

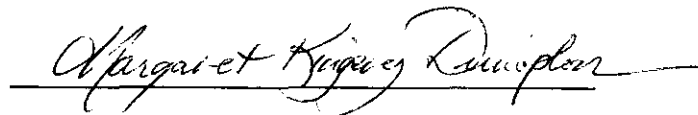
CREATIVE WRITING CLASS CONTINUED:
AN EXPERIENCE IN EDITING AND REVISION

An Honors Creative Project (Honors 499)

by

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Margaret Kingery Dimoplon, advisor

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Margaret Kingery Dimoplon", is written over a horizontal line.

Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana

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Creative Writing Class Continued: an Experience in Editing and Revision

The purpose of this creative project was to experience the extensive editing and revision process an author must undertake to perfect an essay or short story before submission for publication. All pieces in this collection were drafted in English 405--Creative Writing Workshop, English 407--Fiction Writing Workshop, or English 306--Creative Writing: the Personal Essay, but all underwent revision to varying degrees. The origins of these pieces range from writing exercise assignments, to musing, to dreams. As part of this project, the following three pieces were submitted for consideration for publication: "Can't Trust Nobody These Days" submitted to Odyssey and Riverbend literary magazines, "Loving Ain't Enough" submitted to Odyssey, and "To Kill a Cat" submitted to Mustang Press Poetry and Fiction Contest, where it received an Honorable Mention Award.

Her Own Worst Enemy

teacup

rubber duckie

napkins on the table

red geranium smell

rainbows in dark skies

glossy advertisement pages

She freewrote on her paper.

"What do you think you're doing?" a voice asked sarcastically.

"I'm writing," she said firmly, happily.

"Writing? You call that writing? A group of words that together can't form an idea. You call that writing?" asked the voice.

"It's practice," she replied.

"Why do you write, or rather, try to write?"

"Because I want to."

"Honey, you know wanting just ain't enough these days," the voice told her.

"You want to win the lottery, you want to marry Randy; we both know those things will never happen," the voice snickered.

"No!" she shouted, suddenly angry. "I will win the lottery, I will marry Randy, and I will write! I'll do whatever I want!"

"But darlin', I am you," the voice purred, "and I'm telling you, these things just ain't gonna happen, so why don't you put down that pencil and get a real education, like business or teaching, none of this silly liberal arts crap."

"Ohhh." She smiled. "You're not the real me. I never said 'ain't' a day in my life. You won't win this time. I'm not my boyfriend's girlfriend or my mother's daughter, I'm me! I'll do what I want, and I want to write!"

“Little adamant about what we want, aren't we?” the voice crooned. “See, I am you, 'adamant,' that's a you word.”

“You can't trick me,” she said. “You're a part of me, but you're not *me*. I can write, I will write.”

“And how do you propose to do that?”

“Practice.”

bathwater in the tub

ring around the rosey

is Mother Goose dead?

Can't Trust Nobody These Days

"That'll be ten bucks." The old man flipped back the lever on the gas pump. He spat on the ground and dug a grimy toothpick from the pocket of this soiled blue shirt as he accepted the bill.

"See you got Mississippi plates there. Guess you know then that Elvis was really from down that way, not born here in Nashville like some people think."

The old man pulled his hat brim further over his eyes as he squinted into the sun and thoughtfully chewed his toothpick before continuing.

" 'Course, can't trust what people say these days. Elvis is dead; ain't no one see him lately. But sure as my name's Silas Gruder, some fools still think they've seen him out catfishin' in Indiana or shopping at K-Mart. I've seen him, but it was a long time ago, before he got big-headed and successful."

He removed a sliver of toothpick from his mouth and ran it underneath the blackened circles of his fingernails as he began his story.

Elvis was hitchhiking back to Tupelo, Mississippi in 1950, but he only made it to the edge of Memphis before he met me. I could see him walking down the road from my shady spot in front of the filling station. He stopped and asked for something to drink in those polite manners of his. I walked back to the room behind the station where I live and got a bottle of milk and a slab of cheese.

"Where you headed, Kid?" I asked, handing him the bottle

He grasped the bottle by the neck like the best of the old guys at the tavern and took a swig before answering.

