Having It All: A Collection of Short Stories

An Honors Thesis (HONORS 499)

by

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Purpose of Creative Project

The purpose of my creative project was to write and revise short fiction. "A Nice Christian Girl" and "Having It All" were two stories I wrote for English 405. "A Dog in the Middle of the Road" was a story I wrote for English 407. For my project, I decided to revise these stories. I revised "A Nice Christian Girl" by weaving another story line into it. For the revision of "Having It All" and "A Dog in the Middle of the Road," I ended up throwing out most of the original story. For these revisions, I made point-of-view changes, character changes, and plot changes that brought me closer to the vision I had for the stories.

"Wild Girls" and "Country Living" are newly written for the project. "Wild Girls" is a short, short story that I was inspired to write after listening to the radio one day. I started "Country Living" with one line from my journal of possible first lines for stories--it was an exercise from a book, in which I would write one line each day that could possibly open a story. I also revised these stories.
"Hi, Peter. I'm home--Peter, are you there?" Joan asked as she set down a couple of grocery sacks on the black lacquer dining room table. Snowflakes on the sacks had started to melt, making them soggy. Joan was fortunate that one of the sacks didn't burst open.

She walked to the doorway and could see Peter sitting in his red velvet lazyboy recliner in the living room, clutching the remote control in his hands. He poked his head around the corner and said, "Yeah, I'm here."

Joan went to the hall closet, taking her coat, hat scarf, and boots off and putting them in it. Peter diverted his attention to his thousand dollar entertainment system. In a matter of seconds like a speed skater, he zipped through approximately fifty-two channels. He turned the sound down on the TV, and scanned the radio stations on the stereo.

Peter hadn't been to work for weeks, and his sick leave and vacation leave were quickly being used up--another day at home, Peter would lose a paycheck. He worked at a factory where they manufactured plastic cups, plastic bags, plastic bottles, and plastic forks, spoons, and knives. Joan was a secretary at the local university. Joan had her money to spend on shopping and her car, and Peter had his money for the house payment, the bills, his cars, and his toys--the home entertainment system. They had been married for six years and had no children.

"Hey, Hon, what you doing?" Joan came in, perky from her favorite activity--shopping.
"Nothing much," mumbled Peter. He slunk down in the recliner, tilting it back more, grabbing a copy of *People* magazine.

"I thought maybe we could watch this movie I rented and eat some Chinese food together," Joan said. She sat on the edge of their white plush couch.

Still looking at *People*, Peter replied, "I'm really not in the mood. . . . Chinese food, huh?" Joan knew it was his favorite, and she thought it could get him out of his brooding.

Joan shook her head and tousled her brown, bobbed hair. A little habit she performed every five to ten minutes. It was known to annoy some people. She thought it annoyed Peter.

"I thought maybe we could watch 'All The King's Horses'--remember, Peter, when it was out? We wanted to go see it, but we were busy redoing the house and going to the fertility doctor . . . and, well, you know. Anyway, everybody said it was good. Sylvia at the office said she liked it, and she hates Westerns. I guess it's just that right combination of romance and adventure." Joan tapped her sneakered foot on the mauve polyester filled carpet. She could see the resigned look on Peter's stubbly dark face. Nothing was going to make Peter happy.

"Great, but I'm not in the mood for a movie--western, romance, adventure--nothing." Peter narrowed his dark eyes, stiffened his shoulders, and slunk back up from the recliner, tossing the magazine on the floor, where a subscription card flew out. Joan jumped up from the couch, stooping over picking
up the subscription card and the magazine—the pages rustling and hissing.

"I don't know why we have to go through this... every time I—" Joan started in, "Peter, why can't you... just get over this?"

She put the magazine in its proper place—the wicker magazine rack by the front door. She stood beside Peter, petting his head. She could feel his oily hair and noticed he was wearing the same gray sweat pants and shirt from yesterday.

Peter pulled away from her pets and rubs, and Joan made her way back to the couch, her eyes staring at an abstract marble statue. She knew Peter hated it, and she had paid plenty for it.

"What is there, Joan? Tell me. Five years at the factory. Two mortgages. Two car payments. What?" Peter said.

"Honey, we have each other. Isn't that enough for you?" Joan questioned him.

"So what? Don't I have reasons... . . ." Peter picked up yesterday's paper.

"Let's have children. There are other ways," chimed in Joan.

"Who would want to bring kids in this world—war, starvation?" Peter peered down into his lap at the paper.

"But you used to—" Joan's voice broke off into high sobs. She stood in the doorway, feeling the emptiness move through her body like a cold, winter wind. It was all her fault. They had agreed on four children—two boys and two girls. But she
was the one with the defective womb.

She could see her reflection in the glass coffee table. She could see the plumpness in her face and the crow's feet forming around her brown eyes.

Joan left the living room and went into the kitchen. She took the groceries out the brown paper sack--cans of corns, peas, and beans, paper towels, and a bright red bag of rice chips. She threw them in the cabinet, making as much noise as possible. She opened the bag of rice chips and munched on them loudly. They tasted awful, but they were supposed to be good for you. She slammed the door shut. She scrunched up the bag loudly, hoping every angry noise would penetrate Peter's ears.

She set the two cartons of Chinese food on the stove. She wondered why Peter had to upset her mood. Today was such a good day for her--better than yesterday. She didn't have the usual load of forms to type up. She only had to print some mailing labels. She and her co-workers went out to Zeno's, the new Italian restaurant, for an extra long lunch. She left work early and went shopping, but only to come home to Peter. His moods, his tantrums. Why did he do this to her?

She wanted to make up. She wanted to talk. He should go see a psychiatrist or a psychologist, she thought. To Joan, he was just like the woman on that special she saw on the News about manic depression or bipolar disorder, as they called it now. Her Mom always told her not to go to bed angry. She opened the kitchen cabinet and pulled out two plates--her favorite
pattern with the pink hearts and blue flowers. She took a carton of Chinese food and poured the right amount of rice on each plate and took another carton of sweet and sour pork and spooned out the right amount over the rice. Peter loved sweet and sour pork--she wanted this to cheer him right up like some magic potion.

Joan strutted slowly toward the living room holding up the two plates, but Peter was gone. She dropped the plates on the glass coffee table, clinking the surfaces, spilling some. She quickly ran down the hall. Images flickered in her mind--slit wrists, empty pill bottles--but she had to say to herself--"No, no way he would do that!" She flung the bathroom door open, knocking down a stack of towels on the vanity down on the floor. Nothing. The bedroom. She ran upstairs. The guest bedroom door was half shut. They had redecorated the guest bedroom into a nursery, but changed it back to a regular room. She peered inside.

Peter sat up on the bed only putting his jeans on. But Joan didn't see that. She saw a knife and a vein.

"Peter, what are you doing?"

Peter turned around and replied, "Don't worry."

Joan got on her knees and pushed her hands in the plush carpet and said, "How can you tell me that. When I lost the baby, you said that you would be better off dead, you know."

"Let's not talk about that."

Peter walked out into the hall, and Joan followed him.

"We have to talk," said Joan. "What is that you want,
Peter? You never tell me what is on your mind. Is it your job? Is it me?"

Peter slid open the hall closet door and pulled out his stadium jacket. He put it on, barely glancing at Joan. He took his car keys from the wooden peg. He strode to the door. Joan was right behind him.

"You can't do that!" Joan grabbed his arm that was jingling the keys.

