

PARTY OF ONE: THREE STORIES
AND A CRITICAL AFTERWORD

by

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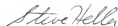
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Abstract

This is for Michael

and

for Sarah.

Something Blue

I. Because my father is newly retired and unfamiliar with the concept of leisure time, we've come to New Orleans for the summer. He has friends nearby, in Buras, and I thought they'd be helpful--old friends, from his tour in the army during the war, some time before my mother existed for him. My parents have been separated, legally, for almost a year, and will be divorced, officially, in a few more months.

I agreed to New Orleans because the picture it conjures up was enough to justify leaving Washington, my job at the import shop, and Ryan. I was enamoured, I said, of experiencing The South: juleps, jumbalya, Bourbon Street. This was the way I explained my decision.

"Your father," Ryan maintained, "is an adult." The disappointed voice.

We were sitting in the kitchen, sharing an orange. It was too early in the morning for a serious discussion, and we were both too tired to be courteous.

"So am I," I said. "And I make my own decisions."

"Obviously," he said

This was my cue to relent, admit to the influence that still sways too many of the decisions I call my own. Where my father is concerned, however, I am stronger than usual.

"I'd hoped you would at least try to understand. I can finally do something for him."

It is not Ryan's nature to be obstinate. He was raised to be cooperative, and when I ask for help, he offers what he can.

"Well," he said. "If you really believe it will help, then I suppose you should go." He smiled and reached his hand across the table.

I smiled and looked past his shoulder, out the window. It was raining again. We'd come to Washington when I was nine because, my father said, it was a place where things were encouraged to grow. At the time, I'd assumed he meant me.

II.

We are living, for the time being, in a small house that belongs to Mr. Hennessey. He's the one with the gold tooth in front. Before he moved to Buras, to be nearer Mr. Park, he lived here with Mrs. Hennessey, until she died last spring. After that, he explains, he had no reason to stay or will to leave. He says, when he speaks of her death, "moved on," as if it involved some conscious action on her part. My father nods his understanding, and I

realize they are not much different.

Mr. Park chain smokes clove cigarettes. I can't be in the same room with him without feeling light-headed, the way I felt the first time I smoked one myself. I sit across the room from him and breathe only when it becomes unavoidable.

"What I don't understand," Mr. Park says, between drags, "is why a pretty girl like you wants to spend the summer with a goat like your daddy."

"Molly worries about me." My father smiles--first at me, then at him. "She's afraid I'll get lonesome on my own, now that I'm not working." He doesn't complete the thought, but Mr. Park wouldn't know this. He smiles, approvingly, in my direction.

"Sometimes I wish I'd got married. Maybe then I'd have someone to keep me company."

My father pulls a cigarette from his breast pocket: Camel filters, hard pack. The only brand I can recognize on the shelf. When I was very young and we lived in Reno, my father cut the camels from his empty packs with his pocket knife, and we played Arabia in the sandbox behind our house.

My mother relegated me to the backyard every morning after one hour of educational television-- the one thing

she couldn't, in good conscience, deny me. This was the rule, barring bad weather. In the off-season I played in my room and listened to the voice of daytime television: a woman sobbing, "Can't you see what's happening?"

Later, Mr. Hennessey asks me: "You got a boyfriend at home, Molly?" He hands me a dripping glass of iced tea.

"They don't call them boyfriends anymore," Mr. Park says. "Now they're companions."

"Yes," I say. "I do."

"I suppose you'll be getting married yourself, pretty soon."

This is a discussion Ryan and I have with more regularity than I'd like: why he needs to be married; why I don't want to marry him.

"It has nothing to do with you," I've told him. "I don't want to marry anyone."

"There's absolutely no reason we shouldn't be married," Ryan says. "We've been together forever anyway. What's the difference?"

"My point exactly."

"It matters to me that people know I love you enough to make promises. I want them to know I plan on spending my life with you."

"I'll tell everyone we meet. I promise."

"Molly." The impatient voice. "It doesn't always have to turn out badly, you know. Look at my sister. Look at my parents."

Ryan's sister Mary has been married for the same year Ryan and I have been living together. She's younger than Ryan, which makes him even more nervous about getting married than I imagine he might otherwise be. He's the big brother. He should be setting the examples.

Mary's husband Alan is what my father would call A Good Man. He has a steady job, eight to five weekdays. He drives a sensible car that gets good mileage. He makes enough money that Mary can stay home with their children, when they have some.

"Don't you get bored, being home all day?" I asked Mary once. She looked at me as if I'd asked about their sex life.

"Of course not," she said. "I don't have time to be bored. It's a big job, making this a place Alan wants to come home to at night."

I've been looking at Ryan's parents since the day I met them, trying to find an identifiable separation between the two. I'm convinced it simply doesn't exist: they are Maggie and Mike. They say the same thing at the same time

more often than coincidence allows. And Mrs. McBride knows, long before Mr. McBride says anything, that it's time to be leaving. It's unnerving to watch them, sometimes.

"Psychoballet," I said once. "Telepathic Tap. Unfortunately, my love, you're one sorry dancer."

"When you've been with someone long enough," Ryan said, "you know them in ways other people can't possibly. You know them the way you know yourself."

One night, when I was ten, I started for the back yard to listen for the hiss when the sun hit the ocean. To be still enough to hear this was a gift; it took great strength to be at peace, my father said.

My parents were on the deck. It was rare to find them in the same place and not fighting. I stopped in the middle of the kitchen floor and looked at them through the screen door, sitting in lawn chairs, my father smoking, the two of them talking, like anyone else's parents. But they'd never been like anyone else's parents. Not anyone I knew then.

"I don't know what to do to make you happy anymore," my father said. "If I did, you know I would."

"I know," my mother said.

"You know me so well, Karen."

"I don't know you at all," my mother said. "I don't think I ever did."

Mr. Hennessey and Mr. Park go home at four-thirty. After dinner-- shrimp and rice, key lime pie from Mari-neau's-- my father and I sit on the back porch. Even now, nearly ten o'clock, things show no sign of cooling off. At home, I think, it's not quite eight: there's a gold splash on the water, the sky is orange, and Ryan's waiting for the hiss. I told him about it not long after we'd met.

"Nice thought," Ryan said. "But you don't really believe anyone can be that much at peace with the world, do you?"

"You are," I said.

Ryan was born into a world where people raise their children and not their voices. It's an air-tight place. We hear and see the same things, but for Ryan everything is diffused, half or more as real as it is to anyone else.

For instance, me.

I sat on the deck every evening, waiting for Ryan's kind of calm to come over me, waiting for the noise to fade with the light.

"Aren't you coming in?" my mother asked me one night,

through the screen door. "You'll be eaten alive."

"I'll be all right."

She sighed. I had my back to her, but I saw her shake her head. "We're through, Molly. I promise."

I had heard the front screen door slam shut, heard the car engine turn over and the wheels grind the gravel of the driveway into the ground. I had hoped it was my mother leaving, but I'd known it was my father. He was always the one who left, when they were through.

"For now, or for good?" I asked.

My mother came outside and sat beside me on the steps, put her arm around my shoulders. I didn't lean toward her. I didn't move at all.

"Things change," she said. "People change. Sometimes you just don't see it coming in time to work through it."

"Who changed?" I asked, looking at her. She didn't turn toward me. She was looking at her hand, moving her ring finger to make her tiny diamond fracture the porch light.

"It's not a question of who changed. It's what changed." She waited a minute before she continued; considering, I supposed, how much information I was entitled to. "When I married your father I was very young. I didn't really know what I wanted. I have a better idea now, and

it doesn't include him."

"Why not?"

"Because he doesn't understand the things that are important to me now," she said.

What I heard, when I listened to them, was my mother telling my father these same things: that he didn't understand, he wasn't listening. That she wanted a life of her own.

"Then you changed," I said.

My mother nodded. "I changed," she said, and stood up to go back inside. She'd known, even when she was trying to explain herself, that I wouldn't believe anything else.

My father coughs, and I turn toward him. We've been here just three weeks, but he seems to have aged. He's quieter than I ever remember him being.

"You didn't answer Tom this afternoon," he says.

"When?"

"When he asked if you were getting married soon."

"It wasn't a question. He said he supposed I would be."

"Well. I guess I know you well enough not to suppose anything."

I smile at him. "You should."

"You're like your mother that way," he says. "Head-strong."

I look up, but the stars are lost in the cloud of smog over the city. Since we arrived, there has not been a clear sky. Mr. Hennessey said that, in New Orleans, these are a rarity; that, between pollution and rain clouds, you can almost always count on losing the sky. When he said this I smiled, although it seemed to me sad and, somehow, eminently true.

My father exhales, and I watch a small cloud of smoke disperse into the air. Ordinarily, I would point out the detrimental effects of his weakness on my environment. But tonight, in this city, it hardly seems to matter.

"I don't like to think I have much in common with my mother," I say.

"Your mother is a good person, Molly." He pauses, knowing neither of us believes this at the moment but feeling the need, even now, to be my father. I feel him look at me. "Don't you want to marry Ryan?"

"I don't want to be married."

"To anyone? Ever?"

"No."

"That's sad," he says, and shakes his head. A piece of the hair he combs straight back falls across his forehead,

and I realize that my father's going grey. "I didn't realize I'd made you so cynical."

"You had nothing to do with it," I say, because I believe this. "And I don't think I'm cynical. Just realistic. I have an advantage, actually. I've seen the future."

"You shouldn't think it's wrong to care about people," he says. "It's the only thing worth anything at all."

"I care about you," I say.

"That's not the same."

"I care about Ryan." I shrug. "I just don't see why I have to marry him to prove it."