"Back to Tupelo, Mississippi."

"Why for?" I asked.

"It's too lonely here," He said, his eyes all soulful like a beagle dog.

"Why, you ain't so lonesome you'll die," I said.

"Oh yes I am," he said.

"Hope you make it back to Mississippi then before you die, or maybe you'll have to check into one of them hotels for lonely people."

Elvis had no sense of humor and when he pouted, that top lip of his stuck out.

"What's your name, boy?" I asked.

"Elvis."

"What kind of fool name is that?"

"Good enough for a singer star," he said defensively.

"Singer star? Is that what you wanna be? Ain't never gonna be much of a star with a name like that," I said. "Or with a face like yours. You need a mustache to cover that baby lip of yours and not no milk one either."

Elvis hastily swiped away the milk with the back of his wrist but seemed no less daunted.

"Yep, a singer," he said. "Stared singing gospel hymns in church back in Tupelo. Figure I can't get nowhere in Memphis so I best go back to Mississippi."

"Well there's where you're wrong," I said. "If you're gonna make it anywhere, it'll be here in Memphis. Or else out in California."

"California?" Elvis wrinkled his forehead. "I don't think so. Isn't that where they got them earthquakes that shake you up?"

"Why, it's just a little rocking that stirs things a little -- something to break the doldrums. Why, ain't nothing more exciting to them old boys sitting in jail than a little rocking."

Elvis seemed doubtful and drank some more milk.

"Here boy, eat a hunk of this."

I handed him a slice of cheese I cut with my pocketknife.

"You'll need a little bit of food to get you down to Mississippi."

“Just a hunk of cheese?” he asked.

“Hunka, hunka yellow cheese. Why don’t you sing a song about that?” I said.

Elvis shook his head.

“A song about cheese? Maybe about love, but not cheese.”

I tossed the rind of my cheese over to my dog Bud who was looking like an old burlap bag lying in a heap in the dirt.

“What’s that?” asked Elvis, taking notice.

“Why that? That ain’t nothing but a hound dog,” I said.

Elvis tossed his cheese rind over to Bud who then thumped his tail once.

“Don’t let that tail fool you,” I warned. “He ain’t friendly, not even to me.”

“Well, I guess I better get going,” he said. “Thank you kindly, sir, for the milk and cheese.”

“So, are you still going back to Tupelo?” I asked.

“Naw, think I’ll hang around Memphis for a while,” he said.

“Well, here’s some more advice for you. People don’t like people who look different so don’t go around wearing any flashy clothes. Go for those nice suits and black shoes. And above all, don’t move around so much. You been fidgeting and jiggling that leg of yours the whole time you been sitting there,” I said.

“Well, thank you, sir. I’ll think about what you’ve said.”

And he got up and started walking back up the road towards Memphis.

When Silas finished his tale, he kicked a rock and shoved his hand into his trousers pocket and dug out another not-so-fresh toothpick to exchange for the one in his mouth.

“Well, that Elvis kid never took any of my free advice. Too bad, Lord only knows how good he could’ve been. He should’ve stuck to milk and cheese. Everybody knew all that booze and drugs was ruining him, everybody but Elvis, that is. Some people

wouldn't know the truth if it hit them over the head."

Silas spat out slivers of his rapidly disappearing second toothpick.

"And what did he do when he got famous? Went around giving away Cadillacs! 'Course, he don't owe me nothing, never took any of my advice. I was only being nice to the kid. Hey! You goin' now? I got more to tell. I met that Springsteen fellow once, and he asked if I was born in Germany. Said hell no, I was born in the USA."

To Kill a Cat

The orange tiger-stripe cat suddenly leapt from the tall grasses growing alongside the gravel road and darted in front of my car. I slammed on the brakes, half-expecting to feel my tires crush its body. But there was no thump, and my car skidded on the gravel before sliding off the road. The cat disappeared into the soybean plants on the other side. I pulled myself through the window of my car which now rested on its side in a nest of vivid green grass in the ditch, its front end against a tree, and its windshield a fine web of cracks.

Damn cat. I should have just hit it. How many times had he said a cat wasn't worth trying to miss?