Peter jerked his arm from her clutch. "Stop worrying," he said, "I just need to go out for awhile."

Joan didn't like the sound of his voice. She imagined him jumping off a tall building. Or just driving far away from her. "Where are you going? When will you be back?" she pleaded.

Peter shook his head with uncertainty. As he turned the brass knob of the front door, opening it, a blast of cold air hit the room, hit their faces, melting all warmth. Peter shut the door like a judge lowering his gavel. Joan pulled back the lace drapes to see him leave. She could see his sneakered feet jogging down the gray, stone steps to the driveway. She could hear the opening of the car door, the closing of the car door, the start of the ignition, and the spinning of the wheels. He was gone, and he had never walked out like that before on a disagreement. Even in their most heated arguments during the first years of their marriage when Joan would start throwing breakables against the wall and Peter would shout out a string of obscenities, he didn't storm out. Joan used to worry that they would get divorced because of the
nasty arguments, but now she wished that they would argue like they used to. Peter's silent arguments seemed like the end of the world to her.

Joan sat down in Peter's recliner. She picked up the remote control. She wasn't going to cry or worry. She didn't want to be a weak, hysterical female like the kind you see in those soap operas. She wanted to break down, but it was time to keep her cool. It was time to see things Peter's way.

Still sitting in the recliner, tired, but her eyes wide open, she decided to call Peter's folks. Maybe he'd just gone there awhile to get away from her. She didn't blame him. She had let him down. Two miscarriages and dozens of visits to the fertility clinic. Dr. Desota sitting backing in his brown, leather chair, holding up the manila folder. "I've been over this, and I believe it is your wife's endometriosis that is the only thing that keeps you from conceiving." The way his words fell on both their ears, the way he had said it, left no doubt in Joan's mind that if she had only taken care of herself, if she had only slowed down for awhile, they would have at least one child.

But did Joan want children? She did, but she was content with the two of them. She was content with her job, the house. She felt a sudden flash of anger toward Peter. She thought it was Peter who was never satisfied. He wanted the renovations to the house; he wanted the new car; he wanted the baby; he wanted the better jobs; he wanted the upper class friends.
Three hours had passed since Peter left. Joan knew he was depressed. He had always been solitary. She was cheery. They were opposites, but their personalities evened out. "The perfect couple," Peter's aunt had told her at their anniversary party. But Joan couldn't kid herself. Deep down she felt she wasn't woman enough. She didn't want that thought to creep in. She knew it was unhealthy to blame herself, but Peter seemed to remind her everyday, even when he wasn't here.

Joan picked up the portable phone and dialed Peter's parents, Kate and Ed.

"I'm sorry dear. He isn't here. Was he supposed to be here?"

Joan could hear the motherly concern in her voice. Joan could see the thoughts running through Kate's mind—wanting, wondering why he wasn't there yet, imagining the worst like a car accident. "I don't know. Sorry I bothered you," Joan said.

"Are you two still having problems?"

Joan didn't feel the animosity that most women feel towards their mothers-in-law. But Joan didn't know what to say. How could she tell a mother her son left without saying anything? "Everything's fine. I just thought he might be over there."

"Joan, are you sure?"

"I just wanted him to pick something up from the store." Joan hated to lie, especially when she wanted to tell her the truth about Peter leaving, their silent arguments.

"Bye, dear. Call me back when he gets in."
Joan put down the phone. "I just wanted him to know that I love him," she whispered.

Joan sat in his chair, in his place, drinking his beer, eating his potatoes chips, holding his remote control. She had called Peter's work place--asking the night shift foreman if he had come in--and friends--waking them up and inconveniencing them. Nobody had seen or heard from him. She wanted answers. It was midnight, and he wasn't there. She wondered why she hadn't followed him. She just trusted him. She had overreacted before in the guest bedroom. But she knew what she had to do.

She slid open the hall closet, grabbed her boots and heavy winter coat. She didn't even bother to slide the door closed. She grabbed her keys from the peg, went out the front door, giving it as good angry slam. She jogged down the steps to the driveway. She jumped in her car and backed out of the driveway without looking. She didn't know where she was going, but she wanted to drive and drive until she found him.

The green digits on the dashboard read 2:10 a.m. Joan had driven all over the city and even to the Pedmount Street Bridge. There was no sign of him or his car. The town was deserted except for a couple of teenagers loitering outside the AM/PM convenience store. Joan drove up to get some coffee. She saw two teen-agers, a boy with scraggly brown hair and a girl with too much make-up. They noticed her stare, and she
heard a faint laugh. She got out of the car and walked quickly to the doors. In the reflection of the glass doors, she could see the teenagers kissing passionately.

In the back of the fluorescent lit store was a security guard reading a People magazine. The clerk who was only a few years older than the loiterers was slumped over the counter. Short and chubby, she had dark eyes and black hair that was falling away from a hair net. She spoke tiredly, "What ya need?"

"I'll take a large cup of black coffee with sugar," Joan said. Joan was tired and sleepy, but she knew there was no threat of her falling asleep. What if she came home, and he wasn't there? Would he ever come back?

"Miss, Miss," the girl spoke up. Joan's mind was still concentrating on Peter. His dark hair, his brown eyes, his strong chin. She wanted only to see him curled up in bed when she got home. The girl said sarcastically, "Your coffee. That'll be a dollar twenty five."

Joan's fingers scrapped the bottom of her purse, pulling out quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies.

"That's it, Miss. Thank you."

The teenage lovers had left, and the parking lot was empty.

She sat in her car feeling the coldness from the seat penetrate her body while the warmth from the cup of coffee caressed her hands, then her lips as she took a sip. Would Peter be at home or was he at another AM/PM, sitting his car, holding a cup of coffee? Should she even care about Peter?

He had treated her with little consideration while she tried
to make him happy with Chinese take-out and a movie. Did she need Peter? Could she live without Peter? She felt that she was a strong woman and could take care of herself without a man, but Peter. . . . They had met on a blind date. She had graduated from college with an associates in office management and soon got a job there. Peter didn't go to college. Did he feel inferior to her? What was love to her? Did she love Peter?

As Joan turned into her street, she did not see Peter's car. Her heart sank, and she started to shiver. She sped up the driveway. She rushed out of the car and fumbled at her keys until she found the door key. It must be true--she would never see Peter again. No, she must not think that. She tried to play mind games with herself. He went to his parents house--yes, that was it--and decided to stay because it was late. He would come back tomorrow after both their tempers had cooled down. Yes, that must be it, she reassured herself.

The lights were all out in the house. She turned the lamp on, and the recliner was empty. She peered in the kitchen. Nobody had been there. She decided it was time to call the his parents. If he wasn't there, the only place left for her to call was the police.

She walked into their bedroom, expecting to see a neatly made bed. As she flicked the light switch, she saw a lump in the bed. It was Peter curled up like a cat. Immediately she thought he was dead. She let out a cry and fell on her knees.
He turned over, groggy, then sat up hurriedly.

He said, "Oh, Joan, you came back."

She stared at him in disbelief. She was happy he was all right, but he had really hurt her tonight.

He tossed his hair and smacked his lips. He had shaved and taken a shower. "I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to--you know, do this. You were out looking for me. I knew."

"Yes," she said, "I was out there all alone, in the dark, looking for you, Peter. But everything seems fine and dandy for you now. I thought you were dead. I thought you had left me for good. What else was I suppose to believe?" Joan wanted to go on and say more. Joan was always compromising or trying to make him happy. She felt all the guilt for his moods, but after tonight the anger felt like a flood ready to break the levee.