"You don't get married to prove a point." My father looks at me and smiles. "Not if you're smart, anyway." Then he stands up and raises his arms, stretching.

"Why did you get married?" I ask him-- knowing the answer to this question, but wanting to hear, for the first time, I realize, his version of the story.

"I wanted your mother to think I was sincere." He turns around and looks at me. "You and Ryan, I think, have something more substantial to work from. He's a good kid."

"You think so?" My father was the most vocal objector to my decision to move in with Ryan. Since then he's been cordial to Ryan, but not much more. Thinking that my father likes him is something new.

"Yeah. He had the right kind of home."

"There's no such thing. Different things work for different people. I'd be a loon if I'd grown up in his house."

"You know what I mean. His parents taught him to value the right kinds of things."

"Like what."

"Self-respect. Responsibility." He dismisses these to the wider scope of his last choice. "Family."

I smell marshmallows burning, the hot-oil sweetness of a barbecue. We took makeshift camping trips in our backyard because my mother hated insects and broke out in hives at the thought of life without electricity. My father wanted me to appreciate simple things.

"I think I'm a pretty good kid," I say, after a few minutes.

"What do you know?" My father smiles again and walks out into the yard. Finally all I can see of him is the glowing orange dot at the tip of his cigarette, moving with his hand.

What I missed, more than anything else, was the smell of his smoke. After he left, the first time, my mother opened all the windows and aired out the house. I stole a pack of Camels from the gas station and burned them, one by

one, in an ashtray in my room.

III.

I develop a tan for the first time in my life. Ryan comments on this, referring to a snapshot I sent along to fill out one of my skimpy letters. Writing him seems redundant: He knows I'll scout out antique stores, gather shells on the beach.

"Letters are important," he says. The injured voice. "I know you sat down and thought about me, or at least about what you wanted to tell me. I know you're making an effort."

I smirk at the receiver. "I guess I didn't realize communicating was so complex."

"It isn't always. Sometimes you don't have to say a thing."

Ryan, of course, knows that New Orleans is my cover, devised solely for the purpose of spiriting my father into new surroundings, as far from my mother's most likely course as possible. She doesn't deal well with heat, so I know we're safe.

"I saw your mother yesterday," Ryan says, not put off when I don't respond to his news. "At a gas station. In

Tacoma." Ryan waits for me to ask what my mother was doing at a gas station in Tacoma.

"Did you drive out to see your brother?" is what I ask.

"Yes. She's moving back to Reno, Molly."

"Good for her. Do you like my tan? I think I look sultry."

"I think you look tough," he says, finally letting it go.

"That's not exactly complimentary."

"That's how you look to me. I'm sure you're devastating, but I liked you well enough pale."

"And feeble."

"Molly." Ryan sighs. "You asked."

And never, my father had advised me, the last night I spent at our house, ask a question if the answer isn't something you really want to hear. He was packing a suitcase, rolling socks into pairs, choosing shirts and ties that matched. He would be at work in the morning, and I would be at Ryan's.

"What did she say to you?" I sat down on the side of the bed. His side. I watched him fumble with a cigarette and drop it on her white carpeting. He didn't try to pick it up. He just let the black spread out from the burning

end before he finally crushed it out.

"She said no," he said.

I sigh into the receiver, but catch myself before I shake my head.

"Will you come home now?" Ryan asks.

The last thing he'd said to me at the airport in Seattle was "You will come back?" I'd wanted to say of course I'd come back, make it sound as if my return were as inevitable as the next day. But I hadn't answered him then, and I can't answer now.

After we hang up I can still hear his voice. I can see him sit down in the wicker chair next to the telephone table, elbows on his knees: bench position, he calls this.

"Always the bridesmaid, never the bride," Ryan said, when we were discussing his growing-up, the high school years. He was always second string. Not an entirely bad situation, he believed; he could still claim to play the same position as the starting stringer. He could also muster up the energy to walk off the field at the end of the game.

"So what you're telling me," I said, "is that prowess

doesn't pay."

"Precisely," Ryan said, smiling down at me. We were on the wharf, looking out at the Sound. It was late, and windy, and I was very cold. Ryan put his arm around me. I leaned into him. "Sometimes it's all right, watching from the sidelines."

Right now Ryan is looking at his hands: square hands with short fingers. They are, he says, the bane of his existence, because he wants to play the piano and doesn't have the reach. Instead, he plays sax. Every day, from four to five. And poker, with Chad and David, on Tuesdays. And the horses, in the summer, on Wednesdays. We have a routine, half of which revolves around me. And I know where to go, where he'll be, if I need Ryan for anything.

I pull open a drawer and rummage around for a piece of paper, a pen that still works, or a pencil with some semblance of a point.

IV.

We're standing at the airport, holding hands like kids. My father is wearing his horrible green leisure suit, which matches his eyes. I told him, once, that he cut a dashing figure in this color. Now he wears the suit whenever we go out together.

He's sweating in spite of the air conditioning, and in spite of the fact that he's looking quite slim these days. In Seattle, August is no worse than any other month of the year. We both know this, but my father is staying here.

"Are you going to write to me?"

"Probably not," he says, smiling without his teeth. They're false, and he's always hated them. When I was in high school I sprinted to answer the telephone at night, before he could get to it. "Because you won't write me."

"I might surprise you," I say. Then I'm scared. "Do you really think I'm cut out for this?"

"You're going to be all right."

I have always been all right. In every house, in every role. And it's time, I think, to be something more.

"Naturally," I say.

"Listen." My father looks at me straight on with a confidence I trust. "You try hard. It's never easy, even when both of you really care."

I hear my flight being called and shoulder my bag. "When has anything I wanted been easy?" I ask.

My father smiles at me. "You're a good kid," he says.

This is an unexpected gesture on his part. I've made three promises in my life, two of them to my father. I promised him I wouldn't ever say I hated my mother again,

when I was thirteen, and not even two hours ago I promised I wouldn't cry when I left him here. When he asked for this last one, he was asking for my faith in him, which is something I'd believed, until then, I offered unconditionally.

I walk down the jetway by myself. The stewardess smiles at me, another passenger on another trip. An older woman is already sitting in the seat next to mine. After we take off, she offers to show me the new pictures of her grandchildren. I comment on this one's dimple, that one's curls.

"Sweet babies," she says. Then she leans toward me to add, in a whisper, "It's good to be going home alone."

I agree, and settle into the privacy of my headphones.

I look out the window after we've taken off and look at the ground below us: small cars on small roads, small houses, small green lawns. Everything's smaller, but everything's intact. And I realize, in the same moment, that the day has arrived without clouds.

At The Edge of The Orchard Country

Here is the truth in an eggshell: I should have been a boy. That's Luce's line, the eggshell thing. He likes to put a twist on what we think.

Which explains, to some extent, why I am changing the left rear tire and Luce is sitting on the top rung of a fence, staring out across a field. Somebody's cows are eating their way east, toward the mountains.

He was driving when the tire blew. I'm strong, for a girl, but I don't know that I could have kept us on the road. Luce held on and brought the car to the edge, got out and spit on the flat. I opened the trunk and hunted for the jack.

"I can do it," he said.

"So can I," I said.

So when I finish I toss the jack in the trunk, on top of the ratty red blanket that's been in there and nowhere else as long as Luce has had this car, to tell him I'm done. We started off with the top down yesterday, feeling good about the wind. It was cold last night, though, and Luce didn't bother to take it down today.

I walk to the fence and climb up beside him. Luce is still watching the cows meander across the stretch of flat land-- taken, it seems, with their unconcern for him.

"Where are we?" I ask him.

"Emmett," he says. "Or near there."

"Meaning what?"

"We'll hit the border after dark. Or we can drive as far as, I don't know, Couer d'Alene, Sandpoint, maybe. Head into Canada tomorrow, when we're fresh."

"I don't want to sleep in the car again." I rub my neck, remembering the kink I woke up with this morning. Luce wanted to haul out the tent, but I wanted to be ready to take off in a hurry, if need be.

"We don't have to sleep in the car," he says. "Just so long as we're frugal."

This is a new word for Luce, but one he's given a definite place in his outlook on life. Since we left Aberdeen yesterday he's used it at least five times. My word is hypothesize. Mary Mann always said, if you can't think it through, there's no prayer will get you past it.

And thinking of her, I realize it's the first time she's come to mind. Which is strange since, you live with someone that many years, you figure she'd have a place in the way you think. And not strange, since she's just Mary Mann. Luce and I were the only two who never called her anything else.

I'd been there almost a year when Luce turned up. They

brought him in from the reservation, all bruised up and bloated from not eating. His left eye was swollen shut. I was scared of him then. But I was nine then, too.

"You figure," Luce says, pulling the piece of deer grass he's been chewing out of his mouth just long enough to talk, "we should just stay here for the night?"

"Here?"

Here there is nothing: the field, the cows. Two or three smoke trees, off to the west. And a shack, which may or may not belong to someone, sagging beneath them.

"We've only been on the road a few hours," I say.

"We only drove a few hours yesterday," he says.

"We won't make Canada tomorrow."

"Nothing special about tomorrow," he says.

"What if they catch up with us?"

"Then we won't need to worry about where to sleep tonight."

So I shrug, because Luce is in one of his moods and it's best just to do what he wants. Or else, I'll spend the next five hours in the car listening to one of the three tapes he brought along, or to K-I-C-K, Country Music With a Kick, fading in and out while we wind through the mountains on the other side of Weiser, Idaho.