A neighbor man in dirty blue jeans and a faded plaid shirt jogged over the stubble in the field while his tractor choked and shuddered where he had left it.

"Oh, you're ok," he said, the genuine concern being washed away by his breaking smile. "You just go up the road a piece to the house there, Missy. They'll take care of you there. Gotta make hay while the sun shines, you know." He walked away chuckling at his own joke.

The house seemed unfamiliar as I approached it on foot although I knew it almost as well as my own. A cawing crow flew overhead. I squinted upward, but the white siding glinted the sunlight back into my eyes, and I lost sight of the form in the hot sky. Shirley held the screen door open when she saw me coming up the gravel drive.

"Come right in, come right in. Son's in the living room."

And he was in the living room, stretched out on the couch reading a book. He was shirtless, and his chest was wonderfully hairy, as always,

"Hello," he said with a certain reserve but pretending nothing was wrong between us.

He rolled on his side and allowed me to rub his back and run my fingers

through his hair. Eyes closed, he smiled his Chessie cat smile.

"I have a new kitten," he said.

"Is it cute?" I asked.

"Oh course, she's cute. Aren't all kittens? But," he said, "I have a problem. I don't really like cats, and I don't know whether to keep her."

I smoothed back his sunstreaked hair, and he practically purred in selfish contentment.

"Well, I don't like cats either. In fact, I had a wreck on my way over here," I said, "trying not to kill a cat."

"You should have just hit it," he said, yawning. "Who's going to miss one cat anyway?"

"Yeah? Maybe I should have hit it."

He didn't answer. He was falling asleep with a smile on his lips and the sunlight playing across his body.

I smacked the couch cushion with unaccustomed violence and watched the dust particles float through the sunlight before stalking off to call a tow truck.

The Mustang Press Poets of America Anthology

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Elizabeth Adams,

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to read your work. We are pleased to inform you, that among the thousands of entries in this National Fiction Competition, your story entitled,

"To Kill a Cat"

has won a

Special Honorable Mention Award

Your short fiction piece has been ranked "EXCELLENT!" We take great pleasure in awarding you with this certificate for your outstanding achievement. We hope you will continue writing and wish you luck in the future.

Best Wishes,

Mustang Poets Society

Anthony C. Maeda, National Director

Jacqueline Tran, National President

Big Kids Sometimes Play Rough

I remember getting my first Big Bike - not a little one with training wheels, that was for little kids - but an honest-to-goodness Big Bike that was sitting right there in our living room by the Christmas tree. It was a green Schwinn with a gaudy flowered banana seat, a standard model with no gears and only pedal brakes. Now I was a Big Kid with a Big Bike. I could race other kids, zoom past kids Traffic Cop, and I could skid. That was the neatest thing, to see who could make the longest skid mark on the street. But when the even bigger kids skidded into our bikes on purpose during skid matches and sped too fast in Traffic Cop, Mom just shook her head and said, "Remember, the big kids sometimes play rough."

I was only seven years old when I got my first black eyes. As I pedaled my new green Schwinn bike out into the street, three big boys--eleven, twelve years old--on their bikes rushed at me, parted around me, and then converged into their pack. I could hear their laughter as they skidded into another driveway. Once I was confident that they were too involved in their boy talk to bother me again, I began swerving along an imaginary line in the road and wistfully hoping my best friend Maureen would come home and play with me. Then caught up in my daydreams, I swerved too hard. The bike fell sideways, taking me with it. I landed on knees and palms, but my arms weren't quick enough to prevent my forehead from hitting the pavement. I left my bike in the road and then crying, limped into the house. I could hear the boys laughing again. I had the mandatory two skinned knees and a big bump on my forehead, a "goose-egg." Mom bandaged my knees with large, square, gauze bandages and adhesive tape and put an ice pack on my forehead.

My goose-egg eventually turned green and yellow, and I got dark half-moons beneath my eyes. "The color's gone down to your eyes," my mother explained. I had to go to school that way, with two black eyes, and the principal Mr. Jones asked me,

“What happened to you? Did your boyfriend hit you?” Being only a second grader, I blushed and mumbled something about not having a boyfriend. But I was too young to be very vain, and the bruises didn’t bother me that much. I was just another kid who fell off her bike.

