society and had written several pamphlets on birding in the eastern states. Back in Kansas I had a bird feeder outside my own kitchen window. Whenever a new bird appeared, I dutifully wrote it down in a small notebook that I kept on top of the refrigerator.

My mother picked up her cup in both hands and lifted it slowly to her lips. When she took a sip, she closed her eyes, and I noticed how beautiful, how healthy she looked. Her skin was a pale brown from all those hours searching for birds along the coast.

I loved to talk with my mother. She was partially deaf, and she spoke differently than anyone else. It was almost musical. She spoke in a soft, deliberate cadence as if each word were valuable, beautiful. When I was

very young, before I started school, I picked up some of her speech patterns. My father worried about it, but he need not have bothered. Once I started school, once I understood that my mother did not speak correctly and that most people thought that the way she talked was funny, I started to speak and sound like everyone else.

"He has such potential," my mother said, settling the cup on the saucer. She was talking about my brother Jeff, who was sitting in the living room with Cathy watching an old Debbie Reynolds movie on television. My mother was talking softly, so I had to lean forward across the table to understand what she was saying. She didn't want my father, who was sitting outside just beneath the open window, to hear. At that time my father was very critical of Jeff and speculations about Jeff's potential could infuriate him.

"I try to interest him in things," my mother said. "I've written to at least a dozen colleges for catalogues and information. I've told him I'll help him any way I can.."

"Maybe you need to let him grow up a little," I said. "Maybe he needs to figure all of this out for himself."

"But it's such a waste," my mother said, getting up to stir the chowder that was simmering on the stove. "And it's so dangerous. They handle all kinds of dangerous materials when they build those air conditioners. Asbestos or something. All kinds of toxic materials that can damage the lungs."

When she lifted the top of the pan to stir the chowder, the kitchen filled up with a moist, warm, spicy smell. With my mother there at the stove, with my father outside reading in his lawn chair, and with Jeff in front of the television in the living room, I almost felt like a kid again.

I almost felt like that house was still my home. My mother's white hair was on top of her head in a clumsy bun that was coming loose. There were wispy strands of hair curling at the back of her neck. She looked wonderful to me as she stood there in her beige walking shorts and yellow tee shirt with "Audubon" printed across the back. And suddenly I wanted to tell her about Andrew and me. I wanted her advice.

Just then, when I was feeling really comfortable and at home, Cathy walked into the kitchen. She stood there awkwardly just inside the doorway like she was afraid to come in. She was hugely pregnant and had on one of those long, white, tacky Mexican dresses with lots of elaborate embroidery. I remember that she had gray wool socks on her feet because they were always cold, even though it was summer. It irritated me a little that she walked in just then and stood there calling attention to herself. She had this short curly hair and an incredibly round face, so even though she was nineteen she looked much younger.

My mother smiled at her. "Tired of the movie?" she asked. She held out the large wooden soup spoon to Cathy. "Want a taste?"

Cathy lumbered over to the stove, and I watched her take a sip from the steaming spoon my mother held up to her lips.

"It's good," Cathy said.

My mother patted Cathy's stomach. "Can I make you some tea?" she asked.

"Sure. Thanks," Cathy answered. "That would be great. I'd love a cup of tea." She had this gushing way of talking, of going on and on when a simple yes or no would do. And when she spoke she would sort of smile and cringe simultaneously, like she was apologizing for something. It really

irritated me at the time.

Then she sat down across from me, in the same spot where my mother had been sitting before. My mother brought Cathy's tea over to the table and told us she was going outside for a while. She picked up her binoculars and went out the back door. Cathy and I watched her through the window. We saw her stop next to my father's chair and put her hand on his arm. Then we watched as she walked across the yard and into the woods.

"This baby is something," Cathy said, proudly smoothing her hands over the fabric that covered her enormous stomach. "It's never still. I can't get a moment's peace."

She looked so pleased with herself, so young, so hopeful. I wanted to ask her what on earth she was smiling for. I wanted to remind her that she was a pregnant teenager living in someone else's house with a twenty-five year old factory worker who probably didn't even love her. But instead I smiled back and said, "It won't be long now."

"It could be any time," she said. Then she stood up and pulled her dress up to just under her breasts. I couldn't believe it. She didn't have anything on under the dress, and I was afraid that my father might walk in and see her like that.

"I've dropped already," she said.

I stared at the incredible globe of her belly and saw it suddenly rise and move.

"What did I tell you?" she said. "Want to feel it?" she asked, picking up my hand and putting it on her skin. But nothing happened. I didn't feel a thing.

During the daytime I spent hours down near the water. There was a small salt pond in the marsh that bordered the town beach and I worked there taking notes and collecting samples. A salt marsh is a beautiful place. The vegetation blends into an incredible variety of colors and textures. That summer it was particularly lush. The rose-mallows and beach peas were blooming, and the goldenrod came out early. In a way, the salt marsh with its many shades of green covered with the purple, pink, and yellow blossoms reminded me of the prairies back in Kansas. But here there was the ocean shimmering beyond the green while in Kansas there was only the blue emptiness of the sky.

When I came home in the afternoons with my specimens of sea lavender and asters, Cathy would come into the kitchen and watch me label and press them. Cathy usually spent her time reading books on childbirth and parenting. It was amazing. They were all over the house—Thank You Dr. Lamaze, Natural Childbirth, The Miracle of Life. And when she wasn't reading she was lying on the living room floor practicing her breathing. Everyday she had to beg Jeff to help her with the exercises. He complained a lot. When he came home from work, he'd sit down in front of the television with a beer and not move for hours.

But Cathy continued to behave as if everything were perfect. It was amazing to see her lying there on the floor, her eyes closed, her face set in an expression of blind determination as she panted. And the times when she managed to coerce my brother to get down on the floor and join her, he sat there staring into space timing the pretend contractions. I don't know, in a way it was almost painful to watch. More than once I had to get up and leave the room.

One night after dinner my mother, Cathy, and I walked down to the beach. It was only a ten minute walk from my mother's house, but it took us twice as long because of Cathy. Every few minutes my mother would ask if she was all right, and Cathy would smile in that cringing way of hers and say, yes, she was all right, really. And every time we passed a plant or a wildflower, she'd ask me what it was. I guess she thought it would please me if she showed an interest in these things.

It wasn't really dark yet, and there were people on the beach and in the water. We sat on the sea wall and watched them. I saw a small group of children in the distance running along the beach. As they got closer I could see that they were waving their hands and calling wildly. It was windy and although they were shouting, I couldn't understand them. For one awful moment, I had the impression that they were screaming for help, but then I saw that they were only playing, chasing each other up and down the sand. Soon they were in front of us and we watched them wade out knee deep into the ocean. They curved their hands into cups and began scooping up handfuls of water and throwing it into the air.

"I can't believe I'm going to have one of those," Cathy said, looking at the kids in the water. "I hope I'm ready for it."

My mother was in the process of climbing down from the sea wall onto the sand when Cathy said this, so she didn't hear her. My impulse was to ignore this remark, but I made the mistake of looking at Cathy and she had this silly expectant look on her face. I felt a little sorry for her. "It really is exciting," I said.

"It's made an incredible difference in my life," Cathy said. "It's fulfilled me."

"That's nice," I said. I was watching my mother, who had rolled up her jeans and was walking along the shore, letting the waves sweep over her feet. I wanted to get up and join her.

"People say that the birth changes you forever. I've talked to women who say it just changed everything. That the whole world seemed different."

I thought that she was the most pathetic, the most deluded person I'd ever met. "How?" I asked. "Aren't you expecting an awful lot from this?"

"Well, it's mainly because of the bonding. There's this connection between a mother and a baby and it's almost magical."

My mother had stopped walking. She stood off in the distance looking out to sea. "What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Okay, this is an example. In one of my books it tells how a lot of times when a baby cries, the mother's breasts fill up with milk. Just the sound of the baby, that's all it takes. There's this bond. I don't know. It's kind of a mystery."

"That's fascinating," I said. She was amazing. No matter how sarcastic you were, no matter how bored you might be by her endless tirades about the glories of childbirth, she just wouldn't quit.

"And part of it's the childbirth process, too. In one of my books it says that women who have natural childbirth have a closer bond with their baby."

"What does that mean?" I asked. "You want to be a martyr?"

"No," she said. She slid over on the sea wall right next to me. It was the first time I had ever seen her quite so assertive. "There's no pain. You can block it out, so you don't feel any pain."

I just looked at her. I hadn't really meant to upset her.

"Squeeze my leg," she said.

"What?" I couldn't believe it.

"Squeeze my leg as hard as you can, and I'll do the breathing. Once Jeff squeezed so hard that I had a bruise for a week, but I didn't feel any pain."

"I'm not going to squeeze your leg," I said.

"Well, it wouldn't hurt me," she said. "It wouldn't hurt me if you did."

One night we all sat in the living room and looked at slides. My mother wanted to show us the photographs she took while she was working at a wildlife refuge for terns off of Long Island. The slides of the island all looked the same—long stretches of gray and slate blue punctuated by white wings. My father sat behind the projector, and my mother sat next to him directing the slide selection. Cathy and Jeff were sitting on the couch. I sat on the floor. Cathy was kind of clinging to Jeff, and I saw her kiss him lightly on the shoulder a couple of times. Jeff just sat there, staring at the screen. Once when Cathy put her head on his shoulder, he pulled away a little. "Come on," he said. "Let me breathe."

After we looked at my mother's slides, my father showed some of the old slides from our family vacations. These slides were essentially the same shot—my mother, Jeff, and I standing together in scenic surroundings—only the landscapes changed. One of the first slides he showed was from a vacation we took in the Adirondacks when I was sixteen and Jeff was seven. We were all smiling like crazy and the mountains towered

behind us. We were standing in front of a sign by the side of the highway.

"Remember that trip?" my father said.

"Of course," I said.

"Remember," he said, turning to my mother, "remember we saw that sign that said we were traveling on the most scenic highway in America?"

"The scenery was astonishing," my mother said.

"That's something, isn't it?" my father said. "Not everyone can claim to have been on the most scenic highway in America."

"Well, that is a lovely photograph," Cathy said. "And some day I want to go there. After the baby comes. Some time when Andrew's here and we can all go up there and rent a cabin."

I turned and looked at her smiling face illuminated by the light of the projector as she sat there beside my brother. And I don't know if it was because I had just been reminded of that beautiful place that I had seen, or because she mentioned Andrew's name so affectionately and naturally, but suddenly I could picture it. Just for a moment I was able to visualize all of us together, traveling through the Adirondacks.

That night when I was lying in bed I could hear Cathy's and Jeff's voices. They slept in the room next to mine. I could hear Cathy talking in a low, whining voice. Every once in a while Jeff said something, but I couldn't make it out. After a while I realized that Cathy was crying, whimpering like a child. For some reason it bothered me. And then I started thinking about what she had said, how she believed in this bond, this magical connection between mother and child. I thought about my own mother and how she once saved my life when I was twelve. I had been cooking breakfast at the stove and the tip of my shirt was resting on the electric

element. My shirt went up in flames. My mother was outside working in the garden, and she told me that suddenly she knew that I was in terrible trouble. She couldn't hear my screams, but she knew that I was in danger. She knocked me to the floor and smothered the flames with her own hands and body. She saved me.

Suddenly I heard my brother's voice, a little louder than before. I heard him leave the room and walk downstairs. After a few minutes I heard the car start, and he drove away. I lay there listening, but I couldn't hear a sound coming from Cathy's room. I kept thinking that my mother might wake up and come upstairs to see what was wrong. But nothing happened. The house was quiet. And then, for the first time in weeks, I missed Andrew. I felt this longing to see him, to talk to him.

I wondered what Cathy was doing, and I wondered what she was thinking about. I thought about going into her room and telling her I was sorry, that everything would probably work out. Maybe tomorrow I would ask her to go with me to the salt pond. She really did seem interested. And after the baby came, I could help her. We could walk the baby down to the beach. And they could come out to Kansas when the baby was a little older. They could come out to visit, and we could drive to Colorado and go up into the mountains. In the morning I could call Andrew and ask him to come out. Once Andrew came maybe he could talk to Jeff. I just lay there for a long time thinking these things, but there was still no sound coming from Cathy's room.

I got up and went out into the hallway. I stood there for awhile outside her door. I knocked and said her name, but she didn't answer. She was lying on her back in the middle of the double bed, crying in a soundless,

desperate way. I got in next to her, and she hugged me, pulling me tight against her. I talked to her in the low, musical, impulsive way that one talks to a child when the sound of a voice is more important than words. And the two of us lay there, scared and inconsolable, hoping for rescue.

"Living Near the Sea," "The Start of the New Season," "Second Childhood": A Critical Afterword

Analyzing my fiction in an attempt to discover the source of my vision and style, I have discovered that my short stories reflect a blending of several literary traditions and have been inspired and shaped by specific writers working within these traditions. I incorporate elements of manners, realism, and romance into my fiction, and an examination of my stories has shown me how essential each tradition is to achieve the vision I want to convey. Through my reading and research for this afterword, I have also discovered that the writers who have had the clearest influence on my fiction have also blended these three traditions in their work. The writers to whom my stories are most clearly indebted are James Joyce, John Updike, Ann Beattie, and Joy Williams. In this afterword, I will discuss the traditions of manners, realism, and romance as they pertain to my fiction and the specific influences these four writers have had on the short stories included in this collection.

The short story of manners "has characterized the short story since Henry James." [1] James' focus on the social mores and moral dilemmas of daily living allowed him to examine human experience in a profoundly intimate context. This interest in the individual private life and its significance continued to be a strong force in American fiction, resulting in a flowering of the tradition in the 1940's and 50's. This fiction explored the diverse realities of American life: " . . . these sketches chronicled the lives of ordinary people . . . writers probed with uncanny insight the

manners and mores of the upper, lower and middle classes; the bedroom, barroom, and drawing room; the city, suburbs, and country."[2] Writers as diverse as John O'Hara, Mary McCarthy, and J. D. Salinger were all in their unique ways writing short stories of manners that revealed the subtle complexities of daily living: inter-personal conflicts, domestic tensions, loneliness, and the struggle for self-fulfillment. The stories of these writers "revealed the inner tensions and conflicts between parents and children, husbands and wives, friends and lovers. They treated such diverse topics as childhood alienation, old age, disillusionment, and the eternal search for one's identity."[3]

All three of my stories presented here are short stories of manners. Gordon Weaver, in the introduction to his book The American Short Story, says that since World War II the American short story has presented "more moral questions than moral conclusions."[4] In this moral questioning " . . . the themes of isolation and alienation repeatedly emerge."[5] Inherent in the development of these themes is an examination of the personal lives of individuals—the worlds of family, work, and social interaction. The moral questioning, the analysis of "manners, mores, and morality,"[6] intrinisic to this tradition, and its intimate exploration of human experience make the short story of manners highly appealing. In my fiction, I attempt to examine the moral and existential challenges of daily living, and the short story of manners provides the perfect format for this exploration.

The contemporary writers I turn to for inspiration and pleasure also work within the tradition of manners. Writers such as John Updike, Raymond Carver, Jayne Anne Phillips, Joy Williams, Ann Beattie, and Jean Thompson continue the short story of manners' tradition of moral questioning through

their depictions and analyses of contemporary American life. The short story of manners attracts me as a reader and a writer because I am interested in observing human experience at close range by focusing on the intimate and ordinary details of a character's life. Plot and action do not concern me as much as character. Hortense Calisher defines the short story as "an apocalypse served in a very small cup."[7] The short story of manners may be the smallest cup of all—the domestic world of one individual. This sharp focus on the personal world of an individual clarifies seemingly ordinary experiences, reducing life to its most vivid and essential elements, revealing the mystery beneath the surface of human experience. Calisher says that there is a "certain temperament in the story form. Its very duration . . . verges it always toward that classical corner where sits the human figure."[8] This image of the human figure awaiting exploration and revelation is a powerful one for me and the motivation behind my own writing. The short story of manners provides me with a vehicle for undertaking this challenge.

Like many American writers who write in this tration, the themes of individual identity and personal alientation hold a particular fascination for me. I think that an exploration of the family, the source of our most basic identity, provides the clearest insight into these themes. James C. Robison says that "the most intimate context of anybody's identity is the family—the easiest to recognize and the hardest to escape. The closeness of family members offers countless opportunities for writers to portray dramatic conflicts that exemplify basic human conflicts."[9] The three short stories collected here, "Living Near the Sea," "The Start of the New Season," and "Second Childhood," examine the themes of alienation and identity within the context of family life. This focus on the domestic worlds of

my female protagonists and their interactions with husbands, lovers, children, siblings, and parents reflects my conviction that it is within everyday encounters and experiences that the most significant moments of our lives take place. The short story of manners offers an intensely intimate look at the human condition. It allows me to probe deep inside a character by focusing on the surface details of that character's daily life and relationship with others. These details, when effectively rendered, provide insight into the private desires, insecurities, and struggles of the protagonist's inner life.

My attraction to the short story of manners, then, is at least in part due to its presentation of the surface details of daily life as a key to a more profound and private reality. Since I am interested in exploring this connection between a character's domestic world and the world within the self, I must, to be successful, choose details that are both realistic and evocative. My goal in the three stories presented here is to reveal the transcendent potential in seemingly oridnary experiences. This paradox is conveyed through two other literary traditions—realism and romance. By incorporating elements of realism and romance into the short story of manners, I am able to explore two different, but complementary, realms of experience: the realistic world of work and family life and the romantic, mysterious world of the individual psyche, a world that often defies rational examination and anaylsis.

The three stories in this collection are clearly realistic. The settings—the South Shore of Boston and Cape Cod—are actual places. My protagonists are a housewife, a claims adjustor for an insurance company, and a botanist respectively. Their lives are complicated by a variety of realistic

difficulties: boredom, loneliness, family squabbles. The conflicts they experience are the inevitable conflicts that arise from living closely with others in the real world. However, my goal is not to simply use realistic detail to evoke a mimetic depiction of contemporary human experience, but to compare and contrast this "real" world with the protagonist's inner world which is camouflaged by the routines and rituals of daily life. The surface details of a protagonist's life are an elaborate choreography. Since I am trying to challenge the reader's conception of what real experience is, it is essential that my characters are realistic and grounded in a specific place and time. Otherwise, their eventual transcendence would have little impact.

The style of my stories is realistic as well. Wayne Booth describes Henry James's use of a "center of consciousness" through whom everything can be seen and felt.[10] My own stories are told from this restricted perspective because of its ability to explore and expose the inner life of a character, allowing access into a unique and private reality. Richard Chase emphasizes that in realistic fiction "character is more important than action or plot,"[11] and insight into this inner world is essential for complete character development. Since I am presenting characters who are in the process of shaping and defining their sense of self, the stories can only be told from the protagonists' viewpoints. My intent in each of these three stories is to reveal each protagonist as she transcends the realistic limitations of her life by finding refuge and escape in a momentary, elusive contact with an unrealized aspect of her inner self. Using the protagonist as a "center of consciousness" allows the reader to observe the experience from an intensely intimate perspective. The inner experience

of an individual can never be truly explored since we can only imagine the private life and thoughts of another. Using a "center of consciousness" approach allows me, as a writer, to explore the hidden dimensions of a character's inner world with a sense of authority and certainty that enhances the story's realistic tone, but captures the profound mystery of the protagonist's emotional life as well. For example, Carlene's transcendent kiss in her noisy, messy kitchen could appear on the surface to be a simple act of weakness, rebellion, or lust, depending upon the interpretation of the observer. The full significance of the kiss—its motivation, meaning, and power—can only be felt through Carlene's perception and experience.

The tradition of romance allows the richness of the protagonist's inner world to be revealed and explored. This blending of reality and romance has a long tradition in American fiction. E.P. Walkiewicz says that the American short story "has often fused reality and romance,"[12] and this fusion is an integral part of my own artistic vision. I want to demonstrate the connection between the ordinary and the mysterious in an attempt to understand the full signicance of human experience. One of the attractive properties of romance is its "tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness,"[13] to explore the rich and mysterious world within ourselves. Romance allows the expression of "dark and complex truths unavailable to realism."[14] In each of the three stories presented here, the protagonist retreats into "the underside of consciousness," her own private realm where she experiences, if only momentarily, a sense of fulfillment, discovery, and truth which cannot be rationally articulated, but is profoundly real. Carlene's emotional and erotic release, Janice's revelation of the direction her life must take, and the intimate, empathetic union between the two

women in "Second Childhood" are all deeply romantic experiences that occur in "the borderland of the human mind where the actual and the imaginary intermingle."[15] The insight each protagonist achieves enriches her vision of her own identity and the world she inhabits. The protagonist's understanding, then, of the "real" world has been expanded by the "dark truths" of her private revelation.

The characterization of each of my protagonists is highly romantic. Each woman sees herself as a loner, alienated and different from those around her. Each protagonist romanticizes the past. Carlene, in particular, is a prisoner of her nostalgia. Her tencency to idealize her past has separated her from the "real" world. She becomes so immersed in her longing for the past, that the relevance of the present is lost. She no longer has a clear sense of who she is or where she belongs. She not only feels alienated from her husband, but from her essential self as well. Carlene's romantic imagination is stimulated by Dave's appearance on the beach. In many ways, Dave is a stock romantic figure: the handsome, mysterious rescuer. However, once Carlene leaves the beach and brings Dave into her "real" world, her romantic illusions begin to evaporate. Dave's anonymity disappears and he emerges as a real man. This revelation disturbs Carlene because her romantic longings and the obligations and responsibilities of her real life seem irreconcilable. Her eventual transcendence depends upon her ability to integrate these two facets of her life. By retreating into "the underside of consciousness" Carlene is able to expand the confines of her domestic world, discovering within herself a world of unpredictable proportions. Her momentary escape at the end of the story is not a moment that can be explained in a rational way; it is, for her, a transcendent moment

that allows connection with the mysterious, romantic world within.

Janice is also a romantic character. She, like Carlene, is a dreamer who longs for the past. She, too, sees herself as an outsider and struggles against a numbing sense of alienation and disorientation. Janice daydreams about her father, remembering him in highly idealized terms: the benevolent, directing force of the family. She is both inspired and disturbed by this romantic conception of her father because she feels responsible for taking this role upon herself. This desire to guide and comfort her confused family is hampered by Janice's own confusion about the direction her life should take. The contrast between Janice's romantic visions of how things should be and how they actually are leave her in a state of emotional paralysis. The memory of her father takes on an increasingly sacred significance for Janice as the story progresses, sustaining her and keeping her from being swept away into the confusion and anger that the rest of the family has given in to.

Janice's romantic sensibility can also be seen in her idealization of Helen. Instead of focusing on the semi-alcoholic, self-absorbed woman her mother has become, Janice clings to the long-lost vision of the mother she remembers from childhood. Janice's ability to create and sustain these romantic visions keeps her from deteriorating into Frank's numb passivity or Suzanne's bitterness. Janice's faith, in a sense, pays off. Her romantic memories do provide her with a better understanding of the people around her. Helen is both the self-absorbed woman whom Suzanne despises and the dutiful mother Janice remembers. Because of her romantic sensibility, Janice can see more deeply into the essential mystery of human beings. Her pain and confusion really result from the fact that she is so aware

of life's complexities and contradictions. Paradoxically, because Janice nurtures her romantic illusions, she can more fully understand reality. At the end of the story her romantic visions have been both destroyed and vindicated. She sees Sam and her mother as they truly are with all of their limitations, but her romantic faith in them is also sustained. Janice's attempt to reconcile her idealized images of those she loves with the flesh and blood reality forces her to examine her own needs, desires, and insecurities. She emerges from this journey within the self with a stronger sense of how choices and commitments are made and with a clearer sense of her own identity. I want to suggest through the use of romance in this story that a purely rational response to reality is a limited response. Through Janice's perceptions of those around her, I am attempting to explore the role romance and illusion play in our ability to sustain our faith in ourselves and others.

The narrator of "Second Childhood" is also trying to direct and define her life in the midst of confusing circumstances. She, too, is obsessed by her past, a past that seems more harmonious and satisfying than her present life. The narrator views herself as a practical, realistic person and is disgusted by Cathy's naive, romantic view of her pregnancy and the world in general. However, the narrator is not really the pure realist she thinks she is and discovering the romantic nature of her own personality is essential to her emotional growth. For example, the narrator maintains an idealized vision of her mother, a vision she admires but feels unable to emulate. This conflict between her romantic vision and practical limitations has left the narrator stranded, unsure of who she is or who she wants to be. The story follows the character's progress toward

self-discovery—a discovery that requires a confrontation with her deepest, most private dreams. In a sense, the narrator must acknowledge her own romantic longings before she can take practical direction of her life. In the final scene, the narrator gives in to her romantic vision: she becomes the idealized mother she admires, but also gives expression to the frightened child within herself. This story, like the others, suggests that only through a confrontation of the romantic world within can the real world be understood.

In addition to creating romantic characters, I also use elements of the "pastoral idyl"[16] to heighten the sense of romance in my fiction and this romantic convention plays a major role in all three of the stories presented here. The sea shore, which is the setting of all three stories, is presented as a haven from the outside world. The ocean with its traditional connotations of fertility, mystery, and elemental power allows me to convey the mystery and romance of my characters' experiences within a realistic setting. In "Living Near the Sea," the title suggests a character on the "borderline" between reality and romance. The beach is a separate world, free from outside restrictions and obligations. Carlene is both attracted to and frightened by the freedom of the beach because it seems to threaten the structure of her domestic world. The reconstructed Plimoth colony is also an exotic world apart. In "The Start of the New Season" the cottage is located far from the traveled roads of the Cape, hidden from view and difficult to find. It is Janice's childhood world untouched by time. Janice's return to the cottage represents a retreat into her deepest, most private self. The world of the beach is also idealized in "Second Childhood." The ocean with its salt marshes and vegetation is an infinitely rich and fertile

place. The natural beauty of the grasses, flowers, and salt ponds provide a refuge for the narrator who is futiley searching for a similar harmony in her real world of family and human interaction.

When I first began working on this report, I was surprised to discover how important an element romance is in my fiction, but as I began to explore those writers who have influenced me, I discovered that they too incorporate elements of romance into realistic stories of manners. The four writers who have most clearly helped to shape my fiction—James Joyce, John Updike, Ann Beattie, and Joy Williams—all use romance as a means of exploring the transcendent experiences of their characters. An exploration of each of these four writers has helped me to clarify the specific influences each one has had on my fiction.

My interest in the romantic themes of transcendence and reconcilation can be traced to my early readings of the stories of James Joyce. When I first read Dubliners as a freshman in college, I was inspired by Joyce's ability to reveal intuitive truths about human experience through a careful, brilliant chronicle of the surface details of his characters' lives. These are short stories of manners and provide a realistic glimpse into the daily and domestic lives of ordinary people, but they also evoke a deeper, more mysterious reality. My initial interest in Joyce was also a highly personal one. Coming from an Irish Catholic background, I first read his stories and novels hoping to discover some insight into my own religious heritage. However, I have returned to this collection of stories repeatedly because of the strong affinity I feel for the mystery they evoke and the themes they address—themes of alienation, identity, and the quest for escape and transcendence.

I now see that Joyce's handling of these themes has shaped the thematic content and structure of my own stories. John William Corrington says that almost all the stories in Dubliners are built upon "a dream of escape."[17] The characters all seek, in various ways, to transcend the limitations imposed upon them by themselves or their society but frequently find themselves unable to achieve the release they seek. In Dubliners the typical escape dream occurs when "the protagonist of a story . . . is placed in a position that reveals the direction he must take if he is to live a full and creative life; but always he is defeated by the combined forces of his environment. The opportunity to achieve a satisfactory integration of his life often seems within his grasp, but as he reaches tentatively toward it, he is thwarted by the conditions which the modern world imposes on him."[18] In "Eveline" a young woman struggles between a new future, challenging and mysterious, or the safety and stagnation of her present life. She chooses to remain in the life she knows, despite her unhappiness and frustration. In "Araby,"[20] a young boy goes in search of beauty, mystery, and romance, but comes home empty-handed. Each story in the collection presents characters who long to transcend the routine lives they live, but who are unable to do so. These stories capture the fear that always co-exists with profound longing, and I have tried to evoke this same fear in my own stories. Each of my characters struggles with the same type of conflict that the characters in Dubliners face. Joyce's handling of this conflict has both fascinated and frustrated me because the characters are so consistently defeated in their attempts to escape the limitation of their lives.

The frustrated longings of Joyce's characters have had a profound effect upon my own fiction. His characters' search is profoundly romantic:

"A new condition of inward life is the goal; not a place . . . the far countries reached by the boy in "The Sisters" and sought by the boy in "Araby" . . . are not in this world."[21] The characters in Dubliners undertake a psychological journey of great intensity that contrasts with the drabness of their daily lives. In my fiction, I also try to explore individuals involved in an inward search for transcendence. However, I am disturbed by the inability of most of Joyce's characters to achieve the transcendence they seek, and in my own fiction I attempt to depict ways in which human beings can achieve, at least temporarily, an integration between the real world and the world of their dreams. Carlene, Janice, and the narrator of "Second Childhood" are all faced with a period of transition, an opportunity to move forward into unknown territory. Like Joyce's characters they are hampered by their fears and inadequacies, and they struggle with this conflict before they can move forward emotionally and psychologically. In my stories, each woman is presented with an opportunity for transcendence, an opportunity to achieve "the dream of escape" from the confines of reality by integrating the conflicting facets of her daily and emotional lives. This integration requires a personal, moral choice on the part of the protagonist that results in an elusive, momentary harmony, but not an absolute resolution of the conflict.

The story of Joyce's which has had the clearest influence on my handling of the theme of transcendence is "The Dead."[22] "The Dead" is the final story of the collection and explores the themes of transcendence and reconciliation most fully and affirmatively. It differs from the other stories in the collection in that Gabriel's final insight can be seen as a true epiphany, a moment of true escape and revelation. On one level, the

story functions as a story of manners. Gabriel's interaction with the guests at his aunts' party is carefully detailed. These details reveal both Gabriel's sense of alienation and superiority to the others at the party and a realistic depiction of Irish society. Gabriel is revealed to be a man who thinks he knows himself and can make valid, and often critical, judgments concerning those around him. The validity of Gabriel's perceptions of himself, others, and reality in general is called into question when Gabriel catches a glimpse of his wife, Gretta, as she listens to a traditional Irish tune being played:

> He was in a dark part of the hall gazing up the staircase. A woman was standing near the top of the first flight in the shadow also. He could not see her face but he could see the terracotta and salmon-pink panels of her skirt which the shadow made appear black and white. It was his wife. She was leaning on the bannisters, listening to something. Gabriel was surprised by her stillness and strained to listen also.[23]

Inspired by this vision of Gretta, Gabriel embarks on a romantic fantasy. He feels profoundly drawn to Gretta and desires her with a new intensity. He wants to communicate and share the intensity of his passion with her: "Like the tender fire of stars, moments of their life together, that no one knew of or would ever know of, broke upon and illuminated his memory. He longed to recall to her those moments, to make her forget the years of their dull existence together and remember only their moments of ecstasy."[24] This illusion is destroyed when Gabriel discovers that Gretta's trance-like repose as she listened to the song on the stairway was inspired

by the memory of an old lover, Michael Furey, who, in a sense, died becuase of his love for Gretta. This revelation disturbs Gabriel, making him painfully aware of his alienation from Gretta: "So she had had that romance in her life: a man had died for her sake. It hardly pained him now to think how poor a part he, a husband, had played in her life. He watched her as she slept as though he and she had never lived together as man and wife."[25]

This revelation—that his wife is essentially unknown to him—humbles Gabriel. The smug assurance he has projected all evening evaporates. He is struck with a new sense of life's mysteries and the limitations of his rational observations and opinions. The conclusion of "The Dead" can be read "as a moment when Gabriel is gifted with the self-recognition and self awareness of all humanity denied to the other characters in Dubliners."[26] Gabriel gains a new awareness of his place in the world and an enhanced appreciation of life's mysteries. He becomes "a pilgrim to emotional intensities outside of his own experience."[27]

My own stories are indebted to "The Dead" for helping to shape my own handling of these complex themes. In my stories, each character undergoes a psychological journey similar to Gabriel's. Each woman's sense of self is challenged by someone outside herself and this challenge results in a moment of epiphany in which the real self is finally revealed. Joyce's use of the epiphany, his romantic conception of the essential mystery of human existence have all found their way into my fiction. Gabriel's sense of connection to all human beings—both living and dead—has always been a haunting resolution for me, suggesting an ultimate vision of not only self-fulfillment but existential harmony. In my characterizations of the three protagonists being discussed here I have tried to recapture that

sense of connection and release.

I have also been influenced by Joyce's ability to evoke a clear sense of time and place through a particularity and density of detail. I have tried to use this technique to the same effect in my fiction. Joyce often uses the surface details of daily living to convey the stagnation and drabness of his characters' lives. Or, in the case of "The Dead," these details convey the true nature of a character's personality and motivations. In my fiction, I try to use a density of detail to reveal both the texture of that character's daily life and her inner world as well. For example, in "Second Childhood," the narrator's fascination with the salt pond and the other details of her botanical activities are used not only to reveal the realistic details of her job and to describe the physical world she inhabits, but also to reveal the romantic sensibility she attempts to hide and deny. The surface details of Carlene's life are used to convey her sense of alienation and frustration and provide a contrast to the richer world of her imagination. Carlene escapes from her demanding domestic routine by recalling the solitude, silence, and simplicity of life with Adam at the Plantation. It is easier, more satisfying, to dream about her lost intimacy with Adam, than to face and act on their current estrangement. Carlene has no faith in reality; she is sure that her dreams are richer. She even prefers that Dave remain anonymous for as long as possible, so she can keep him a product of her own imagination. In "The Start of the New Season," the details of action and setting are an elaborate choreography of Janice's emotional progress, a progress that in many ways resembles Gabriel's progress in "The Dead" in that she struggles through a period of disillusionment and confusion, but arrives at a clearer understanding of her connnection to others and

the direction her life should take. In all three stories I have attempted to use surface details to achieve the kind of effect Joyce achieves: a clear revelation of the psychological, emotional, and moral progress of my characters.

Like James Joyce, John Updike also writes short stories of manners that combine realism and romance in an attempt to explore life's mysteries. Updike's attention to detail, his lyrical prose, and his themes of transcendence and self-fulfillment resemble Joyce as well. John Updike shares Joyce's belief in the essential mystery of human experience, and this sense of mystery dominates Updike's stories about contemporary family life. In Updike's fiction, the attempts of human beings to connect and to make sense of the world are dangerous, unfathomable, holy acts that reveal the truths of human experience: " . . . the typical Updike story . . . is dependent for its effect not on overt action but on the accumulation of details and perceptions leading to that moment of epiphany when we see beyond the chaotic surface of things."[28] Updike perceives mysterious spiritual undercurrents in ordinary experience. This faith in the significance of all human experience permeates Updike's fiction and is the aspect of his work that has had the strongest impact on my fiction. The Music School, Museums and Women, and Problems are the three collections of Updike's fiction that have had the most direct influence on my fiction. The stories in these collections focus on the themes of loss and fulfillment within the context of domestic life. An examination of two of Updike's stories will help to clarify the influence he has had on the thematic content of my own stories.

Many of Updike's characters, like my own, are haunted by a nostalgic

longing for a lost world. In fact, many of his stories depict characters whose epiphany occurs when the significance of a past experience suddenly becomes clear, endowing the experience with a new meaning and intensity. One story which captures Updike's almost sacred regard for lost experience is "In Football Season." This story conveys the adult narrator's awful sense of loss, but also his realization of the peculiar freedom and hopefulness he was allowed: "We were at that innocent age, on the borderline of sixteen, when damnation seems a delicious promise."[29] The adult narrator of the story knows now that this particular year was a kind of refuge, the only time of true innocence he will be given in life. Fully aware of the compromises and disappointments of adult life, he endows this memory with an almost sacred significance. His adult life cannot match the mystery and promise of the world he remembers:

> Now I peek into windows and open doors and do not find that air of permission. It has fled the world. Girls walk by me carrying their invisible bouquets from fields still steeped in grace, and I look up in the manner of one who follows with his eyes the passage of a hearse and remembers what pierces him.[30]

There are many echoes of this sentiment in my own fiction. In my descriptions of Carlene's discovery of the loneliness of adult life, in her desire to re-capture the sense of adventure and promise she associates with the past, in Janice's memory of her childhood and in the idealization of her father, and the narrator's desire (in "Second Childhood") to return to her old place within her family, I have drawn upon the bitter-sweet

depiction of the lost world of "In Football Season." The narrator in Updike's story knows now what he could not have known in his sixteenth year—that real freedom is momentary, elusive, and fragile. Updike describes through his narrator the intensity of this experience by isolating this phase of the narrator's life from all that came before and after: " . . . as children we had lived in a tight world of ticking clocks and punctual bells, where every minute was an admonition to thrift and where tardiness, to a child running late down a street with his stomach burning, seemed the most mysterious and awful of sins."[31] However, during his sixteenth year "we found time to be instead a black immensity endlessly supplied, like the wind."[32]

How do we reconcile that sense of promise and fulfillment with the realistic limitations of adult life and an evergrowing awareness of the finite constraints of time and our own mortality? In a way, we become once again the panicked child Updike describes, aware that time is running out, and we have somehow failed. In my stories I return again and again to this conflict. All my characters struggle to regain in the present some sense of a world they have lost.

Despite Updike's obsession with loss, his fiction is highly affirmative. He provides a careful balancing of "life's grits and bumps with intuition of its satisfactions and mysteries."[33] Updike achieves this balance by depicting characters who, despite their failings, weaknesses, and disappointments are able to momentarily transcend the pettiness of routine experience and discover a moment of pure, significant emotion. Updike's fiction has at its center a profound belief that human experience is meaningful. His characters have many faults,

but his stories emphasize the human potential for transcendence and spiritual and emotional growth. There are many stories of Updike's that have inspired me to try to convey this transcendent potential in my own stories, but perhaps one of the most clearly influential stories is "Man and Daughter in the Cold." This story suggests that our most profound and intimate experiences are often the result of chance, rare gifts of insight that change the shape of the world forever. A seemingly ordinary experience expands into an opportunity for spiritual or emotional revelation.

In "Man and Daughter in the Cold," Ethan, the protagonist, discovers in his daughter Becky the existential answers he has unconsciously been struggling with. The setting is a family skiing trip. Becky, age thirteen, is an expert skier; Ethan is a novice. He has trouble keeping up with his daughter and this sudden demonstration of her competency and talent makes Ethan see Becky in a new light: "Alone with his daughter in the rumbling isolation of the gondola, he wanted to explore her and found her strange . . ."[34] Ethan realizes that he knows very little about his daughter, having invested most of his time and energy on his sons. Becky's superiority and impenetrable mystery become increasingly obvious to Ethan. She begins to represent a kind of salvation to him. He has difficulty keeping up with her; the cold frightens him; his asthma begins to bother him, but "there was no way out of this white cave but to slide downward toward the dark spot that was his daughter."[35] Becky leads Ethan on a difficult, reckless journey to the unexamined world within himself: "In this way, in steps of her leading and waiting, they worked down the mountains, out of

the worst wind, into the lower trail that ran between the birches and hemlocks."[36] This establishes a new intimacy between them and they feel bound "together in complicity for the rest of the day."[37]

Later that evening as Ethan unloads the car, Becky comes out and offers to shovel a path to the garage. As she works, she explains to Ethan what she learned about asthma in biology class, hoping to help him understand his disease more clearly: " . . . it's kind of a tree inside you, and every branch has a little ring of muscle around it, and they tighten."[38] His daugher's insight into his own suffering comforts Ethan, and as they work together in silence his anxiety over his asthma, which he knows is worsening and will eventually kill him, lifts: " . . . as the minutes of companionable silence with his daughter passed he took inward notes on the bright quick impressions flowing over him like a continuous voice."[39] Ethan recalls his own father and a similar moment of intimacy: "The conspiracy of love. His father and he shoveling the car free from a sudden unwelcome storm in Newark, instantly gray with soot, the undercurrent of desperation, his father a salesman and must get to Camden. Got to get to Camden, boy, get to Camden or bust. Dead of a heart attack at forty-seven."[40] Suddenly, Ethan feels connected to the world in a new way: his father, himself, his daughter linked by this memory. Amazed by the realization that this synchronicity exists, Ethan confronts his petty jealousy of his students and colleagues, his fear of death, and the awful infinity of the night sky. As he observes the innocent grace of his daughter as she works to clear a path for him in the snow, Ethan transcends these concerns and achieves a moment of pure love and fulfillment:

> He was looking upon his daughter as a woman but without lust. The music around him was being produced, in the zero air, like a finger on crystal, by this hollowness, this generosity of negation. Without lust, without jealousy. Space seemed love, bestowed to be free in, and coldness the price. He felt joined to the great dead whose words it was his duty to teach.[41]

There are many echoes of Joyce's "The Dead" in this story and perhaps that explains its powerful effect on me and on my own fiction. Ethan has achieved the "dream of escape" that Gabriel finds at the end of "The Dead." Both men discover a kind of immortality, freedom, and fulfillment in finally recognizing their weakness and limitations, but also discovering simultaneously a deeper, more meaningful vision of their individual lives by acknowledging their connection with others. The images of cold and snow, the atmosphere of mystery, and the resolution of the two stories create strong parallels between the stories that seem more than accidental. It is almost as if Updike has consciously reconstructed Gabriel's journey toward transcendence in his depiction of Ethan's epiphany.

There are many echoes of this story in my fiction. "Man and Daughter in the Cold," like many of Updike's stories, suggests that the way to self-fulfillment is through communion with others. It is dependent on being able to escape from the self momentarily and really see another person, fully recognizing both that person's mystery and significance. Updike's belief in the ability of human beings to inspire

and experience transcendence has influenced my work in an important way: he has helped me to determine what it is I want to express through my fiction. In each of my stories, I have tried to depict how liberating "escape" from the self and immersion in another can be. The liberating effects of connection and communion that fill Updike's stories influenced my depictions of Janice and the narrator of "Second Childhood." Janice uses her memory of her dead father in a way that resembles Ethan's. This memory becomes a source of inspiration that guides Janice toward the revelation she seeks. As she struggles to exemplify and share with her family the selflessness of his love, Janice, like Ethan, becomes a kind of medium, establishing connection between her dead father's dreams and her troubled family. The narrator of "Second Childhood" also establishes a connection between the past and the present, and like Ethan, she is inspired by the innocent, profound wisdom of another. Cathy, like Becky, is essential to the progagonist's transcendence. Updike's stories clearly reveal a rich world of emotion and revelation. Ethan is still an asthmatic, still mortal, but for a moment he is also free. All my characters pursue this momentary escape, and the stories of John Updike have helped me to discover how it can be achieved.

Ann Beattie, another contemporary writer who creates short stories of manners, deals with many of the themes Updike explores: loss, identity and self-fulfillment. Ann Beattie has also had a strong influence on my fiction. In many ways, the influence of Joyce and Updike on my work has been primarily thematic. They have helped me to determine what it is I want to say through my writing. Their visions of human relationships have helped to clarify and define my

own vision. Ann Beattie has also helped me determine what it is I want to say, but she has also shaped the way I say it. Beattie has had both a thematic and stylistic influence on my work. The two themes that recur in Beattie's fiction are "the need for companionship and the inevitability of alienation."[42] These two themes are explored in the three stories represented here, and Beattie's fiction, especially her collection The Burning House, has influenced my handling of these themes. Many of the stories in The Burning House focus on the difficulties of coming to terms with the loss of the past and creating an adult life of commitment and direction. Beattie's characters are young to early middle-aged dreamers who struggle with problems of love, identity, loneliness, and disappointment. I can identify with many of Beattie's characters and the conflicts they experience because I am a member of the generation she writes about, and I am concerned with many of these same issues in my own fiction.

My characters, like many of Beattie's, are paralyzed by their unwillingness to move beyond the past and make a clear commitment to the future. Beattie and I both write stories that record a character's private emotional journey during a crisis of identity and direction. However, there are also important differences in our handling of these themes as well. In Beattie's story "Like Glass," one of the characters says: "Everybody who doesn't take hold of something, has something take hold of them."[43] This describes the plight of most of Beattie's characters, unable or unwilling to commit or connect, they drift from one experience or relationship to another, oppressed by the emptiness of their interactions with others. Because many of these characters

are in a state of emotional paralysis, they are unable to articulate their needs and desires. They are not only alienated from others, but from their essential selves as well. Attempts to transcend this alienation seem hopeless in Beattie's fiction; disappointment is the inevitable result of human experience. In Beattie's fiction, marriage, the family, and frienships merely camouflage the loneliness at the core of the human condition.

This romantic vision of the loner in existential crisis, struggling to find identity and meaning in life has a strong attraction for me. When I first began writing fiction, many of my early stories were modeled on Beattie's relentless depictions of the emptiness of contemporary life, but as I began to write more I became impatient with the incessent futility these stories conveyed. Even though there is a disturbing honesty in Ann Beattie's insistence on the essential loneliness of human beings, I have become increasingly uncomfortable with her message that unremitting disappointment is the result of all attempts at communication and connection. As my fiction has matured, I have become less interested in dwelling on characters engulfed in and paralyzed by a self-imposed despair. My characters, like Beattie's, do struggle with this despair, but my fiction attempts to examine how this alienation can be breached, if only temporarily.

In my stories, my protagonists achieve their "dream of escape" through connections with others: family, lovers, friends. In Beattie's fiction, the characters often give up the struggle just at the point when real connection and growth are possible. Her stories are full, for example, of characters who are "almost" able to love. In "Learning

to Fall," the narrator's rational fear of losing a sense of control over her life and emotions results in an absolute stifling of her emotional life.[44] It's often an all or nothing proposition in Beattie's fiction: to love makes one vulnerable, so love must be with-held, hidden, or denied. Beattie's characters are caught in a double-bind; there is no possibility of achieving self-fulfillment. I identify with Beattie's depictions of people struggling with this conflict. She captures the cautious, empty involvement that has replaced real love and connection in people's lives. I am indebted to her articulation of this, and I, too, write about characters who have become emotionally alienated from themselves and others. However, I hope to suggest through my depictions of these characters that alienation can be overcome. In "Afloat," Beattie describes the efforts of a stepmother to share in and compensate for the pain her stepdaughter has endured in the wake of her parents' divorce. Despite the woman's genuine empathy, she cannot communicate it to her stepdaughter, and the two cannot connect on a meaningful emotional level. In the final scene of this story, stepmother, stepdaughter, and the girl's father circle each other aimlessly on the surface of their swimming pool. The stepmother says: "I float between them knowing exactly how each one feels . . . knowing that desire can be more overwhelming than love--the desire, for one brief minute, simply to get off the earth."[45] This desire is similar to the transcendent dreams of my protagonists. In many ways Beattie and I are chronicling the lives of similar people with similar limitations and desires, but in Beattie's stories escape and connection are thwarted, while my protagonists are more successful in achieving

the integration they seek.

Carlene, like many of Beattie's characters, is lonely and unhappy. Her marriage seems doomed. She has, in a sense, given up, and she feels sorry for herself and has detached herself from others, living in the safe refuge of her imagination. She differs from most of Beattie's characters, however, in her ability to take the emotional risk before her, but still preserve and enrich her sense of self. At the end of the story Carlene is aware of and has accepted the moral and emotional constraints that define her; she cannot, and probably does not want to escape them. And because she has a clearer sense of where her commitments truly lie and she knows and accepts the limitations implied, the moment of pure release she allows herself takes on a transcendent quality. Whatever happens next doesn't matter in the context of the story because at that moment Carlene is free; her world has expanded and its dimensions will never be quite the same again. She has experienced the release the stepmother in "Afloat" dreams about because she has taken the dream one step farther by taking the necessary emotional risk.

Much of Beattie's fiction focuses on the alienation between men and women, and this is a central concern in my fiction as well. Beattie's fiction implies, and I also believe, that alienation between men and women can be both profound and crippling. In both "Learning to Fall" and "The Burning House," the female protagonist feels helpless, hopeless, unable to articulate the emotional chaos masked by her numb reserve. The passivity of these protagonists offers a kind of protection, but turns them into victims of their lovers' whims and decisions: " . . .

what will happen can't be stopped."[46] This fatalistic vision of the future paralyzes these characters. I am also interested in the difficulties of communication and commitment between men and women, and in my fiction romantic relationships are problematic. Carlene feels alienated from her husband; Janice is disturbed by her husband's separateness and mystery; the narrator of "Second Childhood" separates herself both physically and emotionally from her husband. My protagonists, like many of Beattie's, censor their attempts at communication with their husbands and lovers. Beattie's stories suggest that the emotional gulf between men and women is innate and unbridgeable. In "The Burning House" the female protagonist lies in bed with her husband as he confirms what she already knows; their marriage is over. He explains the difference between men and women: "Men think they're Spider-Man and Buck Rogers and Superman. You know what we all feel inside that you don't feel? That we're going to the stars."[47] This idea that the sensibilities of men and women are profoundly differently can be found in my fiction as well. However, instead of passively accepting this alienation as inevitable and constricting, my characters struggle to understand and come to terms with it. Janice, for example, is disturbed by the essential mystery of all human beings which she sees most clearly exemplified in Sam. The realization that there are secret facets of thought and experience which are his alone disturbs Janice and, for a while at least, causes her to withdraw from him emotionally. She begins to think of him as unfathomable and unreachable, increasing the distance between them. By the end of the story, Janice realizes that she can only really

know Sam through a revelation and expression of her own feelngs for him, and she takes the first step toward this connection by committing herself to her marriage at the end of the story. In most of Beattie's fiction the risk of commitment is too terrifying or too confining for her characters to abandon their exile within the self. The character's journey toward integration with another is cut short or comes to a dead end.

In addition to shaping my thematic concerns, Ann Beattie has also influenced the style of my writing. The detached objective voice of her prose appeals to me and seems to be my natural voice. Beattie, when she is at her best, achieves a strong emotional impact through the simplicity of her style. In the story "The Burning House," for example, Beattie creates a powerful sense of immediacy and tension through the use of present tense while the understated style and matter-of-fact prose provides a balance to the story being told. When her style works, as it does in this story, Beattie conveys both the objective glimpse into a life being lived and the emotional poignancy beneath. Because I so admire the effect Beattie achieves with present tense, I have had a tendency to write a majority of my stories in present tense. In both "Second Childhood" and "The Start of the New Season," I have attempted to capture the sense of immediacy Beattie achieves in "The Burning House." Since both of these stories concern protagonists who are in the process of directing their lives, present tense allows me to create the illusion of describing this process as it unfolds, which I think increases the impact of the discovery. The last sentence of "The Burning House" has a special power because we, as readers,

are partaking in an intensely intimate moment. To see a man announce to his wife as he takes her hand in their darkened bedroom, "I'm already gone," is to actually enter the private world of that individual at the moment of revelation.[48] This is the degree of intimacy I want to convey through the use of present tense in my own fiction.

In both "The Start of the New Season" and "Second Childhood," I am depicting a character's struggle for self-identity. This is an intensely personal and emotional journey. I hope that through the use of present tense, I can carry the reader along on this journey, allowing the reader to observe first hand the emotional progress each character makes. Ths use of present tense also creates the impression that life is unfolding at that moment; anything can happen. The epiphanies experienced by Janice and the narrator of the "Second Childhood" are mysterious experiences that are profoundly felt but cannot be rationally or completely recalled and expressed. Immediacy is essential to capture and convey the impact of the experience before it disappears.

Ann Beattie's work has played an important role in the development of my fiction, but I now find myself turning more frequently to a variety of other contemporary writers for inspiration and direction. Jayne Anne Phillips, Jean Thompson, and Lee Zacharias have all helped me to expand my artistic vision and take new risks with my writing. The writer to whom I find myself turning most consistently, however, is Joy Williams. Her collection of short stories, Taking Care, is a major inspiration and has enhanced my conception of the direction in which the short story of manners can go. Like Ann Beattie, Joy Williams

writes in an understated, simple prose, but she enfuses this simple style with a romantic lyricism. The final scene of her story "Taking Care" conveys the transcendental quality of her prose:

> For insurance purposes, Jones's wife is brought out to the car in a wheelchair. She is thin and beautiful. Jones is grateful and confused. . . Have so many years really passed? Is this not his wife, his love, fresh from giving birth? Isn't everything about to begin? In Mexico, his daughter wanders disinterestedly through a jewelry shop where she picks up a small silver egg. It opens on a hinge and inside are two figures, a bride and groom. Jones puts the baby in his wife's arms. At first the baby is alarmed because she cannot remember this person very well and she reaches for Jones, whimpering. But soon she is soothed by his wife's soft voice and she falls asleep in her arms as they drive. Jones has readied everything for his wife's homecoming. The house is clean and orderly. For days he has restricted himself to only one part of the house so that his clutter will be minimal. Jones helps his wife up the steps to the door. Together they enter the shining rooms.[49]

In her amazing choice of detail and in her realistic, yet evokative description of the homecoming, Williams integrates romance and reality to create a powerful, haunting vision.

The vibrancy, beauty, and simplicity of Williams' prose is both an inspiration and a challenge. Like Ann Beattie, she writes in a detatched, simple style. The danger of this type of style is its flatness, but Williams' fusion of romantic lyricism and detatched simplicity endows her work with an emotional intensity. In my own fiction, I am constantly struggling with the balance between the emotional content of my stories and the detatchment and flatness of a mannered style. Until I read Joy Williams' stories, I was unaware of the rich poetic potential inherent in this kind of style. Like Joyce and Updike, Williams casts an almost surreal aura of mystery over human experience. There is a dream-like quality to her prose that enhances the reader's sense of intimacy with a character. Williams takes us deep within her characters, truly to "the underside of consciousness." She does this by combining and selecting realistic details that resonate far beyond their literal meaning. In the final scene of "Taking Care," for example, the image of Jones's daughter opening the silver egg places her there in the scene with his wife and grandchild, creating a wonderful and mysterious symmetry. I have tried to capture some of the simple lyricism of Williams' prose in my own fiction. For example, the final scene of "Living Near the Sea" is indebted to my reading of "Taking Care." I tried to create a similar juxtaposition of realistic and dream-like detail to evoke the transcendent quality of the kiss. In general, Williams has helped me to become more aware of the power of small, carefully chosen details. Each time I read "Taking Care," I am struck by the richness of the story's imagery and the haunting quality of the seemingly simple details. Her work has encouraged

me to slow down and focus on the small details of a character's life in order to reveal the larger emotions.

Alienation and the difficulties of communication are prominent themes in Joy Williams' work. Her protagonists, like Beattie's, are often trapped and discouraged, but Williams is less likely to leave them stranded in an emotional wasteland. Like Updike and Joyce, her evocative details reveal a rich, hidden world within. Love is not doomed in her fiction the way it seems to be in Ann Beattie's, but it does take strange and sometimes disturbing forms. In "The Farm," for example, Williams provides a glimpse into the secret world where two women, brought together by tragedy, achieve an ominous and powerful intimacy: "The reality of the two women, placed by hazard in this room, this bright, functional, tasteful room that Tommy had created was being tested. Reality would resist, for days, perhaps weeks, but then it would yield to this guest, this visitor, for whom Sarah had made room."[50] If Ann Beattie's stories can be seen as reflecting the emotional poverty of contemporary life, Joy Williams' stories can be seen as reflecting the enormous emotional reservoir within us. Her fiction, for me, exemplifies the task of the short story of manners in our current society. That task is to look beyond the apparent emotional sterility our superficial lives suggest and remind us of the depths within, to test reality and make it yield. Her fiction helps me to envision new directions for the familiar themes of alienation and identity.

Until I began to write this critical afterword, I had given

little thought to the traditions and authors who have shaped my vision and my work. I was, in fact, apprehensive, of looking too closely at my own work, afraid that the results would be disappointing. But the examination of my work and the work of others required for this report has reaffirmed and intensified my desire to write by making me more aware of what my artistic vision is and how to reach it. For the first time, I have a clear sense of where my work is heading; my stories seem more valuable and legitimate now that I can place them in a traditional perspective. Examining the work of writers who have inspired me and shaped my fiction has made me feel part of an exploration that has infinite possibilities. I am now not only more aware of how my writing has evolved, but of the unexplored directions it yet can take.

Endnotes

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[14]Chase, p. ix.

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[23]Joyce, "The Dead," p. 209.

[24]Joyce, "The Dead," pp. 213-214.

[25]Joyce, "The Dead," p. 222.

[26]Litz and Scholes, p. 303.

[27]Richard Ellman, "The Backgrounds of 'The Dead,'" in Dubliners, ed. Scholes and Litz, p. 396.

[28]Walkiewicz, p. 41.

[29]John Updike, "In Football Season," The Music School (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 6.

[30]Updike, p. 8.

[31]Updike, p. 7.

[32]Updike, p. 7.

[33]Walkiewicz, p. 41.

[34]Updike, "Man and Daughter in the Cold," Museums and Women

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[35]Updike, "Man and Daughter in the Cold," p. 103.

[36]Updike, "Man and Daughter in the Cold," p. 103.

[37]Updike, "Man and Daughter in the Cold," p. 104.

[38]Updike, "Man and Daughter in the Cold," p. 105.

[39]Updike, "Man and Daughter in the Cold," p. 106.

[41]Updike, "Man and Daughter in the Cold," p. 106.

[42]Robison, p. 82.

[43]Ann Beattie, "Like Glass," The Burning House (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 220.

[44]Beattie, "Learning to Fall," p. 6.

[45]Beattie, "Afloat," p. 197.

[46]Beattie, "Learning to Fall," p. 15.

[47]Beattie, "The Burning House," p. 256.

[48]Beattie, "The Burning House," p. 256.

[49]Joy Williams, "Taking Care," Taking Care (New York: Random House, 1982), pp. 243-244.

[50]Williams, "The Farm," p. 208.

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"LIVING NEAR THE SEA," THE START OF THE NEW SEASON," "SECOND CHILDHOOD" THREE SHORT STORIES ALONG WITH A CRITICAL AFTERWORD

by

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Abstract The three stories, "Living Near the Sea," "The Start of the New Season," and "Second Childhood," examine the domestic world of three protagonists. Each woman discovers a transcendent potential in seemingly ordinary experience. Carlene, the protagonist of "Living Near the Sea," struggles to reconcile her romantic memories and longing with the reality of her life as a wife and mother. Dave, a tourist she meets by chance on the beach, acts as the catalyst who enables Carlene to integrate the conflicting facets of her life. "The Start of the New Season" examines Janice's attempt to reconcile her idealized images of those she loves with the flesh and blood reality. Her mother's second wedding provides Janice with an opportunity to gain a clearer understanding of herself, her family, and the direction her life should take. The final story, "Second Childhood," also examines a woman's attempt to give direction and purpose to her experience. Her marriage failing, the protagonist of this story returns to her parents' home, attempting to recapture the comfort and security she remembers. However, she must compete for her mother's attention with her new, pregnant sister-in-law, Cathy. The narrator's conflict with Cathy forces her to confront the discrepancy between her romantic vision of who she wants to be and the practical reality of who she is. Through her relationship with Cathy, the narrator discovers that a purely rational response to life is a limited response. She must acknowledge the private, romantic world within before the real world can be fully experienced and understood.

In the critical afterword, I begin by examining the literary tradition of manners, realism, and romance, as they pertain to my fiction. I

then discuss the four writers who have most clearly influenced my work: James Joyce, John Updike, Ann Beattie, and Joy Williams. By referring to specific elements of style and theme in Joyce's Dubliners, Updike's Musems and Women and The Music School, Beattie's The Burning House, and Williams' Taking Care, I show how these writers make use of the traditions of manners, realism, and romance and through this use have helped me to define, shape, and express my own artistic vision in "Living Near the Sea," "The Start of the New Season," and "Second Childhood."