"You could have trusted me not to leave you, Joan. I . . . love you." He knelt by her on the floor and put his arm around her. She saw the dark hairs on his arm as if through a microscope and felt warmth and tenderness. But she couldn't surrender her anger about his mood swings.

"What happened to the car, Peter? Tell me that. When I didn't see the car, I thought you didn't kill yourself, but just left town to get away from me. You hate me, don't you? You hate me for not having your children. This is why you're so despondent. Don't lie to me, Pete. We have to talk about it!" She buried her head in his chest and sobbed. She didn't want to, but it gave her hope as he tightened his arms around
"I put the car in the garage," Peter said in a soft, low voice.

"But where were you tonight, Peter?"

"It's nothing to worry about, Joan. I made some decisions when I was out."

Joan's head was full of questions. Why did he sound so level headed now? Why was he so strong now after being so weak? Why did he have to be strong when she was so weak?

"Joan," he continued, "I did want children. And I did blame you. But I don't need anything. I'm going to quit my job and go to college."

"But where were you?"

"I was just driving around, trying to figure stuff out," Peter replied.

Her eyes were red and swollen from crying. She broke away from his hug and told him, "Didn't you even worry about me out there? You just came home and went to sleep. You have everything figured out. But I was sitting in the car at three a.m., wondering if you really loved me, wondering if I could manage to live without you."

"Could you?" he asked.
A Nice Christian Girl

I'll just sit here in the car--fine! I wonder what Mom is going to give me as punishment. My divine retribution. I just wish I was at home, watching MTV, eating some popcorn, reading the Sunday comics.

Going to church every Sunday and Thursday is worse than going to school. God, I hate this church. No offense God, but . . . The New Disciples of Christ? It's more like the New Hypocrites of Christ. I still remember going up and down the cobblestone path when I was a child. And the foyer still smells like lemon scented furniture polish. Seventeen years of this is enough for any person.

Jeez, what are my parents so happy about? I bet Mom's jaw hurts from smiling all the time around these people. I know mine does. Who's she talking to at the entrance? It looks like Cathy. I swear I hate her--she's such a people pleaser. Ooh, I hate when Mom does that. She holds somebody's hand and smiles and stares in their eyes. It's so embarrassing and phony. Her favorite saying is the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do to you. I bet that isn't in the Bible. But I would never know--I never do any of those Bible study worksheets. I always copy Ms. Cathy Perfect's. Perfect really isn't her last name--I'm just being sarcastic or ironic--I forget. Only my high school English teacher would know. I don't want to copy off her, and sometimes I really want to read the Bible, but I just get so upset. I can feel my stomach twist into knots, and each knot snaps--and I can't take anymore.
So I act dumb, and Cathy in her vain attempts to show-off is only too happy to help me. She says, "Here, Kristen--don't worry--just see how I did it."

Cathy and Tyler are always talking. I wonder if she knows about him. I know she has the hots for him--but all these supposedly Christian guys are scum.

Oh great, Mom's come to get me--sort of like the devil. She calls my name like a little lost lamb. She should be pissed. I should be scared, but I'm not--not of punishment. She'll just embarrass me in front of Dad, Reverend Goodell, and Cathy and Ty.

I open the car door. I ask, concentrating on making my voice sound as cool as possible, "Well, am I going to fellowship?"

"Of course, Kristen. It's what you need right now." She's smiling at me like she does to our neighbors who throw wild parties on Saturdays.

"Am I going to see Reverend Goodell?"

"Your father is talking to him now." I can smell the peppermint from her gum and her flowery perfume. It makes me want to sneeze.

"Did you tell him about the rock music tape?" I'm trying to sound like a smart-aleck.

"Hush dear, someone might hear you."

I can't believe I am going through all this with her over some Metallica and Whitesnake cassettes. Does she think I'm actually going to stop listening to them? What makes me really
mad is that I saved my allowance and lunch money to buy those, and now Mom and the good Reverend are going to torch them. This is so mental. But at least when I mention "Rock Music" Mom's smile turns to a frown.

As I walk in the foyer, I see Dad talking to Reverend Goodell. They both have their heads down looking at the Reverend's black Bible with gold trim. They both are shaking their heads, and, unlike Mom, they're frowning. They're probably talking about the seven deadly sins and how I've committed them all. I can see the first one now: "Thou shall not listen to heavy metal music."

"Reverend Goodell, hello," Mom says. "I suppose John was telling you about our little problem."

I just stand there behind them, smiling. Yes, here I am--their little problem.

"Yes, Jean, I will talk to your daughter after fellowship."

Oh great, another rock-music-is-the-devil's-tool speech. Perhaps, I should stand up for myself this time, just ask: "What is your problem?"

"God bless you, Reverend. Let's go John," says Mom as she waves bye, abandoning me to go through this lecture. Obediently, Dad follows her.

I know Dad can't lecture me--the only thing he said after Mom found the tape in my coat pocket was "You know how the church feels about rock music, Kristen." And Mom brought out pamphlets Christianity and Your Teenager.

Mom and Dad begin talking to Naomi's parents--she's in
my Bible study group with Cathy. I decide to find Cathy and
tell her about my latest rock music crime. Maybe she'll agree
this whole thing is ridiculous.

I go down the basement stairs, and, of course, there is
sweet Cathy setting up for the fellowship tonight. She looks
so nice and average in her blue jeans. Mom won't let me wear
jeans to church—even just for fellowship. For a day, I wonder
how it would be to be Cathy.

"Hey, Kristen. Wanna help me?" Cathy calls. They couldn't
pay me enough to help them. I just come here because my parents
make me. Again I feel the knots in my stomach, then an
emptiness.

"No, not now, Cath. I need to tell you something."

I can't wait to shock her. Oh, she is so polite. Mom
thinks she is such a good Christian girl. Mom explained to
me that Cathy had found God—that her parents aren't religious.
"It's harder for Cathy," she would say. God, she's lucky to
have a family like that. Secular, as Mom would say. I went
over to Cathy's house once for Bible study. Her dad was a riot.
He kept embarrassing Cath by telling dirty jokes to us. And
her mom kept lighting one cigarette after another.

"We can't talk here, Cath," I say, pulling her away from
her busy-body fellowship chores.

"Why?"

"Let's just go out to the parking lot and talk." I feel
so wicked. Cath might be the only friend I have ever had, but
it isn't fair. . . . Things are so nice and neat-o for her.
We go to the church parking lot by a blue Chevette. I think it might be Ty's. Cathy is probably hoping he'll pop out of somewhere. We sit on the hood. "I got caught with cassettes," I say.

"This is ridiculous, Kristen. Why don't you listen to Petra or Michael W. Smith or something else? I do, and I like their stuff better than any stupid Metallica song. Do you still have your Def Leppard tapes? What do you think you are--some kind of stupid, doped-up metal head? Get real, Kristen. You're not even like that."

"What are you, Cath? Some kind of--" for a minute I do not know what to say, but then some anger makes me spill out some words--"some, Christian music-loving, clean teen that goes around with a Bible in her hands and a cross around her neck."

There is silence. Cathy hops off the car. She says, "I don't think we mean to be bad to you, but we all just think you would be better off."

"Yeah, you. What did Mom tell you about me? Well, it's not that, Cathy. Nothing is wrong with rock music." I sound like I'm in some debate in speech class--and losing terribly. I guess I won't tell her about Ty.

I get off the car and start to turn away towards the church when Cathy touches my arm. She says, "Wait. What's going to happen this time?"

"I'll have to talk to Reverend Goodell after fellowship. Mom only cried for half an hour... And God still refuses to strike me down."
Walking ahead of me, Cathy says, "We gotta go. I don't want to miss Ty if he happens to come by."

But Cathy, dear, you can't go just yet. "You know what, Cath? You really don't get this?"

"What?" Cathy's peachy face flushes red and her light blue eyes gaze down. The poor little angel is struck. Here, Cath, let me rip your wings off.

"I can't figure out why you want to come to the Disciples and torture yourself, Cathy, unless--"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you're one of those. Oh, Cath, you know, looking for a man--looking for a boyfriend. Like the McCormick sisters--the old maids, coming here, hoping to find a good Christian man to marry."

"Well, it's not like that. I actually believe in God, in Christ. And if you must know, I do like Ty."

"I knew it. That's why I must tell you something." This is going to be one fallen angel. Somehow they made a perfect couple. But Cath shouldn't have a guy as nice, decent, and good-looking as Ty.

"You know why Ty has been avoiding me. Tell me, Kris."

"Well, Muriel told me he and . . . he and Naomi had slept together. I guess she caught them . . . well, remember that overnight revival we had last month? She caught them in the linen closet. . . ."

I see Cath look down at her shoes, and she lifts her head and makes eye contact with me. I see the panic in her eyes
as she says, "It can't be true. That, that busy body Muriel made it all up. She's jealous of me. Just because--"

I interrupt her--"Listen, Cath, remember when Reverend Goodell ask for special prayers for Ty and Naomi last month? Go look it up--it's in the register." My knots in my stomach seem to have disappeared, and I feel a sort of burning energy inside, but I also feel empty guilt. But I just had to tell her. It's her fault for being so know-it-all--like she knows what is good for me. But she doesn't.

Poor girl. She has such a confused look on her face. She's holding back the tears. I give her a sympathetic glance, and she buys it. She is the one who usually gives me those sympathetic glances.

Cath says, "Oh, Kris, we have to pray for him." She starts crying. Why did she say "pray?" Even in hurt, she is rubbing it into me. I give her some crumpled kleenex from my straw purse. Then I hear Mom's orthopedic shoes clacking. I would know that sound anywhere.

I say, "Hey, Cath, come on. My Mom's coming. She'll want to know what's wrong, and she can't--"

"But she must know. I'll tell her to pray with us."

Mom comes right up to Cathy and says, "What's wrong, dear?"

"Do you know about Ty and Naomi?" Cathy asks, sounding like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar or, at least, a girl caught with illicit rock music cassettes.

I say to Mom: "Muriel called me up the other day with this story, but I didn't know if it was true if Ty and Naomi
had really had sex--"

Mom interrupts me: "Oh my, you mustn't say such things so loud."

"Mrs. Smith," says Cathy, "can you just help me pray?"
The blubering idiot--she really is pretty weak.

Mom pats Cath's shoulder, kneels behind the sacred Chevette, puts her hands together, squints her eyes, and tilts her head up. "Please, Lord, in Jesus Christ name we call," she says. "Cathy needs Your healing. Please make sure she continues to do His good deeds and works. Pray for Ty Peterson and Naomi Jensen who have lost their way. Amen."

Cathy echoes, "Amen." I hurry off the pavement and walk ahead towards the church again. Cathy clutches my hand, and keeps on sobbing as we head to the church basement. She's such a baby. If she had any sense, she would just slap me.

Downstairs everybody is sitting on metal chairs in a crooked circle. It is so fakey. I sit between Mom and Cath. I see Dad sitting by Goodell. Across the circle I see Ty. Then I see Muriel sitting with Naomi several chairs to my left. If I was Cath, I would tell both Naomi and Ty off big time.

We sing hymns; then people share stories about their "falling from grace" and "God's special healing." I notice Ty and Naomi are quiet as church mice. Mom makes a request to pray for "poor little Cathy in her time of need." Why not "pray for my daughter who listens to the devil's symphony?" But no, we must not ignore Cathy.

Now I have to face Reverend Goodell. Mom doesn't forget.
Mom reminds the Reverend who seems to have forgotten.

"We sit on a sanctuary pew where he perfectly demonstrates his preacher art, clutching his black and gold trimmed Bible in his hand. He begins, "Kristen, I understand you've been listening to rock music, popular music. Is there any reason you're drawn to that type of music?" I look right at him--his blonde hair, his white face, his blue eyes.

I want to tell him: "Gee, reverend I'm into black magic and devil worship. And when I'm not at this church, I go to the Church of Satan, and sacrifice people." But instead I say, "Oh well, a friend from school gave me the tapes."

"Yes, all these cases start out innocently enough. But rock stars put themselves up as gods--golden calves--if you will. Kristen, I know God is the only way. God and Jesus Christ." Two men--one with a white beard, the other with a brown beard. They have never answered my prayers.

"If you continue to listen to this," the Reverend says, "you will no longer put God first in your life. Your life will be a daily challenge and take sinful twists. You will find your faith gone."

Reverend Goodell's somber, doomsday tone of voice gives me goose flesh. But I think I should tell him that I never had any faith--just fear. I pray, but never feel anything. But I don't tell him--for fear he'll start quoting Scripture that I don't want to hear.

"Listen, Kristen, we have heard about some of these rock groups. AC/DC is one I've read about in my Christian journals."
A lot of preachers, ministers have done research and have found Satanic messages when these records are played backwards. There's an actual case of a teenage girl in Pennsylvania, no Ohio--yes, that's it,--who listened to either a song by AC/DC or what's the other one? Oh yes, I know--Led Zapping. Anyway, the objects in her room started flying around and hitting her. She said voices told her Satan was going to kill her and her family. After that, she found Jesus Christ. Let's hope you would never have to go through anything like that."

But Reverend, that's bullshit, and you know it. I'm not a five year-old child afraid of the dark. I've listened to Led Zeppelin a thousand times, and I have never heard voices or seen objects floating around. I wonder if he's ever heard "Stairway to Heaven" or if he's ever heard one rock song in his life. He probably spends his life locked up with his journals and Bible, wondering how to scare the Hell out of people.

"I don't listen to those groups," I respond.

"Yes, Kristen, I know. Your Mom gave me the tapes. I've read some of those lyrics--all about sex and drugs, all about doubting a higher power.

"Whitesnake--the name's about sin and temptation. Just like the serpent in the Garden of Eden that led Eve to sin, and it will lead you there, too. Kristen, don't follow this, or you will surely regret it."

Regret what? Listening to music? I am not having sex like Ty and Naomi. I'm not hooked on diet pill like Muriel.
I only got drunk once in my life, and that was at Christian camp last summer. If I remember right Cath had a sip of beer just to prove she was cool, too.

We both get up from the pew. I guess this little lesson is over. The Reverend pats my shoulder and says, "I want you to talk to Cathy. She'll give you some Christian Contemporary music to listen to. You'll find it fun, and it won't compromise your belief system."

I shake my head. As I go out in the foyer, Mom and Dad are waiting for me. Dad yawns, and Mom says, "Go out in the car--we'll be there in a minute." Dad talks to the reverend, and Mom looks at me until I'm out the door.

At home, Dad goes to his den. Not a word all the way home. He doesn't even ask me about my meeting with the Reverend. He never asks me about anything. He occasionally quotes Scripture and tells Mom at the dinner table what happened at work--which is never much since he sells insurance.

One time I came home from Bible study after being voted the group leader. It is a honor. I would be the one to lead the study, to ask questions, to read Scripture. I've only done it twice--Cath usually leads. I thought he would be excited--take me out for pizza or something. But he nodded his head and said, "Very good, Kristen." Like I was a dog that he had taught a trick to.

Mom sits down at the dining room table and starts her cross-stitch. She's a cross-stitch fanatic. If I ask her about it,
she would go on and on about it. She would want me to do some cross-stitch with her, but I hate the stuff. She goes to her cross-stitch club one night a week. Tonight she's stitching red roses intertwined on a cross on her hoop of burlap.

I go up to my room. My walls look so plain. Cath has a million things on her walls, including posters of rock stars--Christian rock stars. All I have is a couple of Mom's cross-stitching framed--one's a tree and the other small, yellow and pink flowers forming a circle. She wanted me to put up a cross-stitch of the Lord's Prayer, but I took it down. She's even cross-stitched my pillow cases, sheets, and comforter with little flowers.

Behind my big stuffed animal--a St. Bernard dog--I have hidden more cassettes. Inside the dog, I've put some wild, dangling earrings. Although Mom wears make-up and stupid jewelry, she would criticize me if I did and probably make the Reverend talk to me. She would say, "You're a child--so young and innocent. Stay that way for awhile."

I put the earrings on and study myself in front of my oval, dresser mirror. I see my plain face, and mousy brown, straight hair pulled back in a braid. I'm skin and bones--no boobs, no hips. My cotton blue dress looks like prison uniform. One day I'm going to walk out of here with my hair all teased and sprayed, and my face piled up with make-up. I will look like a real metal head. Hell, I may go to fellowship that way.

I pull off the earrings and pull out an Iron Maiden cassette, but I'm not in the mood. All I can think about is
the Reverend telling me how awful it is. I climb into bed and
stare at the ceiling. I think I'm such a coward. I should
stand up for myself.

I hear the clock ticking in the living room. I hear the
floor boards squeak. I remember staying at Cath's, where the
TV blared all night long. Now, I hear some voices.

It's Mom and Dad. Quietly I climb out of bed to the top
of the stairs. I can see them in the living room and can hear
them. Dad says, "I think we should be harder on her for bringing
in that trashy music. It's wrong. Before you know it, she'll
become a slut. Goodell doesn't think it is that serious. But
I don't want no daughter of mine pregnant and doped-up."

Mom stands beside him. I hide alongside the wall.

Mom says, "John, I did what you told me--I told the Reverend
to talk to her. I prayed with her. I gave the cassettes to
Reverend Goodell. What am I suppose to do to her?"

"Why don't you whip her, Jean? 'Spare the rod, spoil the
child.'"

"John, I will never hit one of my children. Besides, Cathy
told me that she had listened to that kind of music before and
that it is harmless--but she doesn't listen to it anymore since
she was baptized."

I can't believe Mom and Dad met on a blind date and went
to a soda shop, sock hop or whatever--and danced. Mom tells
the story sometimes when she doesn't have cross-stitch to finish
or a church meeting to attend. Mom brought Dad to The New
Disciples Church. Then they married and had me. I guess after
they had me, they didn't want anymore brats.

Mom sits back down. Dad's face is flushed. He says, "I'll whip her myself if I have to."

In a low and serious voice that I can barely make out, Mom says, "You won't lay a hand on that child."

I go back upstairs, feeling mixed up. Somebody slams the bathroom door. I just want to go to sleep and forget everything.

I wake up to Monday morning. I wake up after having a strange dream. Mom, Dad, and Cathy are all holding hands walking up towards a light. It looks like Heaven. A man who looks like the Reverend comes up to me and says that I can't go on. But I say I have to talk to Cathy and get some Petra tapes. He says that I have to wait for Ty and Naomi. I wait, and Cathy and Mom come back from Heaven dressed as Metalheads with teased hair singing, "And she's buying a stairway to Heaven." I wake up, thinking my music is leaking out of my headset, and Mom or Dad might hear it. But it was just a dream. I know I'll probably think about it all day at school.

Mom comes in my bedroom and says, "Kris, time to wake up."
"Yeah, Mom. I'm up."

I look over at her, and she is smiling. She has no make-up on. I can see her wrinkles and graying hair.

I go and take a shower. I look at my hair and start to back comb it. I run into Mom's room and grab her big, pink metal can of hair spray. I spray it ever so slightly. Then I put on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. I sneak over to my
St. Bernard and grab out the earrings. I put them on and go downstairs.
Wild Girls

"Get in the car, Jessie," Vicki says, swinging open the rusty red door.

"Jeez, justa minute," replies Jessie who looks for a stick of gum in her purse.

As soon as she finds it, Jessie tries to get into the red Chevy Nova, but Vicki slams the door.

"Uh, real funny," Jessie says.

Both Vicki and the driver, Myra, laugh hysterically. Vicki and Jessie are 17, and Myra is 16. It is Vicki's car, but she lets Myra drive it--never mind she doesn't have her license. Vicki is decidedly the wild one. Jessie is the lanky nerd. And Myra is the baby of the bunch--kind of goofy, kind of awkward.

"C'mon, Vicki, let me in."

"No, bitch," Vicki says, as she lights up a cigarette.

Although Myra is having just as much fun teasing Jessie as Vicki, she decides to let her in on her side. Jessie's face flushes red, and she is mad at Vicki for making her feel foolish. But Vicki doesn't care. She fluffs up her frizzy, yellow bleached hair in the car mirror and starts in:

"Well, professional virgin, what shall we do tonight?"

"Listen, here, Vicki. I know you think you're hot shit," Jessie says, "but I don't have take your stupid shit. Why don't you graduate from Pampers?"

"Good one--Pampers!" Myra shouts between her high-pitched laughter. Myra takes a big slurp from a soft drink, guns the
engine, and takes off down the street, leaving skid marks.

"You'll think good one, you crazy bitch," Vicki speaks.

"What are you trying to do--wreck my car?"

"I thought you wanted me to drive--hey, don't jump all over me."

"Get a grip. I wasn't sayin' nothin'. All I wanted was to tell Miss Honor Roll a thing or two," says Vicki, looking back at Jessie.

Jessie sits quietly. Her mauve-framed glasses slip on her nose. She has black hair, curled ironed into wings on the sides. You can still smell the hair spray. Her eyebrows are dark and make her look defensive--an easy target for insults from boys down the hall at high school or from her best friends, Vicki and Myra.

The sun goes downs in the horizon, and the sky is left purple and dark. Myra heads for their main hang out, on the main drag, Duncan Street.

Vicki turns on the radio--WKAR--Kick Ass Rock all night long. Myra turns the volume knob to the right until the car vibrates and throbs. They sing at the top of their lungs. Kids walk up and down the streets. Vicki rolls down the window, shouting at various guys.

"Hey, Chuckie, baby. Is your dick long enough?" The young man grabs his crotch in response. Myra and Jessie start laughing.

Myra pulls into the parking lot of Taco Town. An orange neon sign with the Taco boy holding up a big burrito reflects
off the car and windshield and their bodies. They get out of the car. Jessie and Vicki sit on the hood. Myra says, "So, what do you guys want? And let me see your money."

Jessie pulls out a handful of change from the bottom of her purse. Vicki gets back into the car, looking for change under the car seat.

"A cola and a taco," Jessie says, giving Myra the exact money for it.

"I'll have a cola and super burrito," Vicki says.

Vicki gives Myra a fistful of change.

"That ain't enough," says Myra.

"How do you know? You can't count, you illiterate bitch," replies Vicki.

"I'm pretty sick and tired of you calling me a bitch, you stupid bitch," Myra says. She runs her hands through her brown frizzy hair and steps closer to Vicki.

"You are a stupid cunt. Just how many abortions have you had now? No, I forgot—you can't count," says Vicki. Her eyes widen, and she steps up to Myra until they are toe-to-toe.

Jessie situates her arm between them. "Girls, C'mon."

"Who are you? Hall monitor?" Vicki says.

By a now a crowd has gathered. Girls smoking cigarettes whisper to each other. Boys with long hair and ripped up jeans yell, "Kick her ass." Two young juvenile delinquents no older than ten, ride around the parking lot on their bicycles, waiting for something to happen.

"Fine. Kill yourselves. Myra, you're smarter than this,"
"Did you hear her, Jess? Her insults. I'm smart. I ain't gonna buy her dinners, and I ain't gonna take her shit," Myra replies. Myra cringes and looks directly into Vicki's eyes.

Jessie goes on, "Myra, Vicki is just having us on like always. That's the way we do, isn't it?"

Jessie nudges in between them, and Vicki elbows her out of the way, knocking her down on the pavement. Vicki strikes Myra with her left fist. Myra falls down on the pavement. The crowd yells and cheers. A young girl screams, "Cat fight!"

Myra scrambles up about the same time Jessie does. Vicki has her fists held up, poised for more.

"Come up, you. Let's see what you have," Vicki says.

From her pink jacket pocket, Myra pulls out a switch blade. Screaming, she runs towards Vicki.

"No!" Jessie shouts and bolts between them.
A Dog in the Middle of the Road

On old Mill Road, there was a warehouse. The sign read, "The Smith Consolidated Warehouse," in big blue letters on the steel gray building. Along the parameter of the building was a tall chain length fence. What was there to protect? It contained only office equipment--fax machines, computers, desks, and chairs with rollers on their legs. It was nothing important really--not like the answer to the universe.

Eight-year-old Dara passed the warehouse everyday, walking to and from Elmwood Elementary School. The school was just as bleak as the warehouse with its faded, red brick exterior and a chain length fence just as high.

Dara walked to her house on Maple Drive. Her house and the other houses on Maple Drive were just as dull as the school and warehouse. It looked like a row of upside down cardboard boxes painted white.

As Dara walked home, she had her eyes focused on her stiff, lilac and blue sneakers that her Mom bought her last week. If it was up to Dara, she would go barefoot and wear shorts to school even in the winter. Her sneakers were like Stephanie Waters', the popular girl in her class, and she had wanted them, but now she hated them.

Dara wanted to be friends with Stephanie, but she made fun of her today. Dara did not know what it was about, but Stephanie had passed a note around saying that Dara had cooties. When Dara left her seat to ask Ms. Needle, their teacher, a question about subtraction, the class started laughing at her.
Dara didn't know about it until Katlin, her 12 year-old sister, told her. Katlin found out from one of her friends who had a brother in Dara's class. Dara was near tears when she picked her up to walk home:

"What's wrong, Dar'?" Katlin asked.

"They were laughing at me. Why do they hate me?" Dara whispered.

"I know why, Dar'. Shelley told me at lunch what happened."

"I wish her brother Brad was dead. He laughed at me twice and threw a pencil at me."

"They were passing around a note that said you had cooties. I guess that Stephanie girl started it all. But don't pay attention to them, Sis."

Dara's face looked like a hand painted porcelain doll's. Her eyes and hair were different shades of brown. She carried a canvas bag full of books and papers--she never left anything at school.

Behind Dara followed Katlin with her closest friends, Marie and Shelley. Dara wanted to get home and watch her favorite shows, "The Brady Bunch" and "The Flintstones." Dara wanted to be like Marcia Brady. She wanted straight blonde hair, but her hair was brown and curly. She wanted some bell-bottom jeans, but Katlin said, "It would be a fashion mistake."

Katlin, Marie, and Shelley talked about the Sadie Hawkin's Dance:

Shelley said, "I'm going to ask Steve. I don't care what he says."
"Don't be crazy, Shelley. Mitzi Rhinehart already asked him. Besides you never had a chance," said Marie.

"Don't be like that, Marie--" interrupted Katlin, "she had just as much chance as anybody else."

"I think I'll stuff something in my training bra. What do you think?" Marie said, looking down at her breasts.

"Don't talk like that. My sister is right in front of us. What if she heard you?" Katlin replied.

Marie pouted and said, "She's gonna hear about this sooner or later. She should start exercising them now, so she won't be stuck with an A cup all her life."

Dara didn't care what Katlin and her friends said. To her, they were dumb teenagers, keeping secrets, whispering and giggling over teen idols in 16 magazine.

Dara sat mesmerized by the TV. She swigged on a 16 ounce bottle of Coke--the only thing she could snag from Katlin and her friends as they bum-rushed the fridge. She swung her legs about. She watched closely as Dino jumped on Fred Flintstone, coming home to his stone castle. Dara had a dog once, and Dino reminded her of Blondie. Her Mom brought Blondie home--she had found her as a pup, lying in a ditch, and they decided to keep her. Blondie was Dara's friend. Blondie greeted Dara when she came home from school, and Dara played tug-of-war with Blondie with her favorite chew toys. Katlin yelled at Blondie for jumping up on her bed or chewing up her stuff. But Dara welcomed Blondie in her bedroom, and Blondie would never touch
any of Dara's stuff. But one day Blondie broke out of their fence—a shallow wooden fence, not like a chain length fence. She was gone for days. They put an ad in the paper. Until their neighbor, Mr. Stuart, knocked on the door, they were all waiting for her to scratch on the door:

"There's a ... a dog in the middle of the road," Mr. Stuart said.

"Is it Blondie?" Katlin asked.

Dara jumped up and down and said, "I knew she would be all right."

Mr. Stuart bowed his head, and they could see his shiny bald spot. "I'd rather not say in front of the girls," he said, motioning to Dad with his right hand.

Dad and Mr. Stuart went outside on the porch. Mom, Katlin, and Dara stood in the foyer, looking at each other. Dara wanted to be with Blondie and ran to follow her Dad, but Katlin pulled her back. Mr. Stuart had scraped her up and put her in trash bag. Dara imagined the red blood on her furry body and the pain that she must have felt.

If she had only been with her, she would have never broken out of the fence. Dara cried like a infant throwing a tantrum.

"Dara, stop it!" Katlin yelled, grabbing her arm. Marie and Shelley ignored her for the most part. They sat on the couch, drinking soda and eating chips, while looking through a Teenbeat magazine.

"I hate everybody," Dara said.

"Then why don't you just go to your room? Wait until I
tell Mom when she gets home." Katlin's face flushed red, and she pointed her finger to the stairs.

Dara ran to her room and slammed the door. She was going to miss "The Brady Bunch," and she had Katlin to blame. They will all be sorry, she thought, when I stay up here for the rest of my life--Katlin, Mom, Dad, and especially Stephanie will all wish they had treated me better. She buried her head in the pillow. But Dara soon grew tired of feeling sorry for herself. She walked quietly out of her bedroom, stood at the top of the stair, and spied on Katlin and her friends.

Katlin paced across the plush carpeting in the living room. "She brings this on herself," Katlin mumbled.

Marie picked up the controller and turned to MTV. While some hairy chested guy sang about love, a half naked woman danced.

Shelley said, "Don't get so upset. She's going through a phase. I would be glad to have her for a sister. Anybody would be better than Brad. You should see all the gross and utterly nasty stuff he does. I don't even want to say."

Dara decided Shelley was her favorite among Katlin's friends.

"Personally, I'm glad you sent the little brat up to her room. Now I can watch MTV," Marie said.

Dara went to the second step, hunching down, trying to listen over the obnoxious music. Dara didn't like Marie much, either. She was always over at their house, eating their food, and watching their TV. Dara thought that she wore too much
perfume, and it gave her allegery.

"I'm not glad. She's such a geek," replied Katlin.

"She's not a geek. She's a wuss. Geek is so 1991," Maria said as she stuffed a potato chip in her mouth.

Katlin had really hurt Dara's feelings. Dara expected to be called a geek from Stephanie, from Marie, but not by her own sister.

Dara picked up a fuzzy, stuffed animal from her bed.

"Hello, Spot, how is your sprained paw today," asked Dara to the toy dog.

Katlin came in the room.

"Hey, Dara," she said.

"I'm not speaking to you," Dara said.

"Mom called and said that she was going to be late. She's working on some big report that has to be done. And Dad left for a seminar. You want some tuna casserole for dinner?"

"You are invisible. I cannot hear you," said Dara in a fake British accent.

"Then who are you talking to, dummy?"

"Hey, I'm no dummy!"

"I knew I could get you to talk to me," said Katlin with a smirk on her face.

"I hate tuna casserole, but Spot loves it," Dara said.

"Well, I guess Spot is the only one eating dinner tonight. C'mon, let's go eat," Katlin said.

Dara sat at the kitchen bar. Katlin could cook tuna
casseroles, and Dara watched her do it. All she needed was a can of tuna and a can of soup. Katlin's special recipe required crackers and American cheese. She put it in the microwave for about six minutes, and she had dinner. Dara wished that she could make lasagna like her Mom, and Katlin would be jealous of her.

"I hate this stuff," Dara said.

"I wish we could get some McDonalds," Katlin said.

"I miss Mom," Dara said, pretending to give Spot some of her casserole.

"I miss Dad," Katlin said.

At about 8 p.m., Mom came in Dara's bedroom. Dara played with Barbie dolls, cutting off their hair with scissors.

"Hi, Dara, sweetie," Mom said and hugged Dara. Dara did not look at her, but kept her attention on the haircut, carefully placing snippets of blond hair in the waste basket.

"Hi, Mom," she said.

"You know you shouldn't do that to your good Barbies," Mom said.

"I know, but I'm sick of her hair." Dara acted as if she were Vidal Sasoon on the commercials.

"Do you love me, Mommy?" Dara asked.

"Yes, I love you lots."

"Then get me a new dog."

"Honey, not now. I'm busy with my job. Your Dad has all
these business trips. Who would train it?"

"I could. Please. Pretty please with sugar on top."

Dara rocked on her knees.

"How about a new Barbie?" Mom asked.

"I hate Barbies." She wacked off a big hunk of Barbie's golden locks.

Dara followed her Mom. Mom went to Katlin's bedroom and shook her head at the big pile of clothes on the floor. Katlin chatted on the phone with Marie. Dara decided to hide behind the door and watch Katlin and her Mom.

"You're goin' to flunk if you don't do that worksheet. Look, I have to go, Marie. Mom just walked in the room," Katlin said.

"I hope you're not letting Marie cheat off of you," Mom said.

"Get real, Mom."

"How are you doing?" Mom asked as she sat on the corner of the bed.

"Don't worry about me. Worry about Dara. She said that she misses you, and all these kids at school are picking on her, and she acts like a complete wuss."

Dara wanted to turn away, but she felt compelled to stay and hear how her sister really felt about her.

Mom put her hand on Katlin's head and stroked her reddish hair.

"She told me that she wanted another dog."
"I suppose you are going to give it to her. That is just great. I will end up takin' care of it," Katlin said as she pulled away from her Mother.

"Now wait a minute, Kat. I'm not doing that. I think you're watching too much of those smart aleck teenage shows on TV."

"Oh," Katlin said.

Dara would never give up the idea of having a dog. If Mom wouldn't give her one, maybe Dad would.

The next day Dara sat at her wooden desk, listening to Ms. Needle talk about how to write a sentence. Dara did not look at Stephanie, who had made fun of her for wearing the same shirt as yesterday--Katlin forgot to do the laundry.

But she imagined going home. Dara's mind drifted to a daydream. Mom and Katlin were there to greet her at the door. They went inside, and Dad came from the back door with a cardboard box in his hands. He handed it over to Dara, and out jumped a little, brown fuzzy pup that licked her in the face.

A secretary came in the classroom. He asked, "Is Dara Winston here?"

"Dara," Ms. Needle commanded, "go with Mr. Alvarez."

Dara left her plastic, orange seat. The kids started sniggering, and Ms. Needle gave them stern looks.

Mr. Alvarez led Dara to the school psychologist, Dr. Reed. Dara's Mom had called the school and told Dr. Reed about the
kid's teasing Dara and Dara wanting a dog.

"First, Dara, tell me how you feel," Mrs. Reed said, smiling with teeth so big that it scared Dara.

"I feel like--" Dara stopped, and she remembered what Mr. Stuart had said when he found Blondie--"like a dog in the middle of the road."
Country Living

Sally hated everything about country living--getting up early, mosquitoes in the summer, horses and cows smelling the air, the quietness of the nights. Standing in her Grandma's kitchen brought it back for Sally. She didn't really want to come here with her Mother, but she was curious. Saturday Sally and her Mom arrived at the family farm in Holden County, Indiana. Her Dad wouldn't come with her Mother because he not only hated the farm, but he hated his wife's family. Sally's siblings wouldn't come with their Mother to the farm, either. Her older brother, Sam, was dealing with his divorce and recent unemployment. Her younger sister, Shirley, was too busy as a student at Ohio State University. Sally's Mother had never traveled alone, and her Dad would have worried if Sally hadn't gone with her. Sally wondered if she was responsible or just insane for agreeing to come to the farm. She remembered that she really never liked this place--only the smell of vanilla from Grandpa's pipe.

They had been there for four days. Grandma got up at 3:30 a.m. everyday without fail. Sally had been unable to sleep and heard her get up--breaking eggs and getting out plates. Sally hadn't had insomnia for two years since she took a relaxation seminar, but now it was coming back.

Everybody gobbled up their breakfast, and Grandma was the last one to eat. Mom was the only one talking:

"Everything is fine. I wished we all could have made it back here."
After breakfast, the men went out in the field. And the women stayed in the kitchen.

"Sally," her Mom said, "Go check Grandpa. He needs turned."

Sally walked into the bedroom that wasn't far from the kitchen. Grandma would sometimes go in and tell him stories that mostly started out--"Do you remember when... . . ."

"Hi, Grandpa," Sally said as she inched towards the bed. She smelled bleach and sickness.

Grandpa snored, but his right eye was open. He was on his back, and she pulled the bottom sheet to the right until he fell on his side. She made him drink some water.

"Nooo!" He grumbled out.

"You have to drink this, Grandpa." He finally took a sip.

Sally hurried back to the kitchen where Grandma was starting lunch. She didn't feel like eating a meal after seeing Grandpa. Grandma made three meals a day, did the laundry, and kept the dust from settling on anything in the house. But Grandpa had lost his physical and mental abilities and his land.

Sally's Uncles Mel and Lyn now ran the farm. Uncle Mel was married to Aunt Nora. Uncle Lyn was widowed. Aunt Clare had passed away several years ago with breast cancer. It was treatable, but she refused to have her breast removed and held out for folk remedies--many that Grandma had taught her--spearmint tea, with garlic and horseradish. Horrible things. Sally couldn't believe a woman could be so ignorant that she would ignore her health and rely on such foolishness.

Uncle Lyn was quiet and solitary. He looked like he could leave
any minute, not come back and not care one way or another.

Sally thought her Mother was lucky in a way. If she had been a man, she would have been stuck with the responsibility of the farm like Uncle Mel and Uncle Lyn. Sally's Mom married her Dad, a boy from the city, left for Chicago, and never acted like she missed the farm.

Aunt Nora lit one cigarette after another and sipped on a long neck bottle of beer all day while she breast fed little Jr. It made Sally absolutely sick. She was just lazy, Sally concluded. Sally wondered if Dad was right about calling Mom's family "a whole bunch of hillbillies." But then she stopped herself. Maybe Nora wasn't so dumb after all. What was the point of working herself to death like Grandma with the hump on her back or Aunt Clare with her breast cancer?

They agreed to stay a week. Sally told her Mother that she could only take a week's worth of vacation from her job, but she lied. She had a month's worth of vacation time coming to her. Like her Father, Sally was a scientist--she was a chemist. But her Dad had been an engineer for the city of Chicago for 20 years until he retired last summer. Sally's Mother had just retired last month from a 13 year job as an attendant at a nursing home and wanted to see her family.

Sally went into the living room and watched TV. They had all the modern conveniences--for the kids mainly. They got cable. They had video games. They had a VCR. They rented movies. Sally watched soaps--something she hadn't done since college. She used to skip a psychology class, so she wouldn't
miss "The Days of Our Lives."

Her Mom came in and sat by her on the pink couch that had plastic slip covers over it.

"Why don't you come in and talk to us?" her Mom asked.

"Mom, I just want to watch some TV."

"I knew you would hate it here."

"I don't hate it. I just don't feel like socializing."

"Well, I'm going back to the kitchen."

Sally ended up in the small kitchen. The chairs were shot and old, and Sally noticed she was sitting on one of the most uncomfortable ones. She sat between Grandma who leaned over the table. Sally noticed Grandma's missing two front teeth.

"So," Grandma said looking at Sally, "tell me about that highfalutin job you have up there?"

"Yes, tell her, Sally," her Mom said.

"There's nothing much to tell. I'm a chemist for Deto Chemical Company. We make food additives, make-up, perfume, hair products. We do research and stuff like that." Sally was nervous and felt like she was reading the company brochure or something. Grandma gave her a blank look that seemed to say--"you ain't the prize pig around here, girly."

"What you do?" Nora asked. "Type and serve coffee?"

"No, actually I'm working on a chemical substance now that can be put in hair spray, shampoo, or even food that causes a strengthening effect."

"Well, ain't it like finding out potatoes sprout up in December," Grandma said, moping the sweat from her liver-marked
forehead with her liver-marked hand.

Sally spent her sleepless nights up in her room since everybody went to bed so early. The room was comfy, but seemed dirty compared to sanitized urban living. The quilt seemed nice, but she wanted to take it down to the laundry mat. The room even smelled like food mixed up with a musty odor. Sally got her computer notebook out and worked on chemical equations. She realized what she really needed was a test tube. She missed her lab. She missed all the hours she spent there, finding new things out and being happy, mad or even sad about her discoveries. She whipped out her cellular phone and called Steve, her supervisor, to tell him how the equations were working out:

"Steve, I think you should have a couple of lab techs try it out. We'll look at it that way--"

"Hey, what is that noise," Steve interrupted.

"You mean the chirping."

"Yes."

"It's crickets, Steve. I'm out in the country."

"It must be a regular Green Acres for ya Zsa Zsa."

"Funny Steve, but I have to go. At least you don't hear gun fire in the middle of the night."

"Sorry, Sal, didn't mean to dis you. Bye."

"Bye, Steve. Don't forget to do that experiment."

Sally generally felt that Steve was a know-it-all, and he resented her. It seemed her chemical inventions were never
good enough. "It's not what we need now," he would say and would put her back on researching somebody else's idea. She really admired Paul--he was an older chemist. He taught her a lot about Deto and said that he saw her as a daughter:

"I had a daughter and wanted her to be a scientist, but she had no interest. She's a waitress now."

Sally sat on the edge of the bed, missing her apartment and job in Chicago. Why didn't she just say, "No," when her Mother asked her to come with her? Sally felt like a cowering little dog sometimes ready to obey on any command. Sally wished that her relatives could see her as a self-reliant, independent woman. Sally wanted to go out in the field tomorrow and see what the men did, but she didn't have the nerve.

Sally remembered visiting the farm when she was about 11, and she stepped on something sharp while she was playing with her boy cousins out in the field. It was a farm tool of some sort with sharp steel points--it looked like a rake, but smaller. It put a gash through her foot. She wasn't really a tomboy, so it was an unusual thing for her to be playing with the boys in some rough neck game--and as a usual result, she would get hurt. She remembered running to the kitchen afraid of her own blood. The pain she could barely remember, but the tears she cried were numerous. Grandma put some red liquid medicine on it.

Grandma told her, "Don't cry. You should know better than to be out in that field. No more sense than a lost chick that got caught for soup."
Bored of staying up in her bedroom, Sally decided to go to the kitchen and have some more of Grandma's apple cobbler. The kitchen was dark and spooky. Sally didn't know what it looked like without Grandma standing over the stove, cooking some meal. It didn't seem right that nobody was up at midnight around this place. She quietly sat at the table and ate. Then she heard the back door open.

"Ah," Sally said, picking up a knife. "One more move, and I'll cut your nuts off."

"Well, that may be hard, darling."

It was Nora.

Nora turned on the light. She was all decked out--studs, boots, fringe jacket, and teased up hair.

"Sorry, I scared you."

"That's all right. I've been mugged twice. But what are you doing . . . dressed, and I didn't even know you were gone?"

"Don't tell no one, but I guess I can trust a girl willing to cut off someone's balls, especially a lady's."

Sally let out a little laugh. She admired Nora. Her sassiness reminded her of Grandma.

"Well, Sally, sometimes a girl has got to go out sometimes. Me cooped up here taking care of the kids. It ain't my cup of tea. And Mel is always too tired to go out dancing or do anything fun. He's just a big stick in the mud. So I go down here up the highway to the Red Rooster. Find myself a dancing partner. Drink some beer. Nobody cares, and I feel fine again."
Sally could smell alcohol and smoke from Nora. So much for clean air in the country, Sally thought.

Nora walked to the refrigerator and grabbed another beer. She drank it down in quick gulps, stumbled to the cabinet, and pulled out a bottle of whiskey.

Sally looked up at the calendar and saw that they had only two more days left on the farm. Sally and her Mom would leave the farm Friday morning. Sally's Grandma would probably say, "You're goin' like pigs to market."