I was so proud when I got my first Big Bike, a Big Kid’s bike, and I gladly accepted the challenges it presented. Falling off a bike is part of learning how to ride, wobbly at first, then whizzing along in a self-assured oblivion until caught unaware. Adult life isn’t so different. I seldom think of my bike accident and of the embarrassment I felt then, but when I do, the memory is not unpleasant; the physical pain has long since faded, and the black eyes didn’t damage my psyche. But I remember my second black eye more vividly than I care to.

Sitting in his living room, alternately watching through sleep blurred eyes the clock tick away the early morning hours and my boyfriend swallow another inch of booze from his bottle, I wondered how much more time would pass before he would pass out. I closed my eyes, but he clicked his stereo volume up yet another level. Fed up with too many rock and roll songs so heavy on the bass that I could feel the thumping in my chest, I grabbed the stereo remote from the table beside him and punched the volume button with my finger. Moody and volatile all night, he exploded in a drunken tirade and lunged to recapture his stolen remote control. I pushed him back down on the couch and thought ironically, “I can beat this drunk,” before he caught me around the knees, knocking me to the floor. His precious remote control slid across the carpet and lay under the couch forgotten as he concentrated only on pinning my arms and legs. I nearly lost consciousness when his fist hit my eye, but hearing my own terrified screams brought me back through a cloud of flashing white lights. Afterwards as he watched me frantically collect my belongings, his look of rage faded to disbelief as the sight of my rapidly swelling, bruised, eyelids and the single line of blood snaking its way over my cheekbone. The realization of what he had done

must have hit him harder than his fist had hit my face. "I didn't do that to you," he yelled as I pushed open the front storm door and ran down the sidewalk to my car. "You walked into a wall." Heart pounding, I drove recklessly down the dark, wooded road as fast as I dared, my vision blurred in one eye as I peered out over the steering wheel through the only clear space on the frosted windshield.

My own realization came later at the hospital in thoughts like "statistic" and "victim of domestic violence." Although sympathetic, the emergency room doctor and nurse were more concerned with how my eye felt than how I felt. Oh, they took care of me all right, but after a vision test, a thorough eye wash and examination, God-only-knows how many X-rays, and one large, square gauze bandage secured with adhesive tape over my wounded eye, I was sent on my way.

Life was easier as a second-grader. My second grade friends accepted my story, but this time there was no simple explanation, no "I fell off my bike," only a few bare facts complicated by a gamut of emotions. Now like fiendish supermarket tabloid readers, people wanted to know, but ironically no one asked "What happened? Did your boyfriend hit you?" Domestic violence doesn't happen to the people they know, and if they did, by chance, discover the truth, they quickly changed the subject or dismissed it with glib comments--"Well he's not worth it anyway," or "I hope he's not your boyfriend anymore." I had my own expression, kind of a female-macho phrase but not entirely untrue--"You should see the other guy. He's really messed up."

From the time I was a child, I was taught to "pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again." Well, I still ride my bike, but I also still see my boyfriend. The physical pain has faded, but the emotional burden is still a monkey on my back. Knowing, however, that my boyfriend, now in recovery, ignores a more vicious monkey strengthens me. If not a bike and big boys, or booze and my boyfriend, something else will pose potential harm. I suppose I could be caught unaware again, but I refuse to live in fear. My mother once said, "Remember, big kids sometimes play rough."

The Mole on My Thumb

I had a mole on my thumb. I suppose this fact is too insignificant for the people of the world to stand up and applaud, but the fact remains, I had a mole on my thumb. That the mole was on my thumb is only important in that it was more noticeable on my thumb than on my elbow or on my back.

I remember the first time I noticed my mole. The brown dots blended together and covered the base of my little girl thumb. It looked like mud. I tried to wash it off, but it wouldn't go away. I knew then that my mole was here to stay.

I had a mole on my thumb, but I seldom noticed it; it was a part of me. I only noticed it when looking at other people's thumbs. They were missing that familiar brown dot.

I had a mole on my thumb, and my mole changed. It shrunk, or I thought it did until I realized that my thumb grew. Then in my teenage years, the dots moved, and some disappeared. One day the mole on my thumb was a sore, red, crusty scab. "Oh, that'll have to come off," the doctor said. "It's turned cancerous." And my mole was ZAPPED! away by a laser beam.