"All right," I say, and slide back to the ground. It's

maybe two o'clock, and what we'll do until dark I leave up to Luce. I go back to the car and lean the front seat forward, slide the cooler toward me and take out a beer and, after a moment's thought, a coke for Luce. He just sits on the fence, watching those cows like he thinks they're going to pull something shady, like he thinks that by watching them long enough he can figure out why they're doing whatever it is cows actually do.

We spend the afternoon bumming around the field, Luce kicking up grasshoppers and catching them, holding them in between his fingers and watching them work their mechanical legs. He's always had a thing for bugs. For Christmas Ten, Luce's first and my second with Mary Mann, she bought him The Bug Jug. It was nothing special--a big plastic jar with a lid full of holes so the bugs wouldn't die. Luce loved it, though. He put it on top of his dresser and waited, I swear, counted days, until spring and the bugs came around again.

That was the year Mary Mann bought me the first dress I remember owning. I wasn't a dress person, not even then, but I liked it: blue, dark blue, nothing fussy. A few tucks on top. And the skirt puffed out when I turned around

fast. I did, a few times, in front of the bedroom mirror. Just to see.

Mary Mann called me out in the living room, where the rest of the kids were playing with whatever new they'd unwrapped. I came out scowling. Mary Mann wasn't fooled.

"You look like a princess," she said.

The truth of the matter is, I felt like a queen. I was ten years old and I felt, for the first time in my female life, pretty enough to think of myself as a girl. Jenny Lee's eyes got big when she saw me. She was only five, so I didn't put much stock in her opinion. But it felt good, all the same.

Then I realized Luce was still reading the instruction booklet that came with his jug, completely oblivious to my new and feminine look. Mary Mann saw me eyeing him, and she knew. Even then, ten years old. She knew.

"Luce," she said. "Doesn't Amy look like a princess."

Luce looked up just long enough to agree with her. Then he looked up again, longer, for himself. I raised my eyebrows, waiting for the verdict.

"You look like a girl," he said.

And today, he tells me I'm getting girl-color in the face. Then he gives me his baseball cap for shade.

"Actually," he says, lifting the bill a little higher,

"it looks good. You need some color in your cheeks."

"Don't think you're going to start me eating vegetables."

"I didn't think about that," he says, and sits down on a rock. "What'll we eat tonight?"

"There's not much left in the cooler. Half a thing of picante sauce, I think, and one more coke."

"There's a jar of peanuts in the glove compartment, too."

"Well then," I say. "We're set."

Luce smiles, but not at me. He's looking at the cows again. They moved to the far side of the field as soon as we crossed the fence. "Have you ever been happy?" he asks.

I shrug. "If I was, I must have missed it."

"Stay tuned," he says. "You will be."

"Are you sure?"

"Very sure," he says.

Most things Luce is sure about are things I take for granted until he makes me think about them twice. The first day he came to Mary Mann's he told me, while we were playing fortress in the backyard, that he'd be going home before too long. Nearly everyone who came to Mary Mann's left within a year, so this news came as no surprise. But when he said he would be leaving, I thought, for the first

time, that this also meant he'd be around awhile.

In that first year Luce joined a soccer league, in the fall, and took first place in the Great Rift Elementary spelling bee with the word xerophyte in March. In April his mother came home, dry again, and they took him back to Fort Hall. But by August, his dad was back too-- and so, with four stitches over his black left eye, was Luce.

For the ride, or rather the after-riding hours, Luce brought books. He likes to read, and I like to listen to him. Tonight, after he's pitched the tent near the three smoke trees and settled in with his flashlight, he reads me poetry: Robert Frost, Somebody Hopkins, and someone I've never even heard of before.

"At the edge of the orchard country, the light comes into its own, free of trees and the greedy brown hands of boys mad for apples, and shade." He shuts the book and looks at me, raises his eyebrows.

"Interesting," I say.

"You didn't like it."

"I didn't get it."

Luce likes me, he's said, because I'm not afraid to say what I don't understand. Which is a lot, when you get

right down to it. Why, for instance, he kept going home when all he really had to do was say he wanted to stay with Mary Mann. No judge in the world would have fought him on it, and both of us knew that.

"This isn't where I belong," he said, when I asked. I was sitting on his bed, watching him throw clothes into his duffel bag, taking them out and folding them up and putting them back again.

"There's a place for you here," I said. "You have a room, and your own bed--"

"None of that matters." Luce shook his head and opened his socks and underwear drawer. I stopped folding his things.

"What matters, then?"

"That I want to be with her," he said.

Which didn't explain a thing for me, as Luce was well aware. But that was what he left me with.

But now, he opens the book again. He reads more slowly, pausing when he comes to something I should keep in mind. He looks up when he's finished. I raise my brows at him again.

Luce sighs. "At the edge of orchard country," he begins.

"I understand that, for Christ's sake."

"All right. The light comes into its own."

We go on like this, line by line, until Luce is convinced that I get the deep significance of his chosen reading. Earlier today we barreled through the belly of a cherry orchard, Luce waving at the migrant workers who turned away from picking long enough to watch us fly on by. He must have planned this reading right that minute. Luce is that way: he likes things that seem to belong together.

Which is why, I think, he's smart. He finds connections where there are none to speak of. Luce was good in school, when he made it to school. Half the time he was sitting in the back seat of the blue State Agency car, in transit.

The first few times they took him home, I cried. I'd watch out my bedroom window while Luce went down the front walk and Janis Avitarre came flying from the car to meet him, wrapping him up in her boney brown arms. She always called him her baby, and Luce always smiled. It seemed he was always happy to be leaving with her.

Mary Mann explained that Luce going home was a good thing, and that if I really cared about him I'd be happy. But I didn't really care about him then. What I cared about was that the other girls didn't know how to play the games that Luce and I had made up for ourselves, and the

boys, being younger, didn't want a girl around. Luce and I together rode the edge of everything, and doing that alone was just short of not existing at all.

It was easier for me, if living like that is ever easy for anyone. I knew when I got a call slip at school it was only because the nurse needed Mary Mann's phone number, or because I'd cut typing again. And I knew when I came home from school that my clothes would still be in their drawers and on their hangers, and my posters would be on the wall. The last time I saw my mother I was eight years old. I never had reason to think I'd see her again.

Luce's mother was in detox, on and off, for years, but his father was the real problem. Every time she'd get her act together and get Luce home, his father would show up and take her out and get her drunk all over again. And then he'd take off-- leaving Luce to call Mrs. Reese, so she could bring him back to Mary Mann's. Sometimes he'd tangle with his father, but not so often once the old man knew that Luce was old enough, and angry enough, to hold his own.

The rest of the kids, Mitch and Steve in particular, were always afraid of him. Which was strange, because they were both twice his size from the day Luce arrived. And not strange, because Luce is twice as mean as anyone I've

ever known. It takes something big to rile him, but once he gets going no one knows what he won't do.

After the first few trips, when I figured out Luce would be back in a matter of months, I quit crying-- but not hating to see him go. Mary Mann wasn't happy about the arrangement, either. I heard her tell Mrs. Reese it was hard, so hard, to care for the child and watch him suffer the way he did and still be positive about sending him home.

But Mary Mann was hooked on Luce before she knew what was happening, and she couldn't turn him away. Just like me: one morning it's fine and you're friends and you're climbing trees, the next he's eighteen and he's packing his things and he's saying Hey Amy let's go. And you think, when Luce says something like that: Let's go. Let's go.

Luce is asleep almost as soon as he turns the flashlight off. I lie awake and watch the trees make shadows on the canvas. We had a full moon last night, so bright I could hardly sleep in the car. I felt like I did when, after we'd switched to daylight savings time in the spring, Mary Mann would still make us go to bed at nine on school nights. Luce and Mitch shared the room next to mine and

Jenny Lee's. We'd knock on the wall, tap Morse Code messages back and forth until it was finally dark.

But last night I sat up and watched him sleep, stretched out on the back seat. He's tall, so his legs are longer than mine, and I let him have the back even though he'd planned on leaving it to me. I wrapped myself around the stick shift until I couldn't stay in one position any more. Then I sat up and looked at Luce sleeping, and I thought about all of this:

Luce thinks of me like a sister, even though we don't think of Mary Mann as our mother. But I think of him as something more than just a brother, even more than a friend. If I think I might hurt his feelings, I stop doing what I am. And if I think, even for a minute, that something I've done has made him mad, I don't do it again.

Like, for instance, dating Mark Haroun. Mark was wild, and a junior. Luce's age. He was tall and lean, dark eyed, and very, very quiet among the girls. The fact that he'd spoken to me at all was, in itself, considered the highest compliment. But I was warned: Holly and Karen said, you go out with him, you'll go out with him. But that didn't matter to me.

What mattered was that Luce came into my room, like he wasn't allowed to do, and sat on my bed and watched me

while I got ready to go.

"You look nice," he said.

"Mary Mann will shoot you if she finds you in here," I said.

"She won't." He looked at my reflection in the mirror. He watched me put in my earrings, a pair of skinny silver hoops he'd given me that year, for Christmas Sixteen. "Don't go," he said.

"I can go out with whoever I want," I said.

"I know," he said. "So don't go out with him."

"I can take care of myself."

But Luce knew that, and he shrugged when he saw I didn't care what he thought of Mark--or, for that matter, anyone else I might decide to see. I came home early, though, straight from the movie, not caring what story Mark might invent, and I sat up late with Luce. I slept through the second half of a Creature Feature with my head on his leg.

I thought about all of this while looking at him, at the one piece of hair that won't go with his part and always falls straight over his forehead and into his right eye. Last year he pierced his ear and, when he thought about it, wore a silver stud. When we left he gave it to Mary Mann, pressed it into her palm while he shook her hand

good-bye, while she cried and begged me not to go with him.
And he told her, I heard him, he told her:

Think of us, always, together and well.

Luce wakes up after sleeping a few hours, cold and stiff under the thin blanket. I haven't been sleeping--the moonlight is still too much for me--but I make like I have. I squint, and I stretch, and I yawn.

"What time is it?"

He looks at his watch, holding it close to his face instead of turning on the flashlight. "Two-thirty," he says.

He sits up and opens the flap on the tent, looking out across the field. The wind comes up and blows in on us, so Luce drops it down again.

"Cold?"

I shrug, because I know he'll take this to mean that I am.

"We could pack up and go," he says.

"Now?"

"Why not now?"

"It's the middle of the night."

"No law against travelling at night," he says.

"You're not tired?"

"We'll drive with the windows down."

"Like hell," I say.

Luce laughs and settles under the blanket again. He's wearing his Levi jacket, the wool-lined one I bought him this year, for Christmas Seventeen. He's also wearing a flannel shirt, which is what his mother sent him every year he wasn't home for the holiday. Mary Mann always saved the presents from parents for last, as if they were something very special when, in fact, they were usually the least appealing of the lot. And she always bought me something extra, so I wouldn't feel left out, even though everyone concerned knew the cold truth.

"You think she'll send the police after me?" I ask him.

"I think they'd have caught us by now, if she had."

I feel brave when I realize what he's said is more than likely true. "I don't get it," I say.

"Get what?"

"Why we're here. Why we left."

Luce shrugs against the sleeping bag. "I'm where I want to be."

"Here?"

"You know what I mean."

"Canada?"

Luce turns his head and looks at me, an unexpected gesture because, at the moment, I'm looking at him. "You really don't know, do you," he says. Then he shrugs. "Why not Canada?"

"Why not California? Or Oregon, or--Christ, why not Pennsylvania?"

Luce smiles at me. "You think too much," he says.

My face is maybe three inches from his, maybe less. I can't think of anything to say.

"You've always thought too much," he says, when I don't say anything.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," he says. "You've always wanted answers. Which you already have, you know. You just have to ask the right questions."

"Don't," I say. "It's too late to get deep."

"This isn't deep," he says. "This is plain as the rose on your face."

Now I smile, but I think that if Luce weren't just inches away from me he wouldn't be able to tell. And then it occurs to me that Luce would know: if I were a hundred yards away, a hundred miles, if the only time I ever talked to him was over the telephone. Luce would know.

I'm thinking about all of this, so when Luce puts his

mouth over mine I'm taken unawares. He pulls back after a minute and looks at me, looks down and into me like only he could.

"Ask me why we're not going to Mexico," he says.

I raise my eyebrows, and Luce smiles.

"Because we're going to Canada," I say.

And then it's all over and all beginning at once, and I see that the reason we're here is the reason we left Mary Mann and the others behind: that being where you want to be is half or more of being where you belong.

Fly Away Home

Anjan is waiting at the window again. I can see her from across the street, clear as if she's standing right in front of me. She's wearing the red sweater I bought at The Paris yesterday, and her hair is down, which means Bud's on his way. How many times I've told her to turn out the bedroom light before she stands her watch, I don't know. Anjan always forgets.

Always: forgets to take out the trash, to do the laundry. Mere is forever screaming at her. She says if Anjan's going to sit home all day, the very least she can do is help keep house.

"Not that it makes any difference," Mere said, when Anjan finally quit school formally. "Not that I think they could have made much of you, either."

This is something I know Grandmere said to Mere herself, and not a few times. I can tell by the way Mere looks when she listens to herself.

It's coming full dark now, but when I look up into the box elder on my way up the walk I can see the dark spot where the nest is lodged, right near my window. As far as I know a bird's never set up house in the thing, but it's been there as long as I've been in my room--just about all my life. I said to Anjan once, I want to know why a nest

keeps itself when a house is forever coming undone.

Anjan shrugged. She always shrugs. What Anjan really cares about, beyond Bud, is anybody's guess.

Mere's in the living room when I come inside. The house is cold, as usual, because she's got the thermostat turned down. Anjan turns it up during the day, so we have to freeze through the night. When we were small and Mere was working nights we'd sleep warm at the babysitter's, but mornings at our house were cold. So cold, sometimes, that Anjan cried. Mere would tell her, "Go to school. Let them try to keep you warm."

I've walked the ten blocks home and probably wouldn't notice the cold at all if Mere weren't all wrapped up in one of Grandmere's afghans. She's always cold, just like Anjan. She's reading a magazine with one hand and smoking a Kool with the other.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey," I say back.

"How was your day?"

"Lasted all day," I answer, like always. We know our lines, Mere and I.

"You got mail," she says. "I put it on the table."

There's a four-high stack of envelopes waiting for me, three from colleges I've written to and one from someplace

in Montana, Sarah Keller College. I can tell it's not worth opening just by looking at the school crest, which has two too sweet little birds perched on the top.

"There's leftover pizza in the refrigerator," Mere says.

"I'm not hungry. I had a break at six." Which is not entirely true. I am hungry, but I know the pizza has been in there for a week. At least, that's the first time I remember seeing it.

"Looks like more school stuff," Mere says, when I start up the stairs.

"Yeah," I say. "Three more."

"You didn't forget about the junior college?"

"No," I say. As if I could.

"I guess you could get anything you want right here," Mere says.

"I guess," I say, still on the stairs, still making for my room.

Mere doesn't say anything after that, but I can feel her wanting to. I'm like that. I can tell when she wants to say something, know what she wants to say. Sometimes I answer, so she'll know I understand. And sometimes I don't say a thing-- not to hurt her, or make her nervous, but because the answer isn't what she wants from me.

Anjan turns away from the window when I come into the room. She's smoking, too, but the window's open so Mere won't smell it on her when she goes downstairs.

"I borrowed your sweater," Anjan says. "O.K.?"

"I guess it has to be," I say, though I really don't mind her borrowing my things. What I mind is how much better she looks in them. Anjan is small all over, short and boney. When she was little, Mere called her Chickadee. "I hate it when you smoke in here."

"Christ, the window's open," she says, and holds her hand closer to it.

"I don't care. It still makes my room stink." I step inside the closet before I pull off my waitress uniform, instead of pulling the curtains or turning out the light and undressing in the dark. "When's Bud coming?"

"Supposed to be here half an hour ago," she says. "Old Jack was drunk, though. I guess he might be making trouble."

"Give me today's news," I say, when I come out of the closet in my new pink chenille robe. Bud's dad is a trapper, like half the other men in Pinehurst, which is not steady work. Mere says it suits him. "What's he giving Bud grief about now?"

"I don't know." Anjan turns her back to me, meaning

she knows exactly and just doesn't want to tell.

Bud's not the kid you dream about, when you dream about having kids. He's not tough, like the boys Anjan used to see; he doesn't sell dope or drink a lot, never woke up in jail on Sunday morning. But he still lives at home, and he's two years older than me-- four years older than Anjan. He didn't finish high school either. He got a job at the Claire de Lune, the new hotel on I-80, last summer. He's a Public Space Attendant. Meaning he vacuums the lobby and stairs and hallways and empties the trash cans and ash-trays. He's been working for six months now, which Mere says only means he's due to quit any time.

Anjan's got it for him. Bad. I can tell by the way she still dresses up when she's going to see him, even though they've been going out for almost a year. What's more, she still comes flying down the hall every time the phone rings. I swear I can see her heart beating right through her shirt whenever she's talking to him.

Since Anjan doesn't go to school anymore, now that she's sixteen and has her way about it, she sits home and watches tv. On the days Bud's off they drive across the state line to Spokane or out to the lake and be together. That's what she says, if you ask her what they did all day.

"Bud quit his job, didn't he." Anjan shrugs. I give

her the heavy sigh and fall down on my bed. "Jesus Christ. You'd think he'd have more sense."

"It was a dead-end job anyway," Anjan says, no doubt echoing him. She does this more often than she thinks I know, saying things she couldn't possibly have thought on her own. Anjan wouldn't know a dead-end job from the opportunity of a lifetime.

"So what's he going to do now?"

"I don't know," Anjan says, but she moves toward the window and looks up the street for his car.

"Just tell me, will you?" I say. "I'm too tired to play Perry Mason."

She's chewing on the end of her thumb when she turns around, something she hasn't done since she had to tell Mere she'd decked Celie Patterson. I was right there for that one, but I didn't try to stop her. We were minding our own, eating lunch on the back steps of the junior high, like always. A ladybug landed on Anjan's leg. She put it on her finger to blow it away.

"Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home--"

"If you can find your way home," Celie said.

Mere wasn't good at being discreet, not even then, but the thought that Celie or anyone not us said anything bad about her always made Anjan crazy. She was on Celie's back

before I'd even registered what Celie said.

I didn't help out when it came to telling Mere, which I suppose wasn't right. Mere only cared about the grown up side of the story, anyway--the fact that her daughter lit into a girl who had never, the principal insisted, been in any kind of trouble before. Naturally, Mere wanted to know why. By then, Anjan was so worked up, it was all she could do to duck when Mere took a swing herself. Anjan ran away for three days, but Mere was just waiting and wilder than ever when they brought her back.

"He's going away," Anjan says.

"Are you going with him?"

"If he goes," she says.

For months, Mere's been telling me this is on the way.

"Mark my words," she says. "Your sister's going to ruin her life."

Why Mere thinks Bud's a giant step down for Anjan is a mystery to me. He's not a prince, but he's a man. Which is more than Mere has to speak of. Mere didn't marry my father because, as she tells it, I was her responsibility. Anjan came along two years later, on the promise of a summer boy: after he'd straightened things out at home,

he'd be back to take care of us all.

Of course, she never saw him again. She always says of course, as if she knew all along exactly how it would be.

"At least," she says, when she's telling the story, "your father didn't make any promises. I knew it was my own doing, and I treated it that way. Anjan--" Mere always says the name like she's swearing, like it takes the pressure off the moment. "Anjan started out as a lie, and she's been lying ever since."

Mere is wrong on this count, but I never tell her so. Anjan doesn't lie. She just doesn't talk to Mere. And when Mere finds out what she's been up to, it always seems like Anjan's been moving on the sly. The truth is, Anjan tells me everything, and I tell Mere what she wants to know.

So I ask my sister:

"Do you really want to go?"

Anjan laughs, but she's not happy. "I'm not just going to let him walk away."

"What's he going to do? What are you going to do?"

"We'll do fine," Anjan says, and I know in a second that she means this to be enough, the way being together answers what they did all day.

Bud lays on the horn out front. Anjan spins around to

look out the window again, as if she needs to be sure it's him. As if anyone else would be caught dead pulling up in front of Anne-Marie Marineau's. Then she turns around again and runs down the stairs. I hear Mere yelling at her back when Anjan blows through the living room.

"Take your jacket." Mere's voice comes out the open front door and back in through my window. "Damn it, Andrea, I said take your jacket."

Mere's the only one left now who calls Anjan anything else. I started it, when Andrea was too hard for me. At school they called her Jan, because she wouldn't answer to Ann and because Anjan was, for some reason, too hard for them.

Anjan's already climbing into the car, sliding over next to Bud, when Mere hits the porch.

"Andrea Marie--"

Her name gets lost in the thrum of Bud's engine when he guns it and pulls into the street. I lean out the window and look down on Mere, standing barefoot on the porch. She's brunette at the roots again. She stands there, breathing hard, hands on her hips like a kid too chicken to call off a fight. Bud's motor slows down in the distance, pausing for a stop sign, then falls in with the other night sounds.

Mere stands there for a long time, it seems, and I'm beginning to think she might really wait for Anjan to come home when she raises her hand to her mouth. If it weren't for the fact that she went outside without a cigarette she might be standing out there yet, just watching the street and waiting for a chance to be in charge.

She comes upstairs after awhile and sits down on my bed. I'm stretched out, looking over my mail, and I don't look up at her. She doesn't say anything for a minute, just stares into my closet.

"You have a lot of clothes," she says, finally.

"I've been buying a few things," I say. "For college." I wag the letter I'm reading for emphasis.

"I guess it's important to have the right things," she says. She stands up and walks into the closet, fingers the skirt of my favorite new dress. "You're really going to leave me, aren't you."

"Ah, Mere." I shrug, trying to make it seem not so much the big deal it is to me. "I'll be home all the time. Every holiday. Maybe even weekends, if I'm close enough."

Mere's still facing the closet, but her shoulders start to shake and I know she's crying before she makes any

noise. What comes to mind, I'm ashamed to say, is the fact that she's going to stain my dress if I don't get her away.

"Mere." I stand up and put my arm around her, lead her back to the bed. We sit down and she tries to hide her face.

"Don't pay attention to me," she says. "I'm being a fool. But I guess that's what I do best, isn't it."

"Stop it now. You don't need to tear yourself down just because Anjan's being spiteful."

"What I'm doing is telling the truth, Clarissa. I'm telling you the honest to God truth about your mother." She stands up then and goes to my window, standing like Anjan did not ten minutes before, staring out into the street. What Mere expects to find there, I don't know.

"When I met your father," she says, "I was so young. Young like Anjan, though. Not like you."

This is a variation on the usual theme, and I pay attention for once. "Sixteen?"

"Silly. A silly little girl. I didn't have a care in the world, except for who was going to take me out Saturday night." Mere leans out the window and takes a deep breath. The streetlamp picks up the tear streaks on her skin and carves them in like wrinkles. Mere's not old, not even thirty-five yet, but the fact that she's getting there

hadn't occurred to me before tonight. "Even when you came along, I didn't worry much. I figured, I was old enough to have a baby, I was old enough to take care of a baby. But I guess that's what everyone thinks, when they have to think something."

"You did all right," I say.

"With you," she says. "I did all right with you because I had no reason not to. But Anjan--" She says the name quietly now, shaking her head. "I had plans for that one. She was my ticket to a brand new life. Turns out it just wasn't the life I'd planned on."

Mere stands up again, shoving her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. Her blouse falls open too far. I look back at my mail.

"You did all right," is all I can think to say.

"I'm not so sure."

"I know Anjan," I say. "I know."

"Well, that's more than I can say for myself." Mere sits down on the bed again, leaning her elbows on her knees, sagging like she could fall asleep any minute. "They're running off together, aren't they."

I shrug, taking Anjan's part. "I wouldn't be surprised."

Mere shrugs back. "Neither would I," she says.

"You're lucky, you know."

"Me?"

"You." Mere looks at me and pushes the hair I've just let out of a ponytail off my face. It's dark, like hers, but straight, like someone else's. "You aren't pretty," she says.

"Thanks." I lean back on my pillows. Mere isn't good at being nice. Anjan's like her that way. And others; they're both fair-skinned, tempermental, bored as hell with everything.

"I don't mean it mean," she says. "I just mean it true."

"I've never thought I was pretty," I say. "I don't need to be told."

"And you've never thought being pretty was enough," Mere says. "And that's why I say you're lucky." She's still looking at me and I'm still looking at the wall. "Don't be mad now, Clarissa."

"I'm not mad."

"You're always mad," she says. "Or looking for a reason to be."

Mad is what keeps me going, but Mere wouldn't understand this. I don't say anything else, and after awhile she leaves me alone.

I hear her in the bathroom later, washing up and brushing her teeth. Then she walks down the hall and closes her bedroom door. She thinks this keeps me from hearing her alarm, but I wake with her every morning at five o'clock. She's gone before I get up for school, baking bread and pastries at the Poulet Rouge. When I get home at night she's dead again, just waiting to go to sleep.

I roll out of bed when I decide I'm still too wired from my coffee break. I look out the window, but there's not a car in sight: just a long stretch of road, and the shadows the streetlamps throw into it.

Mere's alarm goes off before Anjan gets home. While she's in the shower I hear Bud's car pull up outside, slowing down and starting up again in seconds flat. They never sit out front, and Bud never comes inside anymore. He's spent, all told, maybe half an hour at our curb.

It's coming light. I look at the clock, then remember it's Saturday and my day off this week, and time doesn't mean a thing. Anjan opens my door on her way to bed.

"Awake?"

"Enough," I say. She comes inside and sits on my bed, where Mere was sitting last night.

She sits without saying anything. She folds her hands

in her lap, stares at her shoes. "We're going," she says, when I think she's not going to say anything until I ask.

"Where?"

"California."

"When?"

"Today," she says. "Right after Mere goes to work."

I shake my head against the pillow, but Anjan isn't looking at me. "Don't," I say. "Really. Don't."

"It's not like Mere's going to have the police chasing us down. She'd probably pack my things for me. She always said she would. Remember? When I'd tell her I was going to run away again?"

"She didn't mean it."

"She doesn't mean anything."

Mere walks up the hallway, past my room and down the stairs. We listen to her creak into the kitchen, run water into the coffee pot. She pulls out a chair at the table, drags it across the linoleum floor.

Anjan pulls my sweater over her head and throws it in the laundry basket on the floor of my closet. "Bud liked the sweater," she says.

"You can't wash it," I say. "It's silk and angora. Dry clean only."

Anjan stretches out next to me in bed, something she

hasn't done since we were maybe eight and ten and Mere was out late again. In those days she'd listen to me; I'd tell her Mere would be back sooner if she went to sleep, and Anjan would drop off believing that.

"You can take it," I say.

"No," she says. "But thanks."

"I mean it," I say. "It's important to have the right things."

"I guess that's true. I don't want to start off wrong."

Mere's been calling this the case as long as either of us can remember. So I tell my sister, "You can take whatever you want. Look through the closet and see what you need."

"I don't want to take your new things."

"I have plenty of time to buy more. Anyway, I wasn't cut out for being fancy." I get out of bed and open the closet doors, scanning the lot.

"Clarissa?"

I turn around to look at her. Anjan looks small in my bed. She looks like a doll we had, when we still liked to play at having babies. I can see her ribs right through her undershirt when she locks her hands behind her head, and I realize I haven't thought of her as my little sister

in a long, long time.

"What," I say.

"What did I do that made Mere so goddam mad?"

"She's not mad," I say. "She just doesn't understand." why you want to be like her." I sit down on the bed again, but Anjan's intent on the ceiling. It's an old trick: stare and hold your eyes wide and there's no way to cry. "She's spent her whole life trying to tell you that it's not the thing to do."

"But that's not bad," she says. "I'm just not like you. I don't know what I want, but that's O.K." She looks at me. "Isn't that O.K.?"

There are people who would honestly answer yes to this, so I nod and reach over to wipe off her face. Anjan closes her eyes and I get back into bed with her, wanting to think of us small. Back then we feared losing Mere, stood at the window and waited for the sound of a car coming up the street. We wanted her with us, sitting in her green chair, smoking with her eyes shut while we lay on the floor and watched tv.

I open my eyes and look out the window. The box elder's turning. It gives up handful of leaves to the wind and they fly past the window like so many small brown birds.

Afterword

To be a significant author, a writer must first be a significant person, must know deeply, feel deeply, be aware deeply.

William Peden made this statement in trying to explain the difference between the fiction of Ernest Hemingway and that of Mickey Spillane. But this statement also seems to be appropriate in defining the authors who eventually become significant to individual readers. Those writers who are, for me, memorable are so because their work conveys a depth of understanding of my own life experience, on some level, at a particular time. I don't remember exactly when I first read Romeo and Juliet, but I do remember that I was in high school, and that I cried for a good while after finishing it. The conflict there seemed so personal, so immediate, I felt I could hardly bear the fact that two people I knew so well had come to such a tragic end.

Few of us take literature this personally as adults, but the impact that any piece of literature holds for us may never go away. My job as a writer is to create that kind of impact. Those authors which I find exceptionally talented are those that can, if not evoke such a reaction, at least remind me of a previous one.

Many authors reach into my deep memory by allowing me

to examine scenes from the past which have, in some way, contributed to creating the conflict presented in a story. This kind of orientation in itself is often enough to set off some alarms in my memory, reminding me of similar circumstances and reactions, helping me respond to a story more fully. I try to do the same thing in my fiction, to offer glimpses of the contrasts and ironies that have created the characters and situations with which I am dealing. Donald Barthelme has said that the principle of collage is the central principle of all art (Peden 177); and, while I cannot comment on "all art," I agree with Barthelme's comparison to the collage as far as the short story is concerned.

A successful short story, one that keeps me reading, is oftentimes more an amalgamation of smaller stories, all of which are related by some pattern--of behavior, thinking, speech, anything--which subsequently allows me to put together, for myself, a complete understanding of the author's vision. Although many critics believe that such "episodic" plots are better suited to longer works--generally, to full-length plays or novels--I find this structure an extremely effective tool for putting together a story.

By the strictest definition, any story line that does not move immediately from Point A to Point B may be consi-

dered episodic. In short fiction, episodic presentations of plot are often accompanied by spare language, which serves to balance out the time span in which each small scene takes place: the less detail, we might assume, the sharper the focus. Authors who tend toward spare prose often populate their work with characters about whom the reader may know only the basics: name, age, and place of residence, if even that. And, while these stylistic elements are certainly not dependent on one another (as there are many stories which display spare language and yet rely on more traditional presentations of plot), they are often combined. Writers who tend toward a more elliptical prose style are lately being called minimalists, and their work, minimalist fiction.

This distinction, of course, has given rise to others: minimalism has also been called "Brat Pack fiction" and "workshop prose" (Sassone 39). But these terms would seem to be more in relation to the youth of many minimalist authors, and the fact that much of the minimalist writing now in print has come to us in the form of first fictions, than the audience to which minimalism appeals. Raymond Carver, for example, has long been praised by many literary critics as a master of clipped, elliptical prose. And minimalism in art is not, indeed, a new phenomenon.

The concepts underlying this form are also recognizable in the Dada movement of the early twenties and the works of artists Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray. Indeed, Man Ray's "Rayographs," images of various objects placed on photographic paper and exposed to direct light, would seem to foreshadow Barthelme's collage imagery--both artists apparently recognize an aesthetic element behind combinations that seem, at surface level, miscellaneous.

The basic premise behind minimalism in any form is that "less is more"--the less exposition the author (or artist) provides, the more meaning the reader (or viewer) is allowed to discover in the work. Ralph Sassone has called minimalism "literary Rorschach: the less there is on the surface, the easier it is to see whatever you choose" (39).

Minimalist fiction relies almost exclusively on the relationship of parts to the whole to achieve its vision; in effect, it relies on the reader's ability to "assemble" the story in his or her mind. There can be no real miscellany about its components, then, or the story will never be complete. Good minimalist fiction, like Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" or "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," makes the job of connecting the pieces of the story relatively easy. Though the storyline in "Hills" is certainly not episodic, the many questions left unanswered by

Hemingway's objective narrator make this story a puzzle in its own right: Why are Jig and her companion in a train station? Why doesn't Jig want to do whatever it is her companion wants her to do? And what is the real meaning of her cryptic remark about the hills that look like white elephants?

The reader's first job, of course, is to ascertain the subject of the two characters' conversation; once that task has been accomplished, the reader must then determine why it is an issue between them at all. We don't need to know where Jig is from, or what her companion's name is, in order to identify the anger and frustration between the two characters. All the detail in the story leads us to the understanding that something between the two is not right; our job as readers is to discover what this "something" is, and how it developed between them.

The measured, even clinical voice of the narrator keeps us at a distance from the situation; we are given no immediate insight into either character's thoughts. Through detail alone, Hemingway manages to expose the history of the characters' relationship, as well as each character's motivations, and leads us to understand that what is happening to Jig is simply not fair. This kind of narrative distance is not always possible in a minimalist piece,

since the narrator's observations are often the only source of information we have. However, the minimalist author who allows extraneous detail into the narrative is making the reader's job more difficult than it need be; the domination of voice, the distraction provided by a narrator's unusual dialect or idiom, is more often than not the central failing of the minimalist story.

Kevin McIlvoy, editor-in-chief of Puerto Del Sol, has commented that his publication often receives "very impressively polished manuscripts that will dazzle readers with their sheen but offer no character/reader experience of lasting value" (Henry 238). One contemporary writer who publishes just such 'dazzling' work is Lee K. Abbott; his first collection of short stories, The Heart Never Fits Its Wanting, is full of stories that are delightful to read--his narrative voice is oftentimes disarming--but that leave little for the reader to think about once he or she has finished them. Of short stories, Abbott says he prefers those "with all the parts hanging out and whirling"; and this is, perhaps, the most accurate description of his writing that one might offer (Abbott "Note" 22).

Amy Hempel, on the other hand, deftly balances voice against fully developed characters and a slightly skewed, compelling point of view. It is not her language, but her

stories themselves that engage our attention and carry us through the action. Hempel has been compared to Raymond Carver, one of the "spearheaders" of the recent wave of minimalism (Sassone 39). But what is distinctive about Hempel's work is that her voice, which is energetic and contemporary in its idiom--quite unlike the quiet, urbane voices one hears in Carver's stories--never intrudes on the narrative sequence.

The easiest distinction to make between Abbott and Hempel is simply to say that Abbott would appear to believe that spectacle is an end unto itself, while Hempel appears to see anything too flashy as threatening to the minimalist story as a whole. Much like Ernest Hemingway, it would seem, Hempel relies on the necessary rather than the impressive to guide the reader through her stories. And, in the end, we are deeply touched that her characters have come through their trials so well, having been with them through it all.

This is why, for my own purposes, I've dubbed stories like those Lee K. Abbott writes (and like most of those that have lately been appearing in North American Review or the New Yorker) "voice fiction"---stories that are told to us by an engaging narrator who sometimes overshadows the story itself. "Voice fiction" may well have stemmed from

Donald Barthelme's consistent use of what Gordon Weaver calls "absurd dialogue", whereas minimalism of the Hemingway variety centers around minute detail. According to Fredrick Barthelme, minimalism developed as a reaction to the "difficult fiction," including that of his brother Donald, which was being published in the late 70's; the response, fittingly, was to write "a plain sentence, drab as it may seem" (Sassone 40).

Good fiction, in general, relies on the author's ability to know what the reader needs to understand about his or her characters and their situations. Minimalist fiction requires the same attention to plot development and characterization that one would expect to find in a more traditional story, but it hinges on the author's sense of what is absolutely significant.

* * * * *

Ernest Hemingway is considered by some writers, including myself, to be the original minimalist: his language is spare, his detail is wholly necessary or wholly absent (Sassone 39). Other writers assign this distinction to Donald Barthelme (Sassone 40). My objection to this claim is that many of Barthelme's oblique, often nebulous stories

are not minimal--they are, quite simply, obscure. The major criticism of Barthelme's fiction is that it often disintegrates into didacticism, touting a theme at the expense of a story; when Barthelme's fictions work best, Gordon Weaver says, "they are supported by a narrative energy"--which might suggest an otherwise lacking sense of connectedness (79).

One such theme-heavy story is "Basil From Her Garden," which appeared in the New Yorker in 1985 (and in Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards 1987.) In this story, Barthelme uses a question and answer format to expose various facts about one character's life. In response to a question about his "special interests," for example, the interviewee offers this answer:

A--Well, adultery. I would say that's how I spend most of my free time. In adultery.

Q--You mean regular adultery.

A--Yes. Sleeping with people to whom one is not legally bound.

Q--These are women.

A--Invariably. (116)

This exchange between the two characters, or voices, is

undeniably amusing, as are many of Barthelme's stories; his keen eye for the absurd is what makes much of his work delightful reading. But while the content here is certainly minimal--we don't know either character's name or occupation, or why one is being questioned by the other--by the end of the story, what we know of either character, or this situation that finds them together, is minimal as well. What we do know is that a nameless man is the subject of an interview (or participating in a therapy session--the distinction between these two possibilities is never made clear,) and that he likes having affairs with women. But why the interview? Why the affairs? Barthelme declines to enlighten us on either point. The reader, then, is left to intuit for him or herself why these two men are together, and what ultimately comes of their discussion, if indeed anything does.

Ernest Hemingway's minimalism, a controlled and spare prose style that leaves a great deal open to interpretation while simultaneously presenting a complete story, has had what I believe to be a notable influence on my own writing. Hemingway's writing displays "the art of indirection, suggestion, implication . . . rather than outright omission"; omission is justified only when, according to Hemingway, "you knew that you omitted and that the omitted part would

strengthen the story" (Weaver 2). That Hemingway perceived the importance of having some relationship between each of the component parts of his fiction is, perhaps, what distinguishes his writing as clearer than that of Donald Barthelme in my view, and makes it seem more directly related to the current wave of minimalism, as well as my own writing.

Beyond the stylistic concerns, however, Hemingway's vision of the short story as an implication of a larger frame of reference, rather than the definition of a particular moment in time, has helped to shape the way I formulate my own stories. The spark behind a story is often a "why" question:

Why is Molly prepared to exit her own life and join her father in New Orleans?

Why is Amy changing the tire on Luce's car?

Why is Anjan waiting at the window?

The answers to these questions usually give me a reason for beginning a story, attempting to show the reader how Molly developed her cynical outlook on marriage, how Amy came to believe that she must always be prepared to take care of herself, and why Anjan would believe that being with a man, any man, is better than being alone.

For the purposes of this report, I have chosen three

stories which illustrate the pattern-among-the-pieces technique I've worked to develop. All three of my protagonists--Molly, Amy, and Clarissa--have insecurities about themselves that cloud their ability to find the path that will lead them beyond the obstacles my stories present them with. All three find their way around these problems by sifting through the memories that initially sparked their thoughts about their own shortcomings, and lead them to believe that they were less capable than each woman finally discovers herself to be. Only these moments, those of inquiry or discovery, have any bearing on the story, so only the scenes surrounding these moments appear in the final drafts.

This is precisely the way I read "Hills Like White Elephants": only the details that bear any significance to the relationship between Jig and her companion are provided, so that I may understand how it happens that Jig would give up a child she obviously wants at her companion's request. Hemingway's tight but loaded presentation of the scene at the train station is the only key we have for unlocking the meaning behind his words, but notice how, at the beginning of the story, Hemingway hands us the tools for doing this:

The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun (Hemingway 273).

In just the first two sentences, Hemingway has created a setting that introduces barrenness and divergence, two of the main themes of the story. Contrast these lines, then, with the first few lines of Lee K. Abbott's "Precious But Gone Are The Hours We Touched, etc.":

Let me tell you about my ex-girl, Nadine. First time I saw her, she was high-stepping out of the bank as if dancing on the edge of truth and human delight. I was touched. The sign over the place read: Brownfield First National--Your Savings Place--11:48 (Abbott 43).

Little of what is included in these lines has much to do with the story that follows. Abbott almost invites us to believe that this will generally be the case by including an "etc." at the end of his title: the guiding thought here is not contained, and so we start our reading with the

impression that the story, perhaps, will not be either. So we begin to understand, after the first few paragraphs of Abbott's story, that it is more important for us to listen to Eddie Morris than it is to immediately understand what, exactly, he's talking about.

The first lines of Amy Hempel's "The Most Girl Part Of You," however, go right to the point:

Jack "Big Guy" Fitch is trying to crack his teeth. He swishes a mouthful of ice water, then straightaway throws back slugs of hot coffee (Hempel 131).

The narrator of this story, who remains nameless throughout, is solely responsible for the impression of Jack Fitch that we receive; her first comments, then, are fittingly devoted to Jack's destructive behaviors, because it is Jack's exploration of the many ways human beings are vulnerable to pain that serves as the backbone of the story. Within the first page, Hempel provides us with three such examples; it is nearly impossible for us to miss the point that Jack wants to test the limits of his vulnerability.

Perhaps it is fair to assert, then, that some of the best minimalist fiction begins, even in the very first lines, with a sharp and relevant focus. Though even the

most traditional stories must certainly show some limitation of subject matter, the minimalist story tries to expose as little as possible; whatever a character, even the narrator, might be thinking or feeling is divulged to the reader only on a need-to-know basis.

This is why it is important, if not essential, that the minimalist story start the reader out on the right track, headed directly toward an understanding of what is to come. Hemingway introduces us to the Ebro valley in order that we might immediately recognize the corresponding barrenness of the relationship between Jig and her companion. In effect, the first lines of the minimalist story must "cue" the reader into entering the narrative with the main idea already in mind.

The failure to establish this kind of immediate contact with the reader--which Fredrick Barthelme calls "intimacy," and praises as the difference between minimalist fiction and simple reportage (Sassone 40)--is sometimes the only distinction I can draw between a minimalist fiction that works for me and one that does not. But beyond this, reading past the first few lines of each story, the minimalist piece must sustain a focal point to which the reader can refer. In Abbott's story, such a focal point does not appear; we are simply offered the sum of Fast Eddie's

perceptions over the course of several days, and left to decide for ourselves what these things might mean.

Hemingway's focus, however, appears when he connects the original images of the Ebro valley with the characters he has recently introduced:

The girl was looking off at the the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

"They look like white elephants," she said.

"I've never seen one," the man drank his beer.

"No, you wouldn't have."

(Hemingway 273)

Later in the story, Hemingway allows Jig to mention these images again, in conversation. Her companion's reaction is such that we begin to more fully comprehend the significance of these observations: because he is made angry by her references to "white elephants," or objects of little value, we begin to understand that the conflict between the characters may have something to do with their value systems. Consequently, a unifying principle begins to take shape in the reader's mind, not only through repetition, but also through the characters' interaction with these

significant details.

Abbott's story is not devoid of focus: within the first pages, it is easy to see that one of his main themes is the basic human need for companionship. Fast Eddie is a DJ; he talks to people who don't talk back to him. He has inane conversations with the guests who appear on his show. More important, it seems, is the fact that he's been married five times. All these details are disclosed within the first two pages of the story, and it is eminently clear that Abbott wants us to see Eddie as a man who is desperate to be loved.

But while Abbott's story does focus on Eddie's state of mind, there is no real point of reference to which the reader can return when trying to piece Eddie's story together. It is difficult for the reader to understand what Eddie wants or needs without stopping every few lines to think about what Eddie is actually saying. In describing a prayer which he shares with one of his guests, for example--a reverend from "the Powerhouse Church of God in Christ"--Eddie says:

The Rev asked for Wisdom and Light, an end to suffering, articulate and home-owning witnesses-- the standard fundamentals of faith; then a special message, charged by five thousand watts,

shot out through that Sweet Modern Jesus to one Nadine Corrine Suggs, female youth and close-pored incarnation of desire. Amen. (Abbott 44)

Abbott describes his fiction as marking the "connections" between men and women, as opposed to developing on situations in which they find themselves together; thus, one might assume that Abbott's writing could illustrate Hemingway's methods of implication. However, while we may indeed understand the "connection" between Eddie and Nadine, it is impossible to infer an entire story: we can infer why Eddie wants, or needs, Nadine, but why he chose her, and why (and if) she even entertains the thought of responding to a person who comes across, in the story, as entirely out of control, ultimately is not made clear. Because we are not allowed to really know the characters, only to hear Eddie's version of their story, it becomes clear that Eddie's perspective is all that we are meant to understand.

But Amy Hempel balance her entertaining first-person narrator against the moving relationship she develops between the narrator and Jack Fitch. The fact that the narrative voice serves only to characterize the narrator--young but wise beyond her years--and provide exposition for

the reader is, in itself, admirable. In this scene, for instance, the narrator recalls her experience with teaching Jack Fitch to sew:

I cannot baste a facing or tailor-tack a dart, but I can thread the goddamn needle and achieve a fairly even running stitch. It was the running stitch I taught Big Guy; he picked it up faster than I ever did. He practiced on a square of stiff blue denim, and by "practiced," I mean that Big Guy did it once (Hempel 134).

This detail, in and of itself, may seem extraneous to the general story line; however, two paragraphs later, when the narrator tells us to what use Jack has put his new skill--he sews the girl's initials into his hand--we are reminded that Jack's concentration is further evidence of his determination to hurt in as many ways as he can imagine. Hempel's consistent focus allows us to expect that Jack's self-destructiveness must account for what will be the ultimate crisis and resolution of the story, and we are not disappointed.

It is no surprise that both of the minimalist stories end in a way which seems entirely consistent with the plot

development, since we are able to discern, in each case, what the plot is moving toward. In Hemingway's story, Jig allows her companion to make her decision for her, and "decides" to go ahead with the abortion. This seems appropriate, albeit disturbing, because the relationship between the two has surfaced as one in which the man is always in control; for Jig to take a stand, to insist on having an equal voice in the matter, would be out of character. And this one-sidedness, this lack of potential for development, is precisely what Hemingway has been pointing to all through the story.

Similarly, Hempel takes Jack Fitch to the final test of pain: She allows him to enter willingly into the intimate relationship that has been growing between him and the narrator. Having lost his mother to a suicide, Jack is wary of developing new attachments. In the end, his involvement with the narrator arrives almost by accident, indicating the inevitability of such interaction:

Big Guy is going to kiss me.

And here is the thrill of my short life: he does.

And I see that not touching for so long was a drive to the beach with the windows rolled up so

the waves feel that much colder.
(Hempel 139)

Thus Hempel makes clear, through Jack's actions as well as the narrator's observations on this choice, that this relationship may be both another cause of, and Jack's only hope for salvation from, certain pain.

Neither is the ending of Lee K. Abbott's story a surprise; by the time we are halfway through it, we have no idea of what to expect and, as such, are prepared to accept whatever comes next. As it happens, Eddie is severely beaten by his most recent ex-wife's new boyfriend, an Hawaiian biker. And it is just before this beating takes place that Eddie comes to the conclusion that "everything--kindliness, despair, even the past--everything comes eventually" (Abbott 51). Abbott intends for this to be a major revelation for Eddie; his desperation in previous scenes is a valid contrast to this fatalistic approach to the future. And so we see that this transformation, this change in Eddie's outlook on life, is what the story has been leading up to. It is not the pattern among Eddie's perceptions, but the final sum of these perceptions themselves, that is ultimately significant to the story.

Lee K. Abbott does not claim to be a minimalist, but his more recent works (such as his short story "Dreams of

Distant Lives") show a greater attention to establishing patterns among the details of the story. This development in his style is, perhaps, indicative of that pattern's integral role: even when the author him or herself is not actively aware of its importance, the pattern establishes itself within the work. And perhaps this pattern, this idea of what should emerge from the work in the end, is what the writer refers to, in retrospect, as inspiration.

* * * * *

Within my own work, the task of establishing a pattern has usually amounted to cutting down the original drafts of a story until only the bare bones remain. Once this structure has emerged, I know the story is complete. Occasionally, however, the minimalist story is guilty of offering too little exposition; in some cases, I've had to add the missing links that allow the reader to assemble a complete story.

The oldest story in this collection is "Something Blue," the first story I wrote after moving from Idaho to Kansas. "Something Blue," then, because it was the most successful of my stories at that time, became something of a model for the rest of my stories. And, fittingly, "Some-

thing Blue" has also required the most work, as it was the proverbial drawing board to which I repeatedly returned while learning how to compose a minimalist piece. The revision process for this story ranged from very small omissions, as small as single words or phrases, to the complete deletion of entire scenes; in only one instance was any addition required.

The story is composed of four sections, which I like to think of as movements; in the first, my primary focus is illuminating Molly's reasons for leaving her boyfriend of some years, and their life together. This movement was originally in present tense, like the rest of the story, and the end of this movement originally focused on Molly:

"You can't possibly believe it will change anything."

I shrug, look past him out the window. It is raining again. We came to Washington, my father said, because it is a place where things are encouraged to grow.

"Everyone needs to believe in something," I say. "You have God. I have my father."

In revision, however, I determined that this movement was better suited to past tense, to clarify the fact that Molly

is only remembering this scene, and that she has already left Ryan behind by the time we enter the story. It also seemed that Molly's father should play a more significant role in ending this scene, since he is her sole reason for leaving Ryan; and, re-introducing him as a character is one way of negotiating the move from Seattle to New Orleans that occurs at the beginning of the second movement. Finally, the equation of Molly's father to God seemed more than a little extraneous. And so, in the final draft, the final paragraph of the first movement reads like this:

I smiled and looked past his shoulder, out the window. It was raining again. We'd come to Washington when I was nine because, my father said, it was a place where things were encouraged to grow. At the time, I'd assumed he meant me.

Molly's use of the relationship she has shared with her father as a focal point in her daily life is one of the patterns of behavior I've attempted to establish in this story; she refers back to her parents' relationship, and the value judgements it required of her, each time she begins to think of moving ahead in her relationship with Ryan. By establishing this as an almost habitual reaction,

I intend for my reader to understand that Molly's "epiphany" will occur when she realizes that the relationship she now shares with her father is neither healthy nor particularly productive, for either her or her father. Only when Molly realizes that the role she has played in her father's life has changed with her mother's exit can Molly begin to understand that the role she plays in her own life has changed: Molly is now the adult, and she is in charge of her own destiny.

This revelation was not made clear, I think, in early drafts of the story. After a conference with Gladys Swann, however, who suggested that "the key to this story lies in something Molly cannot say," I added a large section at the end of the third movement in which Molly reconsiders the life she shared with Ryan. After a less-than-pleasant phone conversation with Ryan, Molly thinks about the possibility that Ryan has been right in saying that they already have a life together, even without the bond of marriage; rather than thinking about the way her parents failed to communicate, and assuming that this is an inevitability in her relationship with Ryan, Molly takes this time to think about her own life as a distinct entity. I mean this to be the real turning point in the story, as Molly reviews the routine she and Ryan share and concludes that

We have a routine, half of which revolves around me. And I know where to go, where he'll be, if I need Ryan for anything.

Directly after this, Molly picks up a pencil to write a letter to Ryan--yet another concession to the fact that she may have been wrong. For Molly, who throughout this story has conceded to nothing and asked, repeatedly, for people to adapt to her wishes, I mean this to be no small feat.

One of the most difficult tasks in writing a minimalist story, one I struggled with repeatedly in this piece, is learning to identify and correct overstatement of the subject matter. This was a particular problem in the second movement of the story. In the original draft, the conversation between Molly, her father, and Mr. Hennessey which deals with Mrs. Hennessey's death reads as follows:

He says 'moved on,' as if her leaving involved some conscious action on her part. My father nods, sympathetic. At some point I realize that they are not dissimilar at all. They have both loved, lost. Neither of them would change these facts, given the opportunity.

Because minimalism relies so heavily on understatement, it is imperative that the author use language that is both implicative and rooted deeply enough in the scene that its connections are not so obvious. Thus, the final draft of this same scene is much less direct:

He says, when he speaks of her, 'moved on,' as if it involved some conscious action on her part. My father nods his understanding, and I realize that they are not much different.

This paragraph, in my estimation, is more successful in adding to the story because its addition--the relationship Molly perceives between her father and his friend--is not explicitly defined. Rather, it is implicitly contained in her observation.

"Something Blue" is, I think, a fairly simple story. It is easy to identify the pieces that contribute to the pattern here--the father's cigarettes and images of cloudy skies, in particular, both of which act as bridges back to Molly's painful past experiences with family relationships. The plot, though more episodic and, by that token, perhaps more sophisticated than that of the other two stories, has

been easily negotiated from movement to movement by most readers. The story itself is particularly significant to me because I think it represents a real turning point in my development as a writer; it provided a bridge between my heavy-handed earlier stories and the sketchy compensations that followed them.

Both "At the Edge of The Orchard Country" and "Fly Away Home" were easier to write, as I had come to a greater understanding of the minimalist tradition by the time I began them. This is not to say that either story has gone without revision, of course; "At the Edge of The Orchard Country" has come into its final form only within the last month. The key problem with this story was finding a way to characterize Amy's unconditional love for Luce, and to somehow expose its roots. Though he's "left her" for his mother several times in the past, always choosing to go back home when, Amy asserts, he could simply ask to stay with his foster mother, Amy still chooses to leave with him when he finally asks her to.

The problem most readers had with this story was understanding why Amy would choose to go with him; consequently, I understood that the comparison between their early life together and their present relationship had not been cleanly enough exposed. The final draft juxtaposes Luce's

earlier justification for leaving Amy--that he wants to be with his mother--to his final reasoning for taking Amy away--that he wants to be with her. Unless Luce made these two statements, I concluded, the story had no basis for its resolution.

The pattern that ties "At the Edge of The Orchard Country" together is a little more subtle than that in "Something Blue". Amy's obsession with 'knowing', which translates into her admiration for Luce's intellect as well as own her concern about being caught after running away, is, I think, the strongest thread holding the narrative together. In the end, the fact that Amy understands what Luce wants--simply to be with her--is what leads to her further understanding of what it means to belong in someone's life.

I consider "Fly Away Home" to be my strongest story. The story line itself is not complex, but the psychology of the characters and their environment is. The challenge in writing this story was to introduce the French heritage of many northern Idaho towns (which rose with the fur trapping industry) and, at the same time, to expose the real sadness that lies at the heart of such an unstable, fluctuating environment. The irony of such a connotatively 'up-scale' milieu breeding the most devoutly pessimistic human

beings seemed like a natural place to begin a story. And so I asked: Why does Anjan believe that Bud, a product of this same environment, can make her life any happier?

The elements of the French culture--the fact that Clarissa and her sister refer to their mother as 'mere', that Mere works at the Poulet Rouge, that Clarissa shops at The Paris--had to be interspersed throughout the narrative in order for the story not to seem like a profile of Pinehurst, Idaho, and yet could not be lost in the story. The narrative became Clarissa's story, not Anjan's, when I realized that the real question behind this paradox was how and why it continued. Clarissa's ability to transcend the superficial gloss of high culture that surrounds her home town--and begins to surround her own life, as she attempts to build an 'acceptable' college wardrobe and works toward being accepted into a new community--is the only logical conclusion, I think, to a story built around the premise that no one can change the fact of who she is.

This connection between setting and the theme, whether ironic or not, is one of the ways in which I've attempted to thread together the various parts of other stories; I often refer back to "Hills Like White Elephants" for direction in doing so. I believe that a great deal of the significant fiction available to us now was sparked by

examining the relationship between where people choose to live and how they choose to behave in relation to this environment--ordinary stuff at best.

But William Peden agrees that "much of the most important American short fiction has been in the province of the usual and the unexceptional" (30). And so it would seem that the "jejune plots" and "settings crowded with banal domestic details" that appear in minimalist fiction may actually provide the basis for significant stories--stories about ordinary characters and usual routines. Stories about people, I think, not much different than myself.

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PARTY OF ONE: THREE STORIES
AND A CRITICAL AFTERWORD

by

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Abstract

My report consists of three short stories--"Something Blue," "At The Edge of The Orchard Country," and "Fly Away Home"--and a critical apparatus. All three of these short stories deal with the ways in which people (in this case, three women) overcome what they perceive to be their own weaknesses. All three of these stories are also examples of what has been called minimalist fiction, relying on a spare prose style and minimal detail to achieve their visions.

The larger portion of my critical apparatus is devoted to a discussion of the principles underlying minimalist fiction, as well as Donald Barthelme's observation that the central principle of all art is "the principle of collage." I agree with this observation as far as the short story is concerned, but add to it by asserting that there must be an identifiable pattern among the pieces of a story for it to be considered a minimalist work. Ernest Hemingway's minimalism becomes a model for this patterning technique, and by comparing "Hills Like White Elephants" to two contemporary stories, I illustrate the distinctions between minimal and obscure fiction.

The final portion of my report is given over to a discussion of the revision process that ultimately uncovered the minimalist patterns within each of my own three stories.