

THREE STORIES AND A CRITICAL AFTERWORD

by

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for my mother and father
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Marbella

On the white sand of a Spanish beach, Isabel and her mother Francine drank sangria from a huge thermos provided by their hotel. Isabel lay on her back, on a towel; Francine lay in a lounge chair, her elbows placed carefully on the arm rests. It was Isabel's spring break from college, and they were talking about virginity.

"There's nothing wrong with being a virgin, mother," Isabel said. "It isn't abnormal, or unhealthy, as you seem to think."

"Of course there's nothing wrong with it. To a point. There's nothing wrong with it, for instance, if you're twelve. Or thirteen. Or even, I suppose, eighteen. Nor is there anything wrong with it if you're planning on joining a convent. Then it's perfectly acceptable. There is nothing wrong with it, either, if you're a lesbian." Francine paused, then leaned forward, frowning, earnest. "Are you a leabian, dear?"

"Of course not, mother," Isabel laughed. "I am not a nun, or a leabian, or frigid, or aberrant in any way. I'm just not ready, that's all. Okay?"

"Don't tell me," Francine said, the sarcasm entering her voice. "You haven't found the right man. Is that it? Are you buying into that one, sweetie? The Right Man fallacy? Because if you are--"

"Mother--"

"Because--if--you--are," Francine continued emphatically, "you are in for a rude awakening." She plucked a long mentholated cigarette from her monogrammed case and lit it slowly, then lifted her caftan above her knees to expose her already tanned legs to the sun. "The Right Man fallacy is a crucial fact of life. It is certainly something you need to understand fully, before you turn down good men for bad reasons. Now. As I understand it, the American government perpetuated this fallacy in order to boost the economy. Basically, they used the media to brainwash women into believing that there is such a thing as the Right Man-- that such an individual actually exists--one allotted for each heterosexual woman in the country. Yes. Every woman gets one. If she tries hard enough. If she makes herself desirable for her Right Man. It's a very sticky kind of thing, because of course one never knows when the Right Man might pop into one's life, bearing eternal happiness, and so one must always be at one's best."

"Where does the part about the economy come in?"

"Oh, Isabel, dear, think. Women develop a very expensive hunger for their own Right Man, and they will go to any length to satisfy this hunger. They become consumers. Consumers of romance. Once you buy into the Right Man fallacy, you buy everything that goes along with it. Deodorized tampons. Waterproof mascara. Crotchless panties.

Herbal creme rinae. You name it." Francine stubbed her cigarette into the sand. "This is what I'm trying to tell you, Isabel, and excuse me if I do say it's for your own good: There is no such thing as a Right Man. There are many--many--right men. An infinite possibility of right men!" she laughed, then grew serious again. "Now of course I think it's lovely that you want to marry and have babies and all that, if that's what you're planning. But for God's sake, don't save yourself for your wedding night. Nobody does that anymore, Isabel. No one ever did, as far as I can tell. There isn't any point to it."

Isabel propped herself up on her elbows, and shook her head. "I just don't understand all this. I just don't understand your sudden concern over my sex life. It is becoming an obsession with you. You realize that, don't you? And what it comes down to is this: It's none of your business. Now let's talk about something else, before you ruin this 'vacation' for both of us."

Francine was looking wistfully at the ocean, her chin tilted upward, her eyes scanning the scene. Her dark hair, streaked handsomely with white, was freshly cut, so that every strand fell smoothly into place whenever she moved her head. Her face was tan, smooth; her clear blue eyes startling in the dark complexion; her mouth large, sensuous, the bright teeth gleaming evenly when she smiled. From the hairline down she could pass for twenty-eight, and often did.

"Marbella is where I took my first lover, you know." This phrasing always sounded funny to Isabel, as if Francine picked up men the size of toy soldiers and tucked them surreptitiously into her pockets like a shoplifter. Her mother always "took" lovers, except when she got married-- then she took a husband. But that didn't last long. Soon she put him back where she found him, and laughed about the whole marriage as if it had been the biggest joke of her life. Isabel didn't remember what her father looked like. There were no photographs, no letters.

"My first lover," Francine continued dreamily. "I was sixteen. And gorgeous. I mean it." She sighed. "Back then Marbella was much different. The natives didn't speak English. There weren't all these ugly hotels along the beach. There weren't all these tourists. I've never seen so many damned Germans in my entire life." She shook her head, then smiled. "The Spaniards, you know, are real gentlemen. True romantics. That marvelous Latino blood."

"Romantics? Mother, they hiss at you in the streets. They hiss, like tomcats. Even whistling is better than hissing."

"Hissing, my dear, is a sign of their appreciation. You have to learn to take it as a compliment. American men stare at you secretly. When you look at them, they look away. Spaniards are much more open in their admiration. They never look away. They hiss, they look. If you look back, they

smile. You have to see it as a friendly gesture, hissing."

Isabel gave up. She rolled over, onto her stomach, concentrating on the sound of the waves hitting the sand, letting them lull her into drowsiness, drown out Francine's voice. She turned her head away from her mother, and looked at the people on the beach. How funny this is, she thought: All these people wearing next to nothing and lying on little pieces of cloth that they put on top of dirt, to expose themselves to the rays of a very bright star that has the power to give them cancer--but when it's just the skin, just this outer layer of stuff that holds them in, they don't care. She smiled to herself, musing, and it took her a few minutes to notice the dark-haired man with the dark tan and the mirrored sunglasses, who was sitting ten yards away and seemed to be looking in their direction. Except that with the sunglasses, she couldn't tell if he was staring at her, or at her mother, or at the Norwegian women next to them.

His staring, in any case, made her nervous. She found herself looking right at him, at the place where his eyes would be, and she wondered what he would do if she kept staring. The backs of her thighs tingled hotly from the late afternoon sun, and Isabel wanted to rub them, hard, with coconut oil. Instead she stood up and announced that she was going for a swim. She snapped the elastic of her suit around her buttocks and tugged on the shoulder straps. There was a small wet mark between her breasts where the sweat had

gathered and darkened the burgundy suit, a small black triangle of dampness. She passed her fingertips over it self-consciously.

"Do you want to go with me?" she asked Francine, glancing toward the dark-haired man.

"No thanks. The salt water dries out my skin. You go ahead; I'll sit here and keep watch." Francine wore huge lavender sunglasses that perched on her face like a butterfly spreading its wings. Behind the glasses her eyes were carefully made up with lavender liner, lavender eyeshadow, mascara. She is beautiful, Isabel thought. Too beautiful.

Isabel tied her hair back and walked into the sea. The water was warm, and she dove into a wave. She swam in long, even strokes that took her quickly away from shore. Her arms and legs felt strong, solid, powerful. After ten minutes she stopped, treading water and enjoying the huge silence around her. She floated on her back, aquinting up at the blue sky. It was so blue she felt she could reach up with her fingers and scratch away that brilliant, luminous color, to reveal the real sky-blue that lay beyond.

Isabel looked back at shore. From here the beach seemed very far away. She watched the big dots of people, scattered along the beach, and identified the dot that was her mother. Next to the mother-dot there was another dot, a dark dot, a male dot. The man in reflecting sunglasses. She pictured her mother watching herself in the two lenses. Then it

struck her that Francine was probably setting up a date for Isabel and the Spanish stranger, and she became angry. "Damn it, mother, leave me alone!" Her words fell flat on the huge expanse of water. She turned and looked around for some escape; a rock, a different beach, a passing boat. But there was nothing but water, and it was obvious that she had to go back to shore now, before she got tired. She began swimming slowly, using the breaststroke so she could watch Francine and the dark dot.

You are like an amoeba, Mother, she thought as she swam. You swallow everything you come into contact with--swallow it whole. And me especially. You have manipulated me ever since I can remember. Like this trip, she thought, and then had to laugh, it was all so ridiculous. Francine had arrived at her college at the start of spring break and driven her to New York, never telling her what was going on, only that she had a big surprise. It was almost like being kidnapped. She bought Isabel new luggage and a new wardrobe, since she hadn't given her the time to pack, and then drove them to the airport, and they flew to Spain. The minute they arrived at their hotel in Marbella, Francine announced her mission: to find Isabel a lover. She didn't see the perversity in this, but instead argued, "Men buy their sons prostitutes, right? We'll just update an old rite of passage, and we'll do it with much more class. We'll find you a continental lover, the best there is. That's what I had for my first, and

that's what we'll get for you, Isabel. You'll never forget him."

Well, of course it was ridiculous. But the problem was, Francine didn't really see it as ridiculous. She thought she had the right to choose Isabel's first lover as she had chosen everything else--her clothes, her car, her schools. Isabel had lived with Francine's choices because usually they were reasonable. And because Francine could make things so difficult for her otherwise. This time however, she had gone too far without realizing it. Isabel had to do something about this.

She emerged slowly from the water, trying to assess the situation on the beach before she was seen. Francine and the man were smiling and talking and nodding at each other like old friends. The man poured two drinks from the thermos, giving one to Francine. He leaned toward her and then leaned back, moving slowly, smoothly, as if he were underwater. He was drinking from Isabel's cup. She shivered, and folded her arms across her chest.

"Isabel, honey," Francine said in a thin voice. "I'd like you to meet John. John, this is my lovely daughter."

"Your daughter, Francine? I don't believe it!" He laughed good-naturedly, and shook Isabel's hand. She felt strangely relieved: The man was American, not Spanish, so Francine would not consider him a candidate. . . . Isabel started to pull her hand away but John was still holding it.

His grasp was warm and dry, generous, the back of his hand brown and strong. She gave a quick squeeze and they let go of each other.

Her head buzzed. Francine began talking about Seville but Isabel wasn't listening.

She sat on her towel and picked up the book she had bought at the airport. He could be a model, she thought. For cologne, or aftershave. He could be one of those men wearing a towel around his waist, talking to a woman on the phone about the night they just spent together. The man's apartment is full of violins, or yachting trophies, or antique clocks. The man is smiling, remembering, just the way John had smiled at her a minute ago--white teeth, suggestive mouth, strong jaw. A cheat that is meant for resting one's head upon, afterwards.

Isabel stared at her book, feeling a little guilty for these thoughts, but at the same time trying not to smile. Maybe Francine would fall asleep, after what she had had to drink. Maybe she and John could have a few minutes alone. The idea thrilled her: a whispered conversation, while Francine's head dropped back against the lounge chair, her jaw slack, her mouth open, snoring, ugly. John would make the first move, he would make it easy for her, and maybe--

But Francine did not go to sleep. She began to speak, rather loudly, and Isabel jumped at the sound of her voice.

"My lovely daughter is a virgin, John. Can you imagine?"

A virgin?" Francine smiled at Isabel as if she were a piece of sculpture, lying there to be appraised.

Isabel felt her cheeks go hot. Everything inside her contracted in anger. She closed her book and waited for her mother to apologize, or turn the whole thing into a joke. There seemed to be a smirk on John's face but when he took off the mirrored glasses and met Isabel's eyes, the smirk disappeared, the lips pursed slightly with concern, the eyes--the eyes revealed at last, deep and brown and large--were sending her some kind of message, some kind of signal, but she couldn't decipher it now, couldn't hold those eyes now, and she looked away.

"A dying breed," Francine continued wryly. "The twenty-one year old virgin. An endangered species, verdad? She's one of the few still surviving in America."

Isabel wanted to reach over and pinch her mother's perfect face until it turned purple with bruises. Instead she gathered her things, and pulled on her shorts and sandals. "You're drunk," she said, and walked away.

"Isabel!" Francine called after her. "For God's sake, don't be so sensitive. Didn't I bring you up to have a sense of humor, if nothing else? If nothing else, a sense of humor?"

Isabel didn't turn back, and Francine didn't follow her. She remained calm until she reached the hotel room, where she stood in the shower and sobbed as hard as she could.

Afterwards she felt better. She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes.

Stupid Francine, she thought. If only she were a little less self-absorbed, she would have seen that John really had shown some interest in her. And he might even have pursued her--isn't that what Francine wanted?--if Francine hadn't interfered so horribly. Isabel shook her head, then considered. John had looked so sympathetic, so . . . curious. Perhaps it was not too late after all. Perhaps John was, at this very moment, thinking of her. Maybe Francine's cruel comment had exposed her for what she was, and made him see how much she, the daughter, differed. He could be trying to escape Francine's clutches at this very moment. He could be planning to find her, to comfort her.

And then she went to sleep, thinking of how it might go.

* * *

An hour later she was awakened by laughter. Muffled, drunken laughter. She sat up in bed, confused. Someone bumped into a wall. The sounds, she realized, were coming from the bathroom. There were people in there. She got out of bed, quietly, quietly, and put on a sundress. Then she stood outside the bathroom door. The laughter had stopped, and there were new noises now, urgent and low. A familiar voice called out a name. Isabel froze, her eyes wide, her

body tense with realization.

The two of them were in there, on the floor.

She stared at the closed door and pictured John, his hand on the small of her mother's back, the brown eyes filled with a different message now. Francine's eyes would be closed. Her back would be checkered from the tiles--little red squares all over her shapely bottom.

Isabel felt stupid, angry, more humiliated than before. How dare they do this--how dare Francine do this? How dare her mother do this to her. Suddenly she wanted Francine to feel exactly how she felt now. She wanted her to feel shame, or at least embarrassment. Was Francine capable of being embarrassed? She didn't know. She was going to find out. She stood at the door, her hand in the air, waiting to touch the handle, waiting to walk in on them at just the right moment. Francine moaned, a deep guttural sound that stopped, then started again. And suddenly Isabel saw what was going to happen.

Her new knowledge stunned her. She dropped her hand and looked around the room, which was filled now with the light of late afternoon. A rich, heavy light. A beautiful new light.

You could pack your bags, she thought, take a cab to the airport, leave Marbella. You could escape. She breathed hard and fast. The air in her lungs seemed more substantial than before, as if it could nourish her, and she breathed it

greedily. You could escape.

But everything was already changed, or changing. The air, the light, the clothes she wore, her skin and hair, the blood running in her veins.

Isabel took a deep breath and pulled her dress slowly over her head, then let it fall to the floor. She started to cover herself with one arm but reached for the door instead. The motion seemed fluid, almost natural, and she followed it through to the other side.

Mr. Electrolux

Trev Forster did not belong in this situation. That was what he was thinking as he knelt on Mrs. Hammer's thick wall-to-wall carpeting, his hands deep in the acrylic blue.

Mrs. Hammer stood in the middle of the room. Her dark hair, flecked with gray, was loose around her shoulders; her green eyes were wide and staring. Trev looked down at the big fuzzy pink slippers that surrounded her feet. He imagined how she would look if that was all she were wearing. Two big fuzzy pink slippers; the rest of her pale as marble and cool to the touch.

He stood up, clearing his throat, and spoke in his young-and-handsome-college-student voice. "Well, why don't you think about it? I'll give you my card, and drop by in a day or two, to see what you've decided. That old Electrolux of yours will run forever. But with a power nozzle like the one I showed you, it'd be like having a new machine."

"Would you care for a cup of coffee or something, before you leave?" Mrs. Hammer didn't mention the power nozzle. Her eyes were on his chest. Trev wondered if she had heard anything he said. He wondered if she could read his mind.

"No, thanks, Mrs. Hammer. I really have to get going. I have a lot of doors to knock on today." He removed the nozzle from her vacuum and packed it into the box with the demo machine that he had brought in from the car. It's

stupid to leave now, he thought. She hadn't said, Forget it, I'm not interested. And God knew he needed the sale--the money.

He fit the power nozzle back into its cardboard compartment in the box. She watched him do it. Usually they didn't watch. Usually they busied themselves with straightening magazines on a coffee table, or making idle conversation. Even if they were hostile toward him, they never stared; they went into the kitchen and made noise at the sink. The room suddenly felt very warm and in his peripheral vision Trev could see the hot pink slippers shimmering around the edges, like waves of heat off tarmac. And lying at his feet he saw Mrs. Hammer, pale and smooth against the cushiony blue background, her eyes closed, her lips curved into a knowing smile. The image was so clear he had to shake himself to get rid of it. A drop of sweat rolled down his face, and he wiped it away impatiently. Then he stood up and reached for his coat, trying to avoid Mrs. Hammer's persistent gaze. She had not taken those empty eyes off of him.

"Well, Mrs. Hammer," Trev coughed. "Thanks for your time. I'll see you soon. And have a nice day."

"Goodbye, Mr. Forster. You have a nice day, too." She smiled without showing her teeth.

He picked up the box with the demo machine and opened the door for himself, since she remained where she was,

smiling, on her private ocean of carpet, in the middle of the white room, with the white couch and the white chair and no other furniture. He shut the door behind him without looking back, struggling with the box and the door and his coat which caught on the door handle.

Outside Trev loaded up the back seat of his car then drove to the turnaround at the end of the road. He parked and opened his window, dropping his head back against the seat. "You could have gotten a job at Burger King," he muttered. "You could have worked for minimum wage and gone home at night without having been humiliated even once." A door-to-door salesman--he, Trevor Forster, a vacuum cleaner salesman! Every day he felt a painful combination of shame and amazement. Every single day. It didn't matter that the situation was temporary. He shut his eyes and tried to relax. Think of the connection, he told himself. There was always a connection. Between this life, these people, and the other, real life. Then he saw Mrs. Hammer, naked against her carpet, but this time her arms were over her head and she looked like she was sleeping. Trev smiled. Modigliani. Amedeo Modigliani. Nude. 1917. Oil on canvas. The Guggenheim. That was it.

Trev congratulated himself and started the car. He would call it a day. He would go home and write Ellen a letter. He would tell her about how strange his life here was. And maybe he would even say that he missed her.

* * *

Trev was, temporarily, living with his mother in Connecticut. He was taking a leave of absence from school in order to make enough money to go back to school. He was majoring in art history but minoring in business, trying to be practical. The university he attended was in Massachusetts.

His mother lived in a small house that she bought with his father's insurance money, after he died. Trev did not remember his father. What he remembered was that his mother had always worked. She was a nurse and she worked the eleven-to-seven shift at the hospital, so they rarely saw each other because she slept most of the day. Still, he felt she was glad to have him home for a while. Even if they only saw each other at dinner time, he was there, a living presence in her house, sharing the same rooms and food and newspapers and television. On her days off they went into New York to visit museums, and Trev told her about the paintings and sculptures they saw. He had taken thirty hours of art history courses, and could remember the title of every painting he had ever studied, every artist's name, every date that he had memorized.

Now Trev stood in the kitchen and made himself a tuna sandwich. He ate over the kitchen sink and then took his

briefcase to the formica table, sliding his chair carefully across the floor so it wouldn't scrape against the linoleum and wake up his mother. In the briefcase was a spiral notebook. Two of the letters he had written to Ellen were still in the back of the notebook. They were foolish, stupid letters. He had said too much in them; he had said what he felt, and that was too much. He and Ellen hardly knew each other, after all. They had only slept together once. The letters he had sent--seven in the last three months--had all been light and funny and casual, even though he had written several drafts to make them sound just right.

On the first pages of the notebook he had calculated how many vacuum cleaners he needed to sell before he could go back to school. Each week he updated his figures. He needed thirty more as of last night. Thirty more commissions (half from cash sales, half from financed) would pay for next year's tuition. Two semesters. Then he would graduate. Thirty more sales. Seven letters. He opened the notebook to a blank page and sat in the hush of the yellow kitchen, thinking of love, and money.

* * *

The next day Trev didn't get into any houses before noon. He even tried a brand new neighborhood, a rich development that he had discovered the week before. The

houses were enormous, built on acre lots, well landscaped, sitting back from the new road and surveying their property like comfortable stockbrokers. As Trev drove slowly past, he saw that each house was built in a different style: Victorian, Tudor, Spanish, Gothic. The effect was strange, as if the entire neighborhood had been erected as a showcase and not as a place to live, to have barbecues, to raise kids. Perhaps the people who had moved in felt this way too, because they had carefully kept all the evidence of their living to themselves. The garage doors were closed, the lawns were bare. There were names on the mailboxes, but all the mailboxes were the same: small, black, sturdy, mounted on aluminum posts. The names were spelled out with the same shiny gold and black letters.

Trev parked the car and walked up and down the street. He walked cautiously up the paths that led to the huge front doors, waiting for alarm systems to go off or for guard dogs to come chasing him from the backyards. Instead nothing happened. He tapped the doors with the heavy brass knockers and thought he had never heard anything so absolutely hollow in his life. He rang the doorbells and listened as they sang their electronic tunes into emptiness, the sound fading even before the songs were finished. Once he heard footsteps on a staircase but he couldn't tell whether they were going up or down, and even when he rang a second and third time it was clear that no one was going to answer the door.

Trev skipped lunch, thinking of the thirty vacuums. He got into two houses in a row, but at the first he sold only a package of bags, and at the second he demonstrated the rug shampooer to a Mrs. King for forty-five minutes, with no sale. He just kept moving the machine over the stains that covered the ugly beige rug, and Mrs. King just kept pointing them out to him, as if that was what he had come into the house for. In his mind Mrs. King wore a pair of purple harem pants, gold tassels hanging from her breasts, flaccid arms enveloping him on the brown recliner. When he finished with the rug they both knew he had made a fool of himself and he didn't bother leaving her a card.

He drove back to the office to drink a cup of coffee and pick up more rug shampoo. Marilyn, the secretary, handed him a slip of paper as he walked in the door. "WHILE YOU WERE OUT," it said at the top. Underneath was scrawled the message, "Mrs. Hammer called @ 11 a.m. Will be home this afternoon." Trev stared at the message. He thought of the Modigliani nude. He thought of Ellen, a dancer with a dancer's body, better than Degas, better than Renoir. Better than anything. He put the message in his pocket.

In the demo room Trev poured a cup of coffee and sat down on one of the folding chairs, watching Cliff's door and counting the seconds before it opened: six. Cliff was the branch manager, but he hated being in the office by himself. Sometimes the office's morning meetings lasted forty-five

minutes, an hour, even longer, because Cliff didn't want his saleamen to drive off and leave him there alone. Now he strode across the room and shouted his greetings to Trev.

"Trevor! Good to see you! How's it going out there today?"

"Not great. I'm having some bad luck, I guess."

"Luck! Come on, Trevo-buddy. You've been working with me for three montha and you still talk about luck? Are we in the gambling business here or what? No! We are not! Come on, what's this game all about? Exactly?" Marilyn stepped in to watch. She loved Cliff's pep talks.

"Numbers," Trev answered, smiling in spite of himself.

"Numbers--yes, numbera. It's a numbers game. And how do those numbers work? In your favor, Trevor. Am I right? Here's what happena. Help me out here. Let's say you go out a hundred times, knock on a hundred doors, get a hundred no's. You're tired and frustrated, but you do not give up. And then--then?" he squinted his small eyes at Trevor. This was the cue.

"On that hundred and first door--"

"Yes, yes. On that hundred and first door," Cliff repeated, turning to Marilyn. He was getting excited now, pacing the room and waving his arms in pantomime. "On that hundred and first door, the customer opens up. Lets you in. You take out your machine. You show her how it works. She nods, smiles. Takes out the checkbook. Writes you a check

for the full amount. It's beautiful--no finance plan, no monthly payments, everybody's free and clear. She's got a terrific product, you've got a hundred bucks commission for fifteen minutes' work. Hell! You can't even call it work! It's a little conversation, a little dialogue. That's the joy of this business. That's the payoff." Cliff was beaming. His favorite part was coming up. There was a dramatic pause, then he whispered, "Numbers," shaking his index finger at Trevor. "Go out there and knock on enough doors and you'll make that goddamned sale and then you'll feel hot, Trevo-buddy, and you'll make another sale, and another, and the bonuses will come rolling in, and the checks will come rolling in, and the office will win contests and pretty soon we'll get to be number one, am I right? Number one! And we'll all be vacationing in the Caribbean for Christmas. I promise you. The Caribbean."

The coffee was thick from sitting on the burner all day but Trev swallowed the last gulp from his cup anyway. "Well, I guess I better get back out there, huh?"

"You betcha, Trevo-boy. And just remember, you gotta keep at 'em. They're out there, waiting for you." He grinned, his round face pink from exertion.

Trev signed out the rug shampoo from the stockroom and went out to the car. He decided to go to Mrs. Hammer's neighborhood and canvas the houses he had skipped the day before. Then he'd sell that power nozzle to her, just for

the hell of it. Thirty more machines, he told himself. That's my numbers game, Cliff-buddy.

He didn't get into any of the houses in Mrs. Hammer's neighborhood. Twice he had doors shut in his face before he finished his spiel. It was getting colder now, and there was a light snow falling. The sky was gray and white. He wanted to go home.

He got the power nozzle from the car and carried it to Mrs. Hammer's front step, then knocked on the door. Mrs. Hammer answered, wearing a bathrobe the color of a golf course, and the pink fuzzy slippers.

"Hello again, Mrs. Hammer," Trev said as cheerfully as he could. "Hope this isn't an inconvenient time?"

She stood at the door for a moment, then began to smile. "Of course not, Mr. Forster. I've been expecting you. Won't you come in?"

He followed her into the living room. Her old vacuum cleaner was still in the middle of the room, where she had brought it out yesterday.

"The secretary gave me your message. So here I am."

"Wonderful. Would you like a cup of coffee, or a drink?" She walked into the kitchen, but Trev could still see her from where he stood. She poured herself a glass of wine. "I don't have any real liquor in the house, I'm afraid, but there's some wine left, and there might be a beer in the fridge."

"No, thank you, Mrs. Hammer."

"Listen, you make yourself right at home, and I'll be right out." She walked down the hall into a back bedroom, carrying her wine glass high, and Trev sat down on the white couch to wait. He stared at the blue beneath his feet, and remembered the image of Mrs. Hammer lying there, at his feet. Naked. White. Still. Now the graceful, flat shapes of the Modigliani changed, and the body before him was a George Segal sculpture, startlingly human and unreal at the same time. Featureless. Rough plaster belly and legs. He forced himself to look away, at the blank walls, the blank furniture.

"Here, Mr. Forster, this is what I was looking for." Mrs. Hammer came back into the room, carrying a large yellow envelope stuffed with clippings and pamphlets. She had taken off the robe and slippers and was wearing shiny red shoes and red pants and a filmy blouse with black and red roses on it. Trev could see through the blouse, to the black bra underneath. He shut his eyes.

"Mr. Forster, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Mrs. Hammer," he said, meeting her wide and empty gaze. "Just a little tired. I think, Mrs. Hammer, if you don't mind, we should probably get this show on the road. I brought the power nozzle here--"

"Wait a second, Mr. Forster. Here's the thing." She sat down next to him on the couch. The envelope was in her

lap. "When you were here the other day, I kept thinking. There was something about this vacuum cleaner that kept, you know, ringing in my head. The name--Electrolux--it was so familiar. I couldn't remember where I'd heard it before. You see, I wasn't even aware that I owned an Electrolux until you pointed it out. Do you remember? You asked me what kind of vacuum I had, and I had to drag it out from the closet to show you? Well that's the first time I've heard the word 'Electrolux' in years. Oh damn, I'm not being very clear, am I? Well--here." She pulled out a brochure from the envelope, and handed it to Trev.

He took the brochure and held it carefully. It was yellow with age. On the front there was a picture, a drawing, of an old Electrolux model. Above the picture were the words, "Ten Reasons to Buy an Electrolux." He opened it. Inside, next to each of the ten reasons, were drawings of a woman vacuuming different things with different attachments. A floor, a rug, a staircase, a couch, the inside of a car. The woman had very large dark eyebrows, and large dark lips, and Donna Reed hair; her dress fit tightly at the bodice then swept out into a large skirt that tied in the back with a sash. Trev stared at the pictures. He wished he could make a connection. A connection that would make sense to her. All he could think of was Roy Lichtenstein. He imagined day-glo colors filling in the woman's face. He knew that was not what Mrs. Hammer intended.

"This is very interesting, Mrs. Hammer." His voice sounded rough, as if he had just woken up.

She laughed gaily. The laughter startled him. "That's me, Mr. Forster. That woman vacuuming. That's me, twenty-five years ago."

"I don't understand, Mrs. Hammer."

"I was a model. Back in the fifties. I modelled for commercial artists, but I'd forgotten that one of the jobs was for Electrolux. I used to model a lot for illustrations. I did ads for soaps, toothpastes, furniture, pie crust, nail polish, you name it. Sometimes they'd use me in an ad that had, say, three different women in it, talking to each other about the product--you know. And I'd pose for all three, and the artists would simply sketch in different hair, and different clothes, and that way they saved themselves money." She smiled brightly.

Trev looked again at the drawings, at the lips, the eyebrows, the dress. He looked at the shape of the chin, the nose. Then he looked at Mrs. Hammer. It was certainly possible. There was certainly a strong resemblance. But if this was why she had called him back He stood up, handing her the brochure. "Mrs. Hammer," he said. "Mrs. Hammer, this is very interesting. I enjoyed looking at this very much. Really. But tell me. Do you want to buy the power nozzle? Because if you don't, no offense or anything, but if you don't I really should be going."

She looked at him, suddenly flushed. "You don't believe me, do you?" Her voice was high and thin, her hands clenched into white fists. In her face there was anger, tangible anger, erupting like a child's. "You don't believe me, do you, Mr. Forster?"

Trev stared at her. She was becoming hysterical. He had never seen hysteria before, but surely this was it. What was he supposed to say? He didn't know. He couldn't think about it. She stood up to face him, holding him in place with her gaze.

"Look, Mr. Forster," she said in a determined voice. "I'll prove it to you. You don't believe me but I'll prove it to you. Mr. Forster. Mr. Electrolux Forster. Mr. Electrolux!" She walked into the middle of her blue and white room--a blue and white desert, Trev thought, and not an ocean after all--and dumped all the clippings and pamphlets from the envelope onto the floor. A hundred pictures of the pretty, empty face scattered onto the blue. She knelt down and began sorting through the ads. "You just have no idea, do you, no idea about anything?" Trev could see the black bra strap underneath the diaphanous blouse like an iron bar across her back. "You just think a woman sits around all day waiting for you and you think she really is waiting for you--"

"Mrs. Hammer, please, you're not making any sense--"

"But there are other things in life, you know. There

are other things besides your precious presence. There is this, and this, and this--" and with each "this" she plucked up a different version of the same woman. "See?" The wide green eyes looked up at him, glowing with anger and excitement. "See this?" She spread the three faces like three large playing cards in her hands, fanning herself with them and watching Trev as he watched her. He was transfixed, unable to turn around and find the door--unable to move from where he stood. "Ha! I thought so. I thought as much," she hissed. "The minute I saw you I knew. It's true. You knew it too." She dropped the three faces on top of all the other ads and pictures, and lay on top of them, her knees bent to one side, her arms lifted over her head, one hand clasping the other wrist.

She lay perfectly still. Trev watched her chest rise and fall and listened to her heavy breathing. He waited until she was calm and her breath was shallow, then knelt down next to her. All the other, younger Mrs. Hammers smiled up at him coyly and brightly and self-assuredly, as if to encourage him. He just wanted to make sure she was all right before he left. He couldn't believe any of this had happened. She might have had a heart attack, or a stroke--

"What are you waiting for?" she whispered slowly. He watched the words leave her lips. Like five separate messages that had nothing to do with each other. Moment after moment passed. The words hung in the air, waiting.

And then Trev watched himself bend down and kiss the partly opened mouth, as if he were watching someone else. Still she did not open her eyes. Nor did she slap him, or spit at him, as he half-expected. In fact, an almost imperceptible movement of her lips suggested she was actually kissing him back. This is not me, he wanted to shout--at her, at the empty blue and white room, at himself. I am not really here. I am a college student and I study art history and I love a girl named Ellen, oh God, a beautiful smart girl, and I have served on the student council and I understand foreign films. I am a student of art history--this is not real. This has nothing to do with me--

He unbuttoned the filmy blouse slowly, his hands shaking and his heart pounding blood in his head and through his body. Mrs. Hammer lay, passive, moving only enough to help him strip her. It was impossible, what he was doing, but he kept going as if each step were more inevitable than the last. First the blouse, then the cheap red shoes with the loose heels, and the knee-high stockings with torn toes, and the red pants with the stain on one knee, and the black bra and matching panties

She never once opened her eyes. Afterwards, she lay, naked, on the old brochures and ads and pictures and clippings, and Trev watched her closely as he dressed. The eyes stayed closed, the lips curved into a knowing smile. The chest rose and fell, rose and fell. He backed out of the

door, leaving behind his demo machine and the power nozzle. He didn't care. She could have everything. She could keep it.

Outside the air was fresh and cold. He ran to his car, jumped in, and drove quickly away, afraid to look back. God only knew what would happen next. Anything could happen with a crazy woman like that. Maybe she waan't crazy. Maybe she was setting him up. Was there a Mr. Hammer? Was she calling him now? Or the police? Would she accuse him of rape? There was evidence--on her, of course, and then the Electrolux equipment, he shouldn't have left it behind . . . Trev opened the window, gulping in the cold air. He drove the speed limit, taking no chances. In the rearview mirror he watched for highway patrolmen. He was driving on the interstate now, going west--the wrong direction. But he was not ready to go home.

Ten miles went by, twenty. He read the highway signs as if searching for clues. It would be all right. She was crazy; no one would believe her. His hands trembled on the steering wheel. He shook himself. Before long he would look back on this and laugh. He would sit in the Union drinking coffee with his friends during study breaks, and he would tell them a funny and amazing story about his days as a vacuum cleaner salesman.

Trev forced himself to relax. He settled back in his seat and looked at the sky. It had cleared and the sun had

already set, but the afterglow was still spread across the horizon. It looked just like the sky in an impressionist landscape he had studied last fall. The same exact shades of purple and rose. And the clouds, dimpled in the center and ragged around the edges. He could picture the way the slide of the painting had looked on the movie screen in the art library. The real sky faded in the presence of this illuminated image. Pissarro, or Corot? Trev wondered. He gripped the steering wheel, his palms suddenly damp. He could not for the life of him remember.

Meeting the Pacific

Where I come from, the biggest event in a girl's life is still her wedding day. When you get to be a certain age, people start asking when you're going to start a family. And that's when I started making other plans.

It wasn't as easy as it sounds, though. All those years of bringing up my brothers and sister--I wasn't sure what else I could do, except raise kids. Every day after school there was the housework, and getting dinner on the table, and after dinner there was the dishes, and the laundry and the mending. Seemed like I never got caught up. And if ever I thought of life after eighteen, it spread out before me like miles of empty space, and I was afraid to look at it for fear I'd fall in. It took me until my twenty-second birthday to leave that house.

I waited until Mary, the youngest, was safely enrolled in the ninth grade. I figured by then she was old enough to handle herself. My father didn't want me to go but he never said as much. I think he suddenly realized what had been going on all those years, and felt guilty for it. But if he felt guilty, I felt worse. Soon after I left, though, he hired a housekeeper and then I didn't feel bad anymore. I only wondered why he hadn't thought of that when I was eleven, and Mother died.

* * *

I don't know why, exactly, I chose California. I wanted to get to the edge of something. From Flush, Kansas, it's about the same distance anywhere you choose. So I boarded a westbound Trailways and stayed on it until I could see nothing but blue.

The Pacific. I still love the feel of that word in my mouth. Even after I've lived here for almost a year, I still like to say it over and over to myself. I think of it more as an adjective than an ocean: pa-ci-fic. In the mornings I sit at the kitchen table and look out the bay windows and from this distance it reminds me of prairie. I block out the city of Santa Cruz with my hand and concentrate only on that blue-gray-green, that stretch of color that goes on forever, and I laugh when people tell me that Kansas is flat.

Close up, I hate the ocean. Clay tells me it's fear of the unknown. But that's Clay for you--a Ph.D student in English, and full of theories. I just can't imagine being in that water with all those things going on underneath me, a whole Jacques Cousteau world and who knows what else (dead bodies? discarded murder weapons?) that I can't see. All that blue space, and me just a dangling speck in the middle of it.

* * *

I met Clay at the coffeehouse where I work, a couple of months after I got here. The coffeehouse is a trendy place, lots of plants and rough wood floors and ceiling fans, but I like it. Some of the tables have checkerboards painted on them, and old men and young men spend hours there, playing checkers and drinking coffee.

I suppose it sounds funny: The farmer's daughter meets the New York intellectual in California. All I know is that when I saw Clay studying the coffeelists on the wall, his brown hair dishevelled, a gentle crease along his forehead, smile lines around his mouth, I recognized him immediately. I think I dreamed him, the night before I left home. Anyway, he looked perfect to me. He looked real.

There wasn't any sense of hurry about it. I made him his cup of espresso and was glad when he reached for the white sugar instead of the brown. He sat at the counter and read a magazine, but he looked at me twice before leaving and the way he looked, his dark eyes serious and laughing at the same time, I knew he'd come back.

On our first date, we went to the boardwalk and I fainted on the ferris wheel. I had never been so high up before and had no idea I was afraid of heights, but there it was: We got stuck at the top and I got dizzier and dizzier--vertigo, Clay explained, holding my clammy hands and telling me not to look down--and finally I couldn't hold out anymore,

and I fainted. I wasn't out for long, but when I came to I felt sick, and Clay had to yell and scream at the guy who operated the thing to get us down.

"Has that ever happened to you before?" Clay asked me later, as we walked along the beach, away from the carnival noises and the smell of cotton candy and hot dogs, sipping Cokes through straws and watching the waves.

"What? Passing out a hundred feet off the ground? No." And then I started to laugh. The whole thing seemed suddenly very funny to me, and Clay's face, as he looked at me, was so full of concern, and I felt so ridiculous. . . . But there's no point in explaining, because I wasn't really laughing at any one particular thing. It's just that once I start like that, I can't stop. So I collapsed on the sand, surrendering to my hysteria. It had been a long time since I gave in that way.

And in retrospect, I suppose that's the moment I first fell in love with Clay. He didn't ask what was so funny, didn't look away, pretending not to know me. He watched me for a few seconds, and then, as if it were a huge relief, exploded into a belly-aching, whooping laughter. I'd never heard a man laugh like that. He rolled on the sand next to me, and every time we looked at each other we laughed and howled some more. Every time we promised to stop, to calm down, to take a few deep breaths, one of us would snicker or snort and it was all over. It went on and on until I finally

and inevitably crossed that dangerous line into tears--not just tears from laughing, but real tears, crying tears. Clay still didn't think I was nuts, though I may have been. Instead he did exactly the right thing for the second time in ten minutes.

And then I felt as if I really had fallen a hundred feet from the air, but instead of landing on cement and feeling the thud of death, I had floated down to this soft warm Californian sand, floated down to this man who knew how to laugh, and knew how to hold the earth still for me so I wouldn't fly off into space forever. He didn't let me go until eight months later, when I became pregnant.

* * *

I can remember very clearly the day my sister Mary was born. I was eight; my older brothers, twins, were in junior high. My younger brothers, Matt and Todd, were four and three. Todd was supposed to have been the last baby.

I can remember because it was the first day of third grade and I didn't get to go. I had walked to the end of our lane and was waiting for the school bus, standing in my blue dress with the little white flowers on it and the ruffles at the bottom, trying not to get dust on my new Mary Janes. Just as I spotted the yellow bus making its way slowly toward me, I heard my father's pick-up truck coming from behind. I

looked and saw my mother in the passenger seat, with Todd and Matt in the middle. My heart sank.

I shut my eyes, tight, and whispered, Please God, let the bus get here first, let the bus get here first so I can pretend I don't know it's Mother's time and I can get on the bus and they'll have to take the boys with them or put them somewhere else, at someone else's house--let the bus get here first so I don't have to miss the first day of third grade. But it was hopeless. The bus was too slow. The pick-up stopped and my father got out, holding Todd. Matt climbed out by himself and stood next to me, waiting.

Mother rolled down her window. "We're going to the hospital, Ruthie. You'll have to stay here and mind your brothers until--" her face registered a contraction.

My first day of third grade. And Mrs. McCann, the nicest teacher in the school, Mrs. McCann would have us write our names on pieces of manila with magic markers, in any colors we wanted, and tape them to our desks and then hand out all the new books for the year, and if I wasn't there--

"I hate this!" I shouted. "I hate babysitting, I hate babies, I hate this!" My father was silent. He put Todd down next to me and walked back to the truck.

"Ruthie, you quit that," Mother said. "There isn't time for this nonsense. You'll go to school tomorrow, or the next day." She winced again. Her arms were holding her huge, ugly belly and her face was pale and sweating. I took Todd's

hand, and they drove off.

The school bus arrived right after that, the doors opening expectantly. "You're too late," I said. Then I turned and we began the walk back to the house. I kicked at the dirt and watched the fake patent leather lose its shine.

"Is Mommy having the new baby now?" Matt asked.

"Yea," I snapped. "One more for me to take care of."

This turned out to be truer than I imagined, because shortly after Mary's birth, Mother found the lump on her breast, and I didn't complain anymore.

* * *

Her death took place far away from us, in a hospital in Houston. She had been in and out of hospitals for three years. When she came home to visit she was already a ghost, spending her days in the recliner, covered with afghans she had crocheted herself years before, too sick to eat. She wore a wig to hide the baldness but it made her look even stranger to us, a brunette impersonator from another world.

She died in early summer, her favorite part of the year. The twins were out dehorning calves with my father when I got the phone call. Matt and Todd and Mary were playing down by the creek in back of the house. It had never occurred to me that my mother would die and I would be the first to hear about it. The doctor didn't even want to tell me, since I

was so young. But I knew from the way he talked what had happened, and once I knew he couldn't deny it. I kept wondering how I was supposed to tell my father--which voice to use, which words.

After I hung up the phone, it was as though my mother's spirit passed through me and dropped off all its earthly worries: children, house, meals, bills. Until then, my responsibilities had felt temporary, and unreal. Now they were very much mine. I took the frying pan full of chicken off the stove, then called the kids to come back to the house and watch "Loat in Space" until I got back. I remember giving them a bowl of cheese doodles and glasses of chocolate milk.

The men were working a mile or so from the house. There was a corral set up in a pasture and another rancher from Westmoreland was out there helping us dehorn. It's an ugly business and I can remember walking along the gravel road, listening to the bellows and shrieks of the calves; a frantic and horrible sound. I could picture their eyes rolling back and bulging from the fear and pain. As I walked I pretended I was a hitchhiker in the middle of her travels across the country, no luggage, no money, just roaming the land like a hobo. I even whistled for a while and peered into the horizon as if I were waiting for the next freight train to head my way. I didn't think of my mother, and for years this made me ashamed.

The men had their hands full and didn't see me until I was a couple hundred yards away. They all stopped and watched me approach and I kept walking, didn't raise my arm in greeting or anything, and I remember thinking what a long way I had left to go, and how suddenly tired I felt. As I got closer I saw my father lay down the big pliers, take his hat off, and wipe his face with a bandana. He knew, of course. As it turned out, I didn't have to say anything at all.

* * *

I moved in with Clay a month or so after we met. There was no big decision; it seemed like the most natural thing in the world. Our mornings and nights became a perfect frame for the rest of the day. We were like two substances of equal weight sitting in the pans of a balance, and the beam was always level between us. We took turns making breakfast for each other, and read our horoscopes in the morning papers, holding hands across the table. In the evenings when I came home from work we sat on the sunporch off the bedroom--actually it's a just a flat roof that we climb through the window to get to--and sipped gin and tonics, played cribbage, and talked about our days. Sometimes we told each other about the places we came from, and we learned a lot about each other that way. We had been together only eight

months when I began throwing up in the mornings.

But I knew well before then. In fact, I knew the exact moment it happened. It sounds impossible, but it's true. I got out of bed and went to the bathroom and checked my diaphragm, feeling how it had slipped. Then I ran the shower and stayed in there for a long time.

I was sick with it almost from the beginning. Psychosomatic, maybe. But sick is sick. I bought one of those drugstore tests and Clay came home one afternoon and found me staring at the little glass tube full of pee that had changed color, and that's how he found out. When I looked up at him, it was clear what our differences were. His face shone with excitement, and something close to awe; mine went pale-gray, like a sheet that needs bleaching, and I had to put my head between my knees so I wouldn't faint. When I felt better we sat at the kitchen table and drank iced tea. I let him talk first.

"Ruthie, I know this is completely unexpected, completely unplanned," he began. "But you know, this isn't necessarily bad news. Maybe this was somehow meant to be. We're healthy, smart, good people. We'd be good parents. I love you, Ruthie. And I'm ready to marry you, or however you want to do it."

"Clay, wait a minute. We're in no position to even talk about--"

"Listen, in a year or so I'll have the Ph.D and I can

start looking for a teaching job somewhere, anywhere you want."

"That's not what I mean. When I say 'position,' I'm not talking about jobs. Or money. Or two-bedroom apartments. I'm talking about being ready. I'm talking about rushing into something that's bigger than we can handle."

"I don't think that's true. I think we could handle it. And why not have a family now, since this has happened? Why not?"

I poured myself more tea, adding a spoonful of sugar, and clanking the spoon against the sides of the glass as if to tap out the thoughts in my head. "Okay, Clay. Look. Maybe I'm not talking about something that we, as a couple, cannot handle. Maybe I'm talking about something that I, as an individual, cannot even begin to imagine. Or no--I can imagine it all too well. I know exactly what it would be like." I shook my head. "Some mother I'd be. I left Mary to come out here and try a new life. Don't you see? A new life. A different kind of life altogether. If I had wanted this, I could have stayed home and married and had babies and never bothered to wonder what went on in the rest of the world."

I watched his face, watched the struggle in him. He couldn't come over to my side yet. He wanted to, but he couldn't. Next door someone turned on the radio. I could hear the chanting of a Talking Heads song: "The world moves

on a woman's hips. . . ." Clay took off his glasses and lay them on the table. There was a rip in the plastic tablecloth that my fingers wouldn't leave alone.

"I'm sorry, Ruthie. I'm not making this any easier. We're not making it easy for each other, I guess." I kept waiting for him to take my hand away from the tear that I was making bigger. But he had let go of me, if only temporarily, and I had to go to the doctor that afternoon to confirm what I already knew. And to set up other appointments. I couldn't hesitate now.

He put his glasses back on without rubbing them on his shirt, as he usually did, and when I looked at him the distance between us seemed wider than California is long, wider than the sea and the prairie combined, wider than the sky that spread over us on the day he first caught me in his arms and held me because I cried for no reason.

* * *

Later that week, on our way to the clinic, I remembered this trip to Kanaas City that my mother and I took once. I was the only girl in the family then--Mother was pregnant with Mary--and it was a very big deal, and in fact one of the only times I can recall going anywhere faraway with my mother before she got sick. But the thing I remembered most about the trip was not the hotel or the restaurants or the museum

or the stores. The thing I remembered most was this old couple we saw. They were walking toward us and the man took these slow, unsteady steps, his hands groping the air, while his wife held onto one arm as well as she could, and every time they reached a crack in the sidewalk the wife lay down this piece of kitchen linoleum over it, and had to coax and plead with the man to take the next step. He put his foot shakily onto the square tile, and then stepped onto safe ground again, until the process started all over. I was astounded by this. Even my mother didn't say, Don't stare. Why didn't they walk on the street, I wondered. Why didn't they stay at home? A year later I thought I must have dreamed the whole episode, it was so bizarre, but I asked my mother--she was hospitalized in Topeka by then--and she said, no, I hadn't dreamed it, and weren't we lucky not to suffer from such phobias? Wasn't life hard enough without that?

Clay and I were all talked out that morning, but as we walked I had a long conversation with Mother. It didn't feel as though I was making up her words; they just filled up my head on their own. We talked about little things--the calming sounds of the ocean waves on the beach, the early summer smell that every California morning has, the feeling of possibilities that new places bring. She didn't mention the abortion, but she knew about it, because she stayed with me the whole time. Clay kissed me on the cheek in the clinic waiting room and I went in and lay down on the examination

table, my feet in the stirrupa, and I kept my eyes closed so I could feel her cool hands pressed against my face, the way she used to do when I was very little and felt sick or unhappy. She told me I was going to be all right--she said it over and over--and I concentrated on her voice, blocking out the loud sucking noises and blocking out the pain.

Afterwards the nurse took me to a different room and gave me orange juice and another valium and a box of Kleenex. I lay down on a hard cot and for a few minutes I was alone again--my mother was gone and the beige walls and orange curtains in the room made me cry. Soon, though, Clay came in to sit with me until I was ready to go home, and as the tranquilizer took effect and my arms went numb, he squeezed my hands, letting me know I was still there.

* * *

It has been two months since then. Only two months, but it is amazing how fast our life together can absorb things, even bad things. Today, especially, there is a readiness in both of us to go forward. Maybe because it's my anniversary: today makes one year since I moved here, and Clay and I celebrate by taking the day off. We drive to Capitola where the beaches are less crowded, and walk through the town and down to the water. It is another beautiful day, sunny and clear, and as we walk I gaze at the huge expanse of blue, and

feel the wet sand shift under my feet, and I have that feeling of complete contentment that only washes over you once in a great while. Clay finishes telling a funny story about his eccentric grandmother in Brooklyn, and we are quiet now, listening to the ocean and the gulls, and the laughter and squeals of children playing at the other end of the beach.

I watch the waves rush toward me and slip back again, and it seems as if they are coaxing me in some way, drawing me toward them, and it is almost like being hypnotized. There are people in the water, riding the waves, buoyant, safe. Finally I can't resist and I kiss Clay on the mouth and run into the sea in my shorts and tee shirt. I swim out until I can't touch bottom, then I tread water, watching Clay watch me from shore. A big wave covers me for a moment, but I hold my breath just in time. When I emerge I have not swallowed any water but everything tastes of salt. I lick my lips, and wave at Clay. He stands there for a minute, laughing, then kicks off his shoes and plunges in to join me.

A Critical Afterword

When I first began to assemble the stories for this report, they struck me as having little in common. They seemed to represent a relatively wide range of narrative voices, styles, and themes, and their discreteness was one reason I chose them for this discussion. But in examining these stories more closely, and in thinking about the influences on my work more carefully, it became clear that all three stories are in fact organized around the same thematic concerns. And when I began to study the authors who have most influenced my choice of subject and tone--among them Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, Jayne Anne Phillips, Jean Thompson, and Ellen Wilbur--I realized that it was their treatment of these themes that has drawn me to their work time and time again.

To begin with, "Marbella," "Mr. Electrolux," and "Meeting the Pacific" are all concerned with a young person's attempts to understand or confirm his or her sense of self in an environment that is somehow antagonistic to their growth. All three protagonists are somehow displaced--either they are away from home, or back at home, or trying to find a new home. In these settings their moral convictions and value systems and identities are challenged by other characters and by the situation at hand.

More specifically, these challenges contain a sexual element. The protagonists' identities at the beginnings and endings of their stories are strongly connected to the choices they make about sex and their sex roles. Isabel's virginity, Trevor's fantasies, and Ruthie's attitudes toward the traditional roles of wife and mother are in a sense the premises with which their stories begin--the backdrop against which the stories' conflicts will be played out.

In all three stories a crisis occurs which forces the protagonist to alter the established pattern of his or her behavior, and leads to a new outlook on life and self. The characters break the taboos inherent in the stories' premises: Isabel succumbs to adopting her mother's values as the best way to avenge herself and lose her virginity; Trevor acts out one of his fantasies about a customer, which triggers the lapse of memory at the end of the story and will, perhaps, propel him into self-examination; and Ruthie confronts the fear of pregnancy, has an abortion, and continues to live with a man to whom she is not married.

Clearly it is not the sex in and of itself that is important in these stories. Rather, the sexual conflicts are emblematic of the characters' larger struggles. Isabel's struggle with her sexuality is a corollary of her struggle with her mother, and her need to establish an identity separate from Francine. For Trevor, the experience with Mrs. Hammer indicates a problematic discrepancy in his perception

of himself. And Ruthie's fear of pregnancy and marriage results from her resentment toward her mother, whose death forced Ruthie into maternal responsibilities at a very young age.

"Meeting the Pacific" is also representative of another thematic concern in my fiction: the effect of the past, and the memory of the past, on the present. While the other two stories are told in a straightforward narrative, using characters' histories and backgrounds only minimally for exposition purposes, the past plays a crucial role in Ruthie's story. In order to illustrate the effect of where she has been on where she is going, I juxtapose flashbacks from Ruthie's childhood on a farm in Kansas with scenes from her present life as a young woman finding her own way in California. The episodes from the past are thus as important as the ongoing story.

My fiction is not often concerned with extensive and far-reaching changes of character. The endings of my stories are usually quiet in tone, with (it is hoped) a feeling of inevitability about what has occurred. The characters do not change so much as change their view of their lives; they gain a new perspective, or make a subtle move toward a new phase of their lives ("Marbella" features the most dramatic ending of any story I've written, and it is one that risks a great deal). The stories nonetheless involve a certain process of growth, with steps the characters must take in order to reach

a new level of self-acceptance, tranquillity, passion, awareness--whatever it is they lack. There is an open-ended quality about the endings of the first two stories, in that the reader doesn't know exactly what will happen on the other side of the bathroom door in "Marbella," or what Trevor's next thought will be after realizing he has lost a piece of his "real" life in "Mr. Electrolux." "Meeting the Pacific" has a fairly strong sense of cloasure: Ruthie's story is resolved, and I cannot imagine a reader feeling it is imperative to know "what happens next." But even in the open endings there should be a sense that the characters have come to the end of a certain phase in their lives, and there is nothing more to tell about that particular phase. The stories stop short of telling all, but they should tell enough.

* * *

My greatest debt is perhaps to those writers who provided the most effective introduction to some of these ideas in the first place: Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, and Doris Lessing. At first glance I suppose these three seem an odd combination. The novels of Jane Austen depict a time and place that seems quite remote from Woolf's Bloomsbury, or Lessing's Africa. Characters such as Elizabeth Bennett, Mrs. Dalloway, and Martha Quest operate in different worlds and

act upon different motivations, and their struggles to establish their identities in meaningful ways within the confines of their environments entail very different sorts of conflicts indeed.

But the fundamental concerns of these writers, in spite of superficial differences, are remarkably alike. The elements of Austen's work that I have drawn upon, for instance, include the following: her focus upon characters' manners (and other external details) to reflect their morals (and other inner qualities); her insistence upon keeping clear, defined divisions between the public and the private self; her delineation of emotional growth as a process that begins in self-deception and misunderstanding of others, and ends in self-knowledge and compassion; her protagonists' need to find the right husband--and with him the right home, the right social position, the right place in the world. Though this is by no means a comprehensive listing of Austen's concerns, they strike me as among the most important. And they are shared by Woolf and Lessing, though manifested differently by each.

Virginia Woolf treats these themes by entering into her characters' consciousness and allowing us to see the world directly through their eyes. Here, their examinations of the ordinary are made singular and even beautiful through their perceptions. Domesticity, social responsibility, friendships, marriage, and the individual's responses to her

environment are all portrayed with great feeling and insight. These are achievements that have inspired me even if I do not specifically aspire to them in my fiction. Further, Woolf's mastery of the language is, I feel, unequalled; to be absorbed in her books is to be transported not by events or even characters, but by the movement and rhythms and sounds of the words themselves. It is Woolf who has demonstrated for me most clearly what it is to be truly sensitive to language.

Doris Lessing is the only writer of the three whose work I first read outside of any academic context. While Lessing's influence then was primarily from her "Children of Violence" series, her stories, such as the collection The Habit of Loving, were of great importance as well. In particular, her stories which deal with sexual situations as the contexts for self-discovery are of interest to me.

Like Austen and Woolf, though in more overt ways, Lessing examines the complexities and textures of intimate relationships. Many of her stories deal with rites of passage, marriage, infidelity, emotional dependence and independence, and sexual fulfillment (or lack thereof). Her stories often end, like mine, with the altering of the protagonist's perception about his or her situation as a direct result of a crisis in a relationship. Her characters sometimes become emotionally and spiritually paralyzed as a result of their experience. In the frequently anthologized

"To Room Nineteen," for example, the protagonist suffers from an increasing feeling of emptiness and futility, though she has what appears to be a perfect life, and she finally commits suicide. Lessing's stories do not usually end with such dramatic expressions of the characters' hopelessness and despair. But her people are often left isolated and alienated from one another, unable to make the connections with each other that would save them from their emotional and spiritual exiles, if only temporarily. While my earliest fiction encompassed a similar vision, recently I have begun to strive for more affirmative resolutions in my work, as I will discuss in my conclusion.

The works of Austen, Woolf, and Lessing have been invaluable in helping me to think about the things I want to write about. Their focus on the individual's attempts to establish relationships with others while maintaining a strong sense of self is a focus I share, as do the three contemporary authors I mentioned earlier, Jayne Anne Phillips, Jean Thompson, and Ellen Wilbur. I will discuss stories by these three writers in some detail in order to explicate and illustrate our common thematic concerns.

Jayne Anne Phillips' first widely acclaimed collection of short stories is titled Black Tickets; in 1984 she published a novel, Machine Dreams, and she has recently published a new collection of stories called Fast Lanes. In a review of this latest work, Jay McInerney writes, "The

fiction of Jayne Anne Phillips oscillates between two subjects: the world of the open road, runaways and drifters, and the deeply rooted regional American family" (7). Her stories concerning the latter offer an acute analysis of the relationships between parents and children, and the understandings and misunderstandings that both sides have of each other. "Home," the story that I will compare to "Marbella," deals with the tensions and telepathy between a mother and daughter. The two argue over moral and sexual issues until the story's crisis opens a seemingly unbridgeable gap between them. The ending conveys a fullness and a sadness which is typical of Phillips' work.

Jean Thompson is the author of two collections of short stories, the highly acclaimed Gasoline Wars, and the more recent Little Face and Other Stories. She has also written a novel called My Wisdom. Her best stories focus upon the critical conflicts between two people in a specific relationship and setting. Thompson typically explores situations between married people or lovers, delineating the expectations and disappointments that force or advance the relationships into a new phase. This new phase is frequently one of separateness and isolation for the characters, as in the story "Accidents," which I will compare to "Mr. Electrolux." "Accidents" is not Thompson's best effort, but effectively illustrates the thematic elements that run through her fiction.

The third author I will discuss is Ellen Wilbur. Wilbur has published one volume of short stories titled Wind and Birds and Human Voices. Many of these stories are about emotionally damaged characters who learn to find comfort in the mundane details of their lives. Sometimes the lives themselves are mundane, as described in this passage from "A Certain View":

Some people's lives are so ordinary that even the suffering, the deaths, and all the difficulties they ever know seem ordinary too; just what you might expect in the normal course of a life. My family was like this. . . . Not anyone in my family was specially smart or specially good looking. I was just as plain as all the rest. The only difference was, I couldn't accept it. I never was satisfied with myself (47)

But even Wilbur's characters who live the most mundane lives usually experience some kind of crisis that changes their perspective of things. "Faith," the story I will compare to "Meeting the Pacific," is an example of this quiet evolutionary process. Faith is the protagonist and narrator whose life is dramatically altered through the birth of her son; he adds a new dimension of love and faith to her life, transforming memories of the past and possibilities of the future into things of beauty. The story's ending conveys a feeling of closure that simultaneously contains a new

beginning. It is a more hopeful story than either "Home" or "Accidents," as it suggests that people can emerge from painful experiences more whole, more aware, more loving.

* * *

While Jayne Anne Phillips' "Home" is a more ambitious piece than "Marbella," the two stories use similar conflicts to explore the theme of a daughter's search for an identity separate from her mother. These conflicts center on the characters' opposing moral standards. The plots of both stories trace the characters' conflicts over sex (which represent larger conflicts), the daughters' desire to escape from the mothers, and a betrayal which precipitates the stories' crises and resolutions.

In "Home" a daughter returns to her mother temporarily: "I ran out of money and wasn't in love, so I came home to my mother" (8). The mother gets her a job in the school system where she is an administrator, and at night they watch television together. The tension between the mother and daughter (neither character is ever named) occurs primarily because of their different values concerning sex. The narrator is torn between her role as daughter--which includes a genuine affection for her mother--and her identity as a sexually active woman. Moreover, the narrator has had a troubled sexual past, with hints of abuse from her father, and

a pattern of sexual frustration and fear of intimacy. In the end, an old boyfriend comes to visit the narrator at the mother's house, and they sleep together, violating the unwritten rules of the household and creating a chasm between the mother and daughter. The story ends with the daughter comforting her mother, her arms around her as they stare into a sinkful of dishwater.

In this story, the mother and daughter have the usual and expected moral stances on sex. The mother believes sex is proper only between married people (even though her own marriage was a disaster). The daughter believes in and practices more liberal mores. In the passage quoted below, the two characters have seen Hubert Humphrey on television; the mother says he is a "death mask" and probably has cancer. The daughter responds,

All Hubert needs . . . is a good roll in the hay.

You think that's what everyone needs.

Everyone does need it.

They do not. People aren't dogs. I seem to manage perfectly well without it, don't I?

No, I wouldn't say that you do.

Well, I do. I know your mumbo jumbo about sexuality. Sex is for those who are married, and I wouldn't marry again if it was the Lord himself.

Now I am silent. I know what's coming.

Your attitude will make you miserable, she says.
One man after another. I just want you to be
happy. (15)

The truth is, of course, neither woman is particularly "happy." And the solution to their problems is not as easy as having sex, or not having sex. In fact, their argument about sex is only the context for the much larger conflict they are actually engaged in. Throughout the story the two characters ask themselves and each other (if only subliminally): What is the right way to live one's life? What is our responsibility to others, and to ourselves? How can we fulfill our duties to others without losing our identities? How should we behave in the face of emotional instability--even insanity? (Both women have been with mentally ill men.)

The questions present themselves in more specific, overt ways as well. Why, the daughter wants to know, did her mother marry her father? Why, the mother wants to know, didn't the daughter marry her high school boyfriend? Why are they making the choices they have made? Can't she see, each character seems to ask herself, that she would be better off if she would make a different choice--the choice I would make? Throughout the story each character thus holds fast to her own beliefs while trying to persuade the other that she is wrong. And they must do this to protect their own choices, since their own choices have not worked out.

Similar conflicts are being played and replayed in "Marbella," though admittedly with less subtlety and complexity. Here, the conflict over sex is the primary polarizing force. But if the story is interesting in its own right, it is primarily because the typical mother and daughter positions on sexual issues are reversed. Here it is the mother, Francine, who is promiscuous and "liberal" about sex; she even promotes her own daughter's loss of virginity:

This is what I'm trying to tell you, Isabel, and excuse me if I do say it's for your own good: There is no such thing as a Right Man. There are many--many right men. An infinite possibility of right men! Now of course I think it's lovely that you want to marry and have babies and all that, if that's what you're planning. But for God's sake, don't save yourself for your wedding night. Nobody does that anymore, Isabel. No one ever did, as far as I can tell. There isn't any point to it.

Francine espouses the exact opposite morals from the mother in "Home"; in fact, she is almost immoral. She has little regard for anyone except herself, and that includes her daughter, who merely provides her with entertaining opportunities for using her power. Francine is, Isabel thinks, "like an amoeba. You swallow everything you come into contact with--swallow it whole. And me especially. You

have manipulated me ever since I can remember . . ."

Francine's manipulation is much more aggressive than that of Phillips' mother, and leads directly to "Marbella"'s crisis.

The conflicts that the daughters have with their mothers reflect--and, to a certain extent, cause--their inner conflicts about sex. Both protagonists are characterized by various levels of sexual frustration. Phillips' narrator is a sexually active woman whose encounters with men follow a pattern of unfulfillment and fear of physical contact. "I wish I took a fancy [to men] oftener," she tells her mother. "I wish I wanted more. I can be good to a man, but I'm afraid--I can't be physical, not really. . . ." (22) Her lack of sexual feeling is a symptom of a larger lack in her life, and in herself.

Isabel, though virginal, is not asexual. Her sensuality is made clear in several instances, particularly when she first sees John. And when she meets him she begins fantasizing about him almost immediately. She clearly wants a lover, but because of her mother's "mission," she is reluctant. Isabel has allowed Francine to manipulate her in almost everything--"her clothes, her car, her schools"--and she feels, if only subconsciously, that she must guard this vestige of her identity with great care. It is not, then, just a question of protecting her privacy. Her virginity actually gives her control over her life, and to a certain extent over her mother. It marks her as an independent human

being, able to act in ways contrary to her mother's wishes. Virginity is, oddly enough, Isabel's weapon, her one means of self-defense, her way of keeping herself separate from Francine, and intact. It is the one thing she has that is beyond Francine's control. Only in the context of the last scene does Isabel have a chance to accomplish both her goals--to break from her mother's grasp, and to express her sexuality.

The usual sexual struggles between mother and daughter are thus twisted almost unrecognizably as Francine drives Isabel to jealousy and hatred. In Isabel's fantasy about John, punishing her mother is as exciting as being with him:

Maybe Francine would fall asleep, after what she had to drink. Maybe she and John could have a few minutes alone. The idea thrilled her: a whispered conversation, while Francine's head dropped back against the lounge chair, her jaw slack, her mouth open, snoring, ugly.

The ultimate revenge for Isabel would be for her mother to lose her control and her beauty (they are closely related) in front of a man--and in front of her. In the end, this is what may happen.

The frustration that Isabel and Phillips' narrator experience is caused in part by the fact that they are temporarily trapped in places that belong to their mothers. "Home" is the mother's home, and the mother's rules apply.

The mother's entire being seems to fill the house and stifle the daughter. When she calls her old boyfriend and asks him to visit her, she is almost asking to be rescued: "Bring some Trojans. I'm a hermit with no use for birth control. Daniel, you don't know what it's like here" (18). And even Daniel feels suffocated in the mother's home. "This room, he says, This house. I can't breathe in here" (21). The desire to escape the presence of the mother--her television-watching and knitting, her ruffled curtains and Reader's Digest's, her stifling guilt and her repressive morals about sex--consumes the daughter at various points in the story.

Similarly, Marbella is Francine's territory. "Marbella is where I took my first lover, you know," she tells Isabel. "Back then Marbella was much different. . . ." But clearly she is still comfortable here; in fact, she is comfortable everywhere. Wherever Francine is, she grabs control of the situation, and every place she inhabits must fall under her tyranny. Now she has practically "kidnapped" her daughter to find her "a continental lover, the best there is. That's what I had for my first, and that's what we'll get for you, Isabel. You'll never forget him." Marbella thus connotes both Francine's sexual history, and her attempts to give her daughter the same history. It is a place, and a set of circumstances, that will not allow Isabel any individuality or power over her own life. It is motherhood run amuck.

Whether the mothers insist that the daughters should or

should not have sex, the situation is equally oppressive, and evokes in the daughters the desire to escape. In "Home," after the conversation between mother and daughter about sex (previously quoted), the narrator says, "I think about my growing bank account. Graduate school, maybe in California. Hawaii. Somewhere beautiful and warm. I will wear few clothes and my skin will feel the air" (15). A place, in other words, where nakedness is natural and comfortable. The two continue to argue, and the mother leaves the room to take a bath. "Hydrotherapy," the daughter thinks. "I close my eyes and listen. Soon, this weekend. I'll get a ride to the university a few hours away and look up an old lover. I'm lucky. They always want to sleep with me. For old time's sake" (16). And later, when the daughter dries the mother's back after her bath, she becomes frightened by the intimacy of this moment with her mother. "She is so fragile, standing there, naked, with her small shoulders. Suddenly I am horribly frightened I let myself out of the room" (17). For Phillips' daughter the need to escape is always connected with intimacy. Either she wants to run away from it, or she wants to run away to it--or to a semblance of it. In the end, she is able to feel intimacy with her mother, but at a cost.

Isabel's desire to escape from her mother is clear, and understandable, from the first. Her first words in the story are words of self-defense: "There's nothing wrong with being

a virgin, mother It isn't abnormal, or unhealthy, as you seem to think." Later, when Isabel's protestations have failed and Francine continues talking at her, Isabel simply gives up, turning away from her mother and "letting [the waves] lull her into drowsiness, drown out Francine's voice." In the next paragraph, Isabel escapes more literally when she goes for a swim in the sea. Here the object of her sexual desire (John) and the mother are paired together to illustrate the ways in which Francine is involved in Isabel's inner struggle: "'Do you want to go with me?' she asked Francine, glancing at the dark-haired man."

Once in the ocean Isabel spies her mother talking to the "Spanish stranger," and assumes, wrongly, that Francine is setting up a date between him and Isabel. "She turned and looked around for some escape; a rock, a different beach, a passing boat. But there was nothing but water" She is forced to return to shore, where her mother humiliates her and she makes her escape back to the hotel room.

The idea of escape, then, is central to both stories. The daughters' desire to escape their mothers is symptomatic of their fear of intimacy, sexual and otherwise. In the last scenes of "Marbella" and "Home," the daughters choose not to escape even though they are facing the most difficult moments in the stories. It is these decisions that indicate their willingness to change the way they approach their problems.

The crises which evoke change involve sexual betrayals--

one character's betrayal of the other character's moral standards. These betrayals divide, and unite, the mothers and daughters in unprecedented ways. The betrayals are committed by the opposite characters in the two stories. In "Home," the daughter has sex with her old boyfriend, Daniel, in her mother's house, while her mother is there. The mere fact of her daughter's sexual activity is distressing to the mother, but to witness that fact is intolerable. She will not speak to the daughter or let her near her, but stands at the sink washing the already clean dishes from the dishrack, until she begins to sob. And then the daughter tells us,

I move close to her and hold her. She smells as she used to smell when I was a child and slept with her.

I heard you, I heard it, she says. Here, in my own house. Please, how much can you expect me to take? I don't know what to do about anything
. . .

She looks into the water, keeps looking. And we stand here just like this. (25)

This ending suggests a moment forever suspended in time, a moment that will somehow always be between them. They seem frozen in the story's present tense at the end, but they are frozen in an embrace as well, and this may suggest a union that they were not capable of before. In any case, the two characters have been pushed into a new phase of their

relationship through the daughter's betrayal, and through her willingness to be physically and emotionally close to her mother.

In "Home" the daughter's sexual act is not performed to hurt her mother deliberately. It is ill-timed, even selfish, but not purposefully cruel. In "Marbella" the mother's betrayal of the daughter is quite deliberate. And the daughter's reaction is equally deliberate. Here Francine gives Isabel the best reason to escape, but it is the one time when she decides not to. She knows, if only subconsciously, that she cannot escape anymore; to run away from Marbella, and all that it stands for, would be to perpetuate the struggle with Francine forever. While her solution to the problem is perverse, it is only by adopting her mother's perverse values that she can break the cycle of her mother's tyranny.

Like "Home," "Marbella" ends with a suspended, open moment. But unlike the frozen time of Phillipa's moment over the kitchen sink, the ending of my story suggests a perpetual movement forward:

Isabel took a deep breath and pulled her dress slowly over her head, then let it fall to the floor. She started to cover herself with one arm but reached for the door instead. The motion seemed fluid, almost natural, and she followed it through to the other side.

The story stops before revealing what happens on "the other

side," but of course what happens is not particularly the point. The fact that Isabel has made such a gesture is enough. It is not an easy step to make, but it is the right step--the motion is "almost natural," which is enough to get her to the "other side" of the bathroom door, where no matter what follows, her relationship with her mother will be forever changed. Her whole life will be changed. Isabel's gesture is at once awkward and natural, at once necessary and perverse, at once shocking and appropriate. And it is the movement forward that is important, not the ensuing action--just as it is the standing together that is important in "Home," and not what happens when the mother and daughter release each other from their embrace.

For both daughters, then, sexual taboos have been broken. And the taboos that have separated them from their mothers have been broken too: Both have desired to escape from the physical touch and presence of their mothers throughout the stories, and by denying themselves that escape in the stories' final moments, they break through to a new level of love and pain, gain and loss.

* * *

In "Mr. Electrolux" I explore the situation of a character whose perception of his life is jarred when he commits an act he feels is incongruous with his true self.

This act compels him to discover something about himself, or at least to take a close look at his assumptions about his identity.

Jean Thompson's "Accidents" is a similar story in many ways. "Accidents" deals with a conflict between two not very sympathetic characters who have had an affair. Marshall is the protagonist; Trish is the theatrical and loud woman with whom he was involved. Marshall "thought of himself as a man of little imagination" (108)--controlled and steady and predictable. Trish is just the opposite, which is apparently the reason he was attracted to her in the first place. But what "seemed volatile and arousing" became "merely tedious," as Trish refuses to accept his decision that their affair is over, and instead indulges in "scenes and messiness. That was her style, though certainly not his" (108-109).

The story traces their break-up from an argument during which Marshall was "provoked" into hitting Trish. ("That was how he thought of it, for he had never done such a thing before in his life, and even now he had difficulty believing it had happened" [109].) He doesn't see her until weeks later, when she finds him at his club pool and begins speaking to him of their last sexual encounter in some detail. She insists, "You need someone to say things like this to you, that's why you liked me, because I'd say them" (113). She embarrasses, angers, and disgusts him, and he leaves.

In the last encounter between them Marshall sees her in a bar with a man named Denny, and though he tries to avoid the couple, Trish spots and corners him. The three of them have drinks together. Marshall and Trish exchange their usual sarcastic remarks, and then Marshall finally escapes. Trish and Denny leave too, however, and have a car accident in the parking lot which Marshall witnesses. Denny is taken to the hospital; Trish stays behind, seeking comfort in Marshall's embrace. The embrace reminds him, inappropriately, of sex with her, and the thought surprises and repulses him; he releases her and she stumbles against the car. Trish is rightfully indignant. "You can't pretend to be human for a minute, can you? . . . Nothing will ever ever happen to you" (120) she says; and no matter how tiresome and crazy and put-on she is, we know she is right.

Marshall takes Trish to the hospital and later leaves alone. In the last scene of the story he sits in his car, temporarily paralyzed by what has happened. There is a flash of recognition here: He has had a glimpse of himself from a new perspective, and does not like what he sees. The story ends in a suspended moment as Marshall waits for the courage to pick up his predictable life where he left off.

Marshall and Trevor Forster are similar characters dealing with similar problems. I think that Trevor is a more sympathetic character, if only because there are a few brief moments in "Mr. Electrolux" when he is somewhat vulnerable

(particularly in his sentiments toward the elusive, almost mythical girlfriend Ellen). Both men are characterized by some of the same psychological traits. They have a fairly high estimation of themselves, even in their seeming modesty. They believe they are above the temporary situations in which they find themselves: Marshall, in his relationship with Trish, and Trevor, in his position as vacuum cleaner salesman. Their self-images seem unshakable at the beginning of their stories. And yet the effect of both stories is, in part, for the reader to question whether the characters have any actual sense of self at all, or whether they are simply hollow men trying to convince themselves otherwise.

Marshall's personality is summed up neatly in the first paragraph of "Accidents," with sweeping statements he makes about his personality. "I'm nothing but a plodder. Down-to-earth" (108), he says. Equally neutral descriptions emanate from the narrator:

He was a solid-looking young man, dark-eyed, affable, self-possessed. People liked him. There was little not to like. He made few demands on anyone . . . If he was not particularly interested in things that lay outside his nature, all which was not industrious, substantial, easily social, he at least recognized that fact. Marshall deceived no one about himself, nor did he wish to. (108)

He sees these traits as positive, never questioning his

perception of himself, or considering that his lack of emotion is detrimental--and not just to others.

While "Mr. Electrolux" does not open with the same prefatory comments about the protagonist, but rather begins in medias res, the first line of the story suggests the way Trev thinks of himself: "Trev Forster did not belong in this situation." In fact, throughout the story Trev feels that he is superior to the role of vacuum cleaner salesman that he is temporarily playing. It is a role which he believes has nothing to do with his "real" identity as a college student. Mrs. Hammer ultimately challenges his ideas about himself because she encourages him to do something he has never thought himself capable of; something which college students "majoring in art history but minoring in business" do not do.

In the characters of Trish and Mrs. Hammer, Marshall and Trevor find their nemeses. The major difference, of course, is that Marshall and Trish are involved in an affair of some length, while Trevor meets Mrs. Hammer in his capacity as salesman and engages only once in (illicit) sex with her. There is thus no history between Trevor and Mrs. Hammer, and she does not try to pursue him the way Trish pursues Marshall.

Nonetheless, the women serve similar roles in the story. Both challenge the men's identities, attacking their calm exteriors and accusing them of being exactly what they appear to be--no more, no less: overly self-confident, sturdy,

unemotional. At this point in the stories, the women are hysterical, while the men feel either detached and bored, or uncomfortable and anxious. In both cases, they want to escape. When the women reach the height of their emotional outbursts, however, the men are "provoked" into committing an act which they have never before committed. Marshall hits Trish across the mouth (and in the story's final scene, he releases her from his arms and sends her stumbling at a moment when she most needs emotional support). And Trevor has sex with Mrs. Hammer, a woman twice his age whom he has fantasized about but never considered an appropriate lover.

There is an interesting similarity in the language used to describe the two protagonists' feelings during these climactic scenes. For Marshall, the argument that ends the affair with Trish is one he has heard before, and he is bored:

She was launched on one of her endless complaints now. He watched her without really listening. He'd heard it all before anyway. She was calling him shallow, insensitive, cruel, a shrill and boring litany What was he doing here anyway, in this airless disordered room, listening to a woman he cared nothing for berate him? No one should have to listen to such things; no one should say them. He was not here, not really, there was no part of him that belonged here. (109-

And yet in spite of this detachment, it is immediately following these thoughts that Marshall strikes Triah, an act that leaves him feeling "as if he'd been soiled, or caught in a lie, and every morning from now on he would wake to it" (110). He feels he has been brought down to her level of "scenes and messiness," and he resents her for it. He is also ashamed of himself. But he gets over this shame fairly quickly. The narrator treats Marshall with a degree of irony on this point: "He made a conscious effort not to think about her, and like most of his efforts, it was largely successful" (110).

My story uses similar language to describe Trevor's emotions as Mrs. Hammer beckons him to her blue ocean of carpet. Trevor accommodates her, and himself, in a detached yet self-conscious way; like Marshall he feels that "there was no part of him that belonged here." The tension is greater for Trevor if only because the circumstances are stranger. He is also afraid, while Marshall is only annoyed.

This is not me, he wanted to shout--at her, at the empty blue and white room, at himself. I am not really here. I am a college student and I study art history and I love a girl named Ellen, oh God, a beautiful smart girl, and I have served on the student council and I understand foreign films. . . This has nothing to do with me--

Clearly Trevor recognizes that to engage in sex with Mrs. Hammer is a serious threat to his self-image, no matter how weak and ridiculous that image is portrayed in this frantic interior monologue. But he proceeds with Mrs. Hammer regardless. The incident has the feeling of inevitability; this seems to be where Trevor was headed all along. And like Marshall, his reaction is to escape from the woman's house immediately after he has been (in his view) tainted. He makes no attempt to communicate anything to Mrs. Hammer at all. Again like Marshall, he immediately tries to forget about what he has done, or to transform the incident into something unimportant--an anecdote which he will carry into his "real" life, a story he will tell to amuse his college friends.

In the last paragraphs of the two stories, it becomes clear that the protagonists cannot escape so easily from their supposedly uncharacteristic acts and back to the safe self-images they once had. A subtle, almost imperceptible loss has occurred which makes both characters pause. In "Accidents," the last paragraph reads as follows:

Marshall got inside [the car] and put the key in the ignition but did not yet turn it. All he had to do was start it, as he had a thousand times before. All he had to do was turn the key and resume the life he had always known, but for a long time he could not. (121)

While this ending suggests that Marshall has glimpsed the truth about himself, it is clear that eventually he will turn the key in the ignition and "resume the life he had always known," choosing not to do anything with this new knowledge except live with it.

For Trevor, a small lapse of memory at the end of "Mr. Electrolux" represents a potentially larger loss. From the beginning the story suggests the importance of the "connections" that Trevor tries to find between his college life and his life as a salesman. He uses the people and places around him to rehearse, in a sense, what he has learned in his "thirty hours of art history courses." The artists and paintings he has studied thus provide him with ways to render his salesman experience meaningful. A housewife becomes a Modigliani nude, or a Segal sculpture, or a Roy Lichtenstein print, and in these metamorphoses she becomes useful to Trevor as a way of confirming his own identity. Employing this device also confirms his sense that he has a superior understanding of his world; he is above it because he has the power to transform it with his knowledge.

In addition, making these intellectual connections helps him to forget that his real connection to his customers is sexual. To some extent Trevor really is, the reader suspects, just an ordinary door-to-door salesman fantasizing about lonely housewives, and this is something he cannot confront in himself. He therefore uses his academic

knowledge to maintain a crucial distance between his conscious mind and his fantasiea.

And despite Trevor's wish to believe that he is a lover of art, what he actually remembers about his college courses is not the beauty of the work but the jejune details--"the title of every painting he had ever studied, every artist's name, every date that he had memorized." It is significant that his spontaneous desire for Mrs. Hammer elicits a more vivid picture in his mind than does the conscious, rational attempt to find her analogue among the images he has memorized in school. When he imagines Mrs. Hammer lying naked on the carpet, "her lips curved into a knowing smile" (as they will be at the end of the story), he is more "connected" to her and to his true self than when he succeeds in recalling a portrait of a nude that he has learned by heart: "Modigliani. Nude. 1917. Oil on canvas. The Guggenheim." In fact such bland information reveals very little about either Mrs. Hammer or Trevor, and nothing about Modigliani. His "connections" are thus artificial devices that interfere with his need to see his world and himself more clearly.

At the end of the story, when Trevor tries to distance himself from the incident with Mrs. Hammer and to convince himself that his behavior with her was not a reflection of who he really is, he reaches again for a connection to his academic world. Looking at the sky outside his windshield,

he recalls an impressionist painting he recently studied:

He could picture the way the slide of the painting had looked on the movie screen in the art library. The real sky faded in the presence of this illuminated image. Pissarro, or Corot? Trevor wondered. He gripped the steering wheel, his palms suddenly damp. He could not for the life of him remember.

Trevor has lost a piece of his memory and in doing so has lost a piece of his "real" life. Mrs. Hammer, or his behavior toward her, has had some mysterious effect on him that he did not anticipate. By consummating his role as Mr. Electrolux, the ultimate salesman, he has sacrificed a little piece of Trevor Forster, the ultimate student. This loss implies that he is not all the things he thinks he is, which in fact don't add up to much anyway (a student of art history who "loves" a girl named Ellen and understands foreign films). Or at least he is not only those things. His role as Mr. Electrolux is just as accurate as his other roles; Mrs. Hammer's version of him is just as true as his own. And this is what he must face.

The story ends, like "Accidents," with the protagonist hovering over the brink of self-knowledge. We do not know how the character will use the information he has just gained from his experience, but it is clear that he will have to incorporate it into his identity somehow, and adjust his

ideas of himself in the process. This can only be a positive step for both characters.

Like "Marbella," then, "Mr. Electrolux" is concerned with a young person's attempt to find or confirm his identity. Both stories deal with escape: from a place that represents "unreality," because it is not the character's own territory, and from a person who challenges the characters' current sense of self, morals, and personal convictions. Both stories reach a crisis point at which escape is no longer an option, and the characters choose to behave in a different way from before. The changes in behavior involve the breaking of sexual taboos: Isabel's entrance into the bathroom to lose her virginity, and Trevor's acting out of one of his fantasies when he responds to Mrs. Hammer's crazy beckoning, force the characters to reckon with an aspect of their personalities that they have never questioned in much depth. And both characters' lives will, of course, change radically as a result of these actions.

* * *

"Meeting the Pacific" diverges somewhat from the pattern set by the two preceding stories. Here the protagonist does not change her course of behavior so much as remain consistent with her own desires in the face of difficulty, which for Ruthie may be a change in itself. Ruthie, who grew

up complying with others' wishes, doing as her parents told her, never questioning her life or feeling enough power over it to make her own choices, leaves her oppressive hometown and all the expectations of the people who live there in order to search for a new life. Her escape to California is complete in the first page of the story. Soon after her arrival, she finds a job and a man, and all is apparently well.

The challenge comes when she gets pregnant--again, a sexual context for a character's development--and she must hold on to what she believes is the right thing to do. Her abortion does not change her so much as free her. It frees her from the past, and from the future. It frees her from the guilt she has felt, and the resentment she has harbored against her mother for dying and leaving her to act as mother for herself and her siblings. And, more directly, it frees her from being forced into the role of mother (again) before she is ready. It helps her overcome the fears that have formed an integral part of her personality--fear of the sea, fear of heights, fear of "miles of empty space"--the fear of the unknown. In the end she is able to "meet the Pacific" literally and figuratively; she has reached a level of calm and self-assuredness by breaking through the barrier between her and peace of mind.

"Meeting the Pacific" is, I think, a more complex story than either "Marbella" or "Mr. Electrolux." And much of its

complexity is a result of the story's emphasis on the way the past and our memory of the past affects our present. While the first two stories focus upon one line of narration, telling about one event or sequential series of events that happened to the characters to alter their lives and their views of their lives, "Meeting the Pacific" dips back and forth between past and present, between the lover in California and the mother in Kansas, between the living and the dead, between external and internal reality. The flashbacks of Ruthie's life in Kansas are clearly just as important as the ongoing narration in California.

Ellen Wilbur's story "Faith," from her collection Wind and Birds and Human Voices, tells the same kind of story as "Meeting the Pacific," though she brings her narrator/protagonist to the same end through entirely opposite means. "Faith" is a story about a young woman who has always been completely dependent upon her parents and their approval. When they die, it is as if "the colors of the world had all been changed" (98). Faith is left on her own, living in her parents' house and working in the public library in Compton, a small puritanical town which draws tourists in the summer. She does not go out with men: "Whether it was the influence of the summer people or the hours I had escaped in books, I was always 'different' as far as Compton men could see, and they were just as strange to me" (103). Faith thus feels the same kind of separateness

from the customs and expectations that shape the people around her as Ruthie feels in my story.

One summer Faith meets a college boy--a tourist--named Billy Tober. He visits her at the library, walks her home, flatters her. "At home," Faith tells us, "I'd often stare for an hour at the stranger in the mirror, this woman with a body that a man desired" (104). They see each other every night in July and most of August, but Faith takes no precautions, "as if it would have been the crowning sin if I'd been careful to prevent any meaning or possibility of love to come out of the fire of vanity and ignited pride which burned between us" (105).

Of course Faith ends up pregnant, and throughout the pregnancy "I felt my father's wrath in every room of the house, and I never visited his or my mother's grave, knowing the affront it would be. As if they'd died again, I felt bereft" (105). People in Compton pity her even as they condemn her; she serves as a lesson to their children, but she acts her part with becoming humility. "I know I'll always be on good behavior in Compton, and the more abject I appear, the better off I'll be" (106).

There is a space break preceding the last five paragraphs of the story, at which point Wilbur brings us directly into Faith's present moment: "It is ten o'clock, the last day of May, a Saturday, and all of the windows in the house are open for the first time this season" (106). In

this last section we learn that the son she bore is her salvation. Paul brings Faith to a level of fulfillment and joy which she would never have gained without him.

The story ends with a reflective passage on the past and future, conveying the new harmony the protagonist has with her world and self. "Faith" is a story about faith itself--and herself. It is not a dramatic story of dramatic change, but a quiet narrative of a woman whose relationship to her environment, to her past, and to her future shifts with her entrance into motherhood. Faith reaches a state of calm and stillness and beauty as she accepts her new place in Compton, and finds "the beginning of love" (106) through her child.

The characterizations of Faith and Ruthie are different in some important ways. Primarily, Faith is a more passive character than Ruthie. Faith determines her own fate only by surrendering it. Passivity is also her strength, allowing her to accept fully the consequences of her actions, and to live her life in Compton as the abject, if fulfilled, sinner.

Ruthie is decidedly more active in her life choices. Her move from Kansas to California is an act that requires courage and a streak of rebelliousness--things that, no matter how "different" Faith is from her Compton sisters, she does not have. (Certainly it takes courage for Faith to keep her baby rather than giving him up for adoption. But she does not decide to do this until he is born--she is not deliberate in her actions. She seems to take the path of

least resistance in everything she does.) Ruthie is adventurous in spite of her fears. Her choices are made very willfully, and she follows through on them in spite of others' disapproval.

Sex, and more importantly the resulting pregnancies, are the testing grounds for both characters. And the way they react to both sex and pregnancy reveals both the differences in the characterizations, and the similarities in what the stories are trying to achieve.

Faith describes her attraction to Billy Tober as follows: "I was in love with his desire, which singled me out from all the world and made the world a painless kingdom where I ruled the more he wanted me" (104). She realizes from the beginning that she is a different person when she is with him, and that she does not love him. "The day that Billy left, I felt relieved, and in the weeks that followed, I didn't miss him once, which surprised me" (105). Faith seems to have simply passed through an experience she saw as inevitable--getting pregnant without getting married. There is no tie to the man himself, and even her desire for him seems abstract; hers is more a desire to be loved than to love.

Ruthie's feelings for Clay are described in equally abstract language, but for Ruthie it is the love she wants, not the "product" of love. Clay gives her a sense of balance, providing her with firm ground to stand on. She has

found a man who is, one can suppose, the opposite of her silent and unemotional father. Here is someone who can feel things as strongly as she, who can laugh as hard as she, who can "hold the earth still for me so I wouldn't fly off into space forever." And this love, and Ruthie's new life, is threatened when she becomes pregnant in spite of her precautions.

Both Faith and Ruthie seem to make their decisions about their pregnancies automatically; in fact, they seem already made, just waiting to be realized. Faith's decision occurs after her delivery: ". . . the night he was born I knew he was mine as surely as these arms or thoughts belong to me. After the pain of labor, as if I had been delivered of all shame, I asked to see the child. . . . And when they put him in my arms, it was love I held, all warmly wrapped, alive" (106). Ruthie's reaction to her pregnancy is dread and anxiety and sickness. When she discovers Clay wants to keep the baby, she almost faints. And her decision to abort is made almost immediately, in spite of the pain she will cause Clay: ". . . he had let go of me, if only temporarily, and I had to go to the doctor that afternoon to confirm what I already knew. And to set up other appointments. I couldn't hesitate now." She risks widening the distance between them because she has no other alternative if she is to protect the beginnings of a new life--her own.

But perhaps Ruthie's real achievement in the story is to

reconcile herself with her dead mother, and to feel both forgiven and forgiving. Ruthie's ability to conjure up the voice and being of her mother prior to and during the abortion allows her to draw comfort from her presence, which is partly real, partly imagined. ". . . I had a long conversation with Mother. It didn't feel as though I was making up her words; they just filled up my head on their own. . . . She didn't mention the abortion, but she knew about it, because she stayed with me the whole time." This reunion with her mother reflects Ruthie's growing inner strength. She has learned to draw upon love once felt to endure difficult and painful events. And by feeling that her mother is consoling rather than rejecting her during the abortion, she is able to relinquish her past and embrace her present. (Like "Faith," the end of "Meeting the Pacific" is written in the present tense to emphasize this point.)

Though the two protagonists find opposite solutions to their problems, they end up in remarkably similar states of mind. Faith finds love and happiness in spite of the disapproval of some Compton residents. She is fulfilled in a way she never would have been if she hadn't had a child. And since it is made clear that she would never marry a Compton man, getting pregnant the way she did is the only way she could have a child. The story ends as follows:

Now, when I look back, I see beauty. The older the memory, the more beautiful it has become. Even

moments of great pain or disappointment have been transformed, given an importance and a dignity they never had at the time, as if whatever happens and wherever I have failed may one day be redeemed in the far future. I pray it will be so. (107)

The birth of Faith's son has changed both her past and her present, and strengthened her own faith, both in herself and in her God.

For Ruthie there is a similar strengthening and confirming as she rushes into the ocean which she once feared. This is a kind of celebration of her anniversary (she has lived in California for a year), of her growing closeness with Clay, of her recovery from the crisis of pregnancy and abortion, and of her overcoming her irrational and rational fears, all at once.

I swim out until I can't touch bottom, then I tread water, watching Clay watch me from shore. A big wave covers me for a moment, but I hold my breath just in time. When I emerge I have not swallowed any water but everything tastes of salt. I lick my lips, and wave at Clay. He stands there for a minute, laughing, then kicks off his shoes and plunges in to join me.

Above all, this last paragraph is a celebration of pure joy--the joy of feeling an affinity with things larger than the self, and of feeling love for someone who complements the

self. Ruthie has found her Pacific, her feeling of belonging and calm and happiness, and she has found it by cutting herself free from the expectations of others and remaining faithful to herself.

"Meeting the Pacific" clearly diverges from "Marbella" and "Mr. Electrolux" with this entirely affirmative ending. While the last paragraphs in Isabel's and Trevor's stories suggest that the characters are on the verge of undergoing important changes--rebellling against who they have been, gaining insight into who they might be--the tones of the stories' endings do not make any definite promises. This is particularly true of "Mr. Electrolux." The last line, "He could not for the life of him remember," tells the reader that his lost memory is as far as Trevor has gotten. There is no guarantee, even if there is hope, that he will take this loss and use it to inform his life and gain a deeper understanding of himself. "Marbella" leaves the reader with a final sentence that contains more possibilities: "The motion seemed fluid, almost natural, and she followed it through to the other side." Still, there is no question that Isabel's action, even if it is what she must do (as I argued earlier), remains disturbing.

The ending of "Meeting the Pacific" has, I think, the clearest moral focus of all three stories. Here the protagonist accomplishes the difficult task of maintaining a sense of self while establishing a positive relationship with

another person. This is not something that happens often in my fiction, but it is the kind of ending, and the kind of story, that I am writing more and more frequently. Of course I am not interested in facile "happy endings," but I am drawn more and more to endings in which characters who have been isolated and alienated from one another (as they are so often in contemporary fiction) do finally come together, even if only for the most fleeting of moments.

In my introduction I stated that contemporary short story writers have been my greatest influences in terms of my own attempts to write short stories. And one of the ways they have influenced me is, I suppose, reactionary. In reading authors such as Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Amy Hempel, David Leavitt, Mary Robison, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Joy Williams, I have become increasingly frustrated with the recent trends in fiction--the ubiquitous cool in narrative tone, the characters' emotional numbness and inability to take control over their lives, and the persistent lack of resolution at the end of stories. As Madison Bell has written, "minimal" fiction typically shows "a universal failure of solution. . . . No one is asking for contrived happy endings, but. . . [the] consistent fatalism, so typical of the 'new short story,' begins to seem no less contrived" (67). Bell further describes this trend as follows:

These stories are . . . pitched to us as representations of reality. But though they render

realistic detail so vividly, so cunningly, with such superior technical skill, the sum of these details impresses one most with its dreary sameness. . . . This quality does faithfully represent a tendency of our times. But it is a tendency that our writers, as custodians of culture, ought to be resisting. (69)

For the most part writers like Jayne Anne Phillips, Jean Thompson, and Ellen Wilbur do resist this tendency, and I will continue to look to their work and to the work of others for inspiration and even instruction.

Throughout the process of trying to analyze my own work and identify and describe my influences, I have often been reminded of the comments John Cheever makes in the preface to his collected stories. A writer does not become proficient through alliances to his (or her) masters, he says, but instead struggles to teach himself how and what and when to write. Consequently, in any writer's work, "he can be seen clumsily learning to walk, to tie his necktie, to make love, and to eat his peas off a fork. He appears much alone and determined to instruct himself." The three stories in my report, whose first drafts were composed as long as two years ago, and whose last drafts were completed as recently as this week, are, if nothing else, representative of my own "struggle to receive an education in economics and love" (vii).

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THREE STORIES AND A CRITICAL AFTERWORD

by

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Abstract

My Master's Report comprises three short stories: "Marbella," which concerns the conflict between a sexually promiscuous mother and her virginal daughter; "Mr. Electrolux," which tells the story of a college student who is working temporarily as a vacuum cleaner salesman, and discovers a disturbing discrepancy in his self-image; and "Meeting the Pacific," which focuses on a woman who leaves her hometown to establish her own life and identity, only to have her search threatened by her unplanned pregnancy.

In the critical afterword I describe the major thematic concerns expressed in all three stories. I then discuss briefly the writers I have drawn upon most heavily for inspiration in my work: Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, and Doris Lessing. I suggest how reading their fiction has helped to shape the ideas and themes I explore in my own.

My report continues its thematic focus as I make a detailed comparison between my stories and three stories written by contemporary writers: Jayne Anne Phillips, Jean Thompson, and Ellen Wilbur. The similarities here include the use of sexual contexts to provide characters with opportunities for self-discovery and change.

In my conclusion I take another brief look at my influences in order to indicate my growing tendency to write stories that are increasingly affirmative in their moral vision.