I have a pink scar on my thumb. . .

Loving Ain't Enough

As I walk through the door of Max's Pizzeria, I have to pause to let my eyes adjust from the bright sunlight to the dim interior of the restaurant. Max, as usual, is leaning on the counter reading his magazine. He glances up, and his eyes and bushy eyebrows meet as he hunkers down further on his elbows.

I take my usual booth near the red and yellow jukebox, and Max automatically brings over a bottle of beer. From my spot in the corner, I can survey the entire restaurant, empty of customers, and also the people on the street who I can see through the front window and hear through the front screen door. Nothing exciting ever happens here except, I once threw my beer bottle through the front window. "Just trying to kill a fly," I told Max who looked at me strangely, asked if I had seen the Doc. lately, and from then on made a point of hanging up new fly strips when I was around.

For the most part, Max is pretty tolerant of me. I come in every day if I feel the guys at my garage can finish work and close up without me. I guess Max's place really is a restaurant, but I come in to have the beer. Max eventually gave up trying to get me to eat anything, and eventually gave up trying to get money out of me here at the restaurant. He now just sends a bill to my house which I later give to Roselyn, my garage secretary/receptionist, to take care of along with my other household bills; I don't deal with money too well.

Audrey used to say I didn't manage anything well: money, people, my occasional temper outbursts.

"You wouldn't lose your temper if you just learned how to express yourself," she said once.

Audrey was big on expressing yourself and talking.

It was a day like today, all hot and breezy, when she first swept into town. Actually she didn't sweep into town; her red and gray primer paint Plymouth coasted

along the curb, the pistons in a death rattle, until she scrapped the tires, and the added friction being too much, the car died right in front of Max's.

She walked in all leggy and tan, and she smoothed back damp wisps of light brown hair from her hot and tired-looking face as she spoke quietly to Max. Max nodded her towards me, and said, "There's the man you need."

She slid into the seat opposite me in my booth, leaned forward on her arms, and spoke earnestly to me.

"He tells me you're the best mechanic around. I think my car need a little work. Can you do it?"

I couldn't answer for a moment, her light brown eyes, more than her words, kept my attention. I took a sip from my bottle and nodded towards Max to bring her something to drink.

"Oh, maybe," I said, "but it might be major judging from the way that engine sounded. I hope you're not in a hurry to get anywhere."

She sighed. "Well, I was, but I don't know where I'm going so I guess this place is as good as any."

She smiled a little bit and sipped from the glass of ice tea Max brought her.

"I'll just go get the wrecker," I said.

I wanted to get away from her. Those eyes bothered me. Max grabbed my by the arm as I passed by him on my way to the door.

"I don't think I've heard you say so many words to a woman before, Joe. But you might have at least told her your name," he said.

I smiled. "You know I'm not much on formalities," I reminded him.

She was rummaging around the the Plymouth's trunk when I pulled up my wrecker that said **Joe Smeltzer, Repairs and Towing, Daylor, Missouri**, on the side. She set two plaid fabric suitcases on the sidewalk, slammed the trunk, and stood beside my wrecker as I winched her car up.

“So Joe Smeltzer of Daylor, Missouri, I’m Audrey Yorkton,” she said, twirling a stray wisp of hair.

“Nice to meet you.”

I pretended to be involved in the winching even though I’ve done it a thousand times before. As I straightened up from her bumper, I could see Max gawking from his doorway.

I towed her car to the garage which was only a couple of blocks away from Max’s on the south side of town. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Audrey checking out the cab with all its gum wrappers, empty cigarette packs, bottles of vital engine fluids, and stray greasy work gloves, and she didn’t look disgusted, and she didn’t say anything. She only nodded when I later set her two suitcases in the back of my blue and rust pickup and told her I’d take her to a motel. The motel, I guess I should have said. Daylor ain’t even a Motel 6 kind of town.

“Isn’t there any place else?” she asked when she saw the sign’s burnt-out neon bulbs and boarded windows of the suite where the county sheriff and his boys once busted a couple from out of town in a drug raid. They found only one joint but booked them anyway. I don’t remember him, but the woman was sure interesting in her pink negligee and green mud mask.

“Well, yeah, there is a motel over in the next town, but that’s about twenty miles away,” I said.

“That’s fine,” she answered, but her shoulders sagged as she put an elbow on the armrest and propped her forehead up with her hand. “I hope there’s a good diner there.”

“There’s a place that’s a pretty good greasy spoon, but that’s about it.”

“Oh.”

She blankly stared out of the side window as I drove. I drummed my fingers on the wheel, but she didn’t seem to notice.

So I took Audrey to my house for something to eat. I'm not too much of a gourmet--dinner was frozen fish sticks and french fries. Suits me just fine, but I didn't know if Audrey was the kind of woman who expected better.

"You have a nice home," she said, gracefully dipping a french fry into her ketchup. "It hardly looks like a bachelor's house at all, usually they're kind of bare, but you have some nice furniture and accessories."

She dipped a french fry into the ketchup again and drew ketchup swirls on her plate with it. "I wanted to be an interior decorator once," she said.

"And you don't anymore?" I asked.

She laughed a little. "Sometimes you have to be realistic. A Missouri farmer's idea of interior decorating is having a matching couch and chair. The schools and the clientele are in places like New York, but I don't have the money to go." Audrey silently drew more ketchup swirls on her plate before nibbling at the end of the french fry.

"So you're earning the money to go?" I asked.

"Oh no. Like I said, I became realistic. I'm just looking for a new place to live."

Why she was looking for a new place to live remained unsaid, and I wasn't nosy enough to ask. Well, maybe I was just too chicken.

She was asleep on the couch by the time I finished washing the dishes and cleaning the kitchen. I left her there and went to the front porch to read the newspaper in the last of the evening light. The squirrels were out chasing each other. They live in the old maple tree in the front yard between the house and the sidewalk. I named them Duke and Kitty, though I ain't never told anyone that; don't want them to think I'm crazy. Duke's brave, he's always wanting to jump from their home tree to the one on the other side of my front walk, up where the branches are real thin. He hasn't got the gumption up yet, but someday he'll try, I figure. Duke came up almost to the porch and took a leftover fish stick and nibbled at it cautiously before taking the rest of it away.

Audrey was still asleep. I covered her with a blanket before going to bed

myself. And she was still asleep, all curled up on the couch, when I got up for work the next morning.

Bobby Lee, who's usually late, was there waiting for me at the garage. His name ain't really Bobby Lee, it's Robert, but we call him that because he's a hick. He's just a young kid from Indiana who wants to be a mechanic on a racing team at that big track there. Bobby Lee says there's more corn in Missouri than Indiana, but I still tease him about being a bigger hick than we are. "Who's yer momma, who's yer poppa?" I always ask him. He doesn't think the Hoosier joke is that funny.

"Heard there's a woman at your house," he said as I unlocked the door. "And I heard that's her car there."

He nodded towards the Plymouth and followed me through the front door and into the garage where I raised both doors.

"Yep, you're right on both accounts." I said.

"You gonna marry her or what?" he asked guffawing.

"Why don't you get that car in here so I can look at it before you start work on something, and I got to fix your mistakes. And then Mrs. Phillips is coming in for an oil change."

He shut up then and sulked around as he pulled Audrey's car into one of the bays.

Just like I thought. Damn fool ignorant woman. The car might have lasted longer if she hadn't neglected it so much. The oil was dirty and low, as were most of the other fluids, the tires were bald, and the muffler was so rusty it probably would have fallen off over the next railroad tracks. But the engine was gone, there was no getting around that. She'd probably been ignoring all those pesky engine noises that are suppose to be warning signals.

I spent half the day tearing that engine down, seeing what parts were salvageable and what weren't, until I got disgusted and started hoping somebody

would come in with something easy like an oil change or tire mounting. Maybe Audrey should just buy a new car.

Well that damn fool ignorant woman was in my kitchen fixing dinner when I got home, and she looked so cool and clean compared to the sweaty and grimy guy I had spent the afternoon with that I couldn't bring myself to yell at her about her car.

"Hello, Joe," she said, and she smiled, making me feel like the ribbing Bobby Lee gave when he saw me trying to scrub all the grease from my hands was worth it.

And that was the start of it all. She stayed in my house, which no doubt raised a few eyebrows, fixed dinner for us when I got home, even got a job as a teller at the National Bank of Daylor, and insisted upon paying rent for her room. She went to the Methodist church down the street and won the hearts of those blue-haired old ladies. And she never spoke of leaving or of where she was going when she got stranded in Daylor.

I fixed her car. It's all I could do for her--seems like I was getting the better part of the deal, not her. So I looked around, trying to find a new engine. I didn't have much luck even with all my connections, but in the meantime, I found her some new tires and a muffler and was even thinking about getting some guy I know to paint it.

It was on a Wednesday afternoon that my old buddy Rick Schumacher came back into Daylor. We were high school buddies, but after graduation, we went our separate ways. Rick became a truck driver and saved his money until he started his own company. Then he hit hard times and was bought out by the same company he started for. Now he's starting all over again as a driver and whenever he passes through Daylor, he takes a layover. Knowing Rick, he probably had that clause added to his contract.

Rick and I went over to Bud's Bar which was customary when Rick came to town. I had gone there once in a while after work, but after Audrey came, I hadn't been at Bud's, and I'd even stopped going to Max's. Bud doesn't care too much for Rick. I

think it has something to do with the time we were asked to leave, Rick said, "sure, after we finish the dart game," and then proceeded to throw a wild shot that nearly pegged Bud.

Rick wasn't his usual rowdy self. We did all our usual stuff--drank some beer, played some pool, told some stories, but Rick didn't seem to be enjoying himself, telling the stories that made me howl and pound on the bar.

"I'm getting married, Joe," he said later in the evening. He wouldn't look at me and instead ran a finger through the sweat rings the bottle left on the table.

I didn't quite believe it. This was Rick Schumacher, star quarterback, ladies' man, entrepreneur--throwing away all those glories.

I don't suppose you like it much, but I think it's time," he said. "This is my last run before the wedding. After that, I'm going to work at her daddy's company. Beats being on the road at 2:00am. She's a nice girl, kinda like your Katie."

"So you're giving up everything for a woman."

"I'm not giving up anything," explained Rick. "All those stories, those are all in the past, it's time for something new. I'm gaining everything. No more showering at a truck stop or sleeping in a rig. Instead I get a nice warm bed and someone to share it with."

It just don't figure, Rick getting married. But I couldn't talk him out of it. Damn fool.

"Where have you been?" asked Audrey when I got home.

"None of your business," I told her.

"Beg you pardon?"

She whipped around so fast that pieces of hair stuck in her eyelashes. I withered under her blazing eyes and sighing, sank down on the couch.

"My buddy Rick's getting married, and it's got me down a little," I said.

"You're always thinking of yourself, aren't you? You should be happy he's

found someone, but no, all you're probably thinking about is how you two won't be able to go out and drink beer all night. Come in here."

She grabbed my hand and pulled me into the kitchen.

"Here."

She pointed to a dish on the stove.

"Look at that, a perfectly good chicken casserole ruined because you didn't come home or call to tell me. I thought maybe we could go out tonight and do something, but you never thought of me, did you?"

She glared at me accusingly. I didn't say anything, didn't know what to say, or else I was just too chicken again.

"Here's your dinner."

She picked up the casserole dish and threw it at my feet. The dish didn't break, but chicken casserole splattered all over my pants legs and the floor. Audrey stalked out of the room and slammed the door of her bedroom.

And she was still mad the next morning. I was in the kitchen making the coffee when she walked in.

"I need your truck keys," she said, and she said it like I better not argue.

I pulled the keys out of my pocket and tossed them on the table instead of handing them to her. She ignored me and took the keys.

"Where are you going?" I asked as she started to leave.

"Out."

"Why? What about work?"

"It's my day off," she said.

"When will you be back?"

But the front screen door banged closed, and she was gone.

She didn't call while I was at work to say she was all right, and she didn't come home that evening. I thought about calling the police and telling them she stole my

truck but I didn't. I was in bed and asleep when she woke me.

"Hello, Joe. I'm home."

She was standing in my room, and in the dim light, she looked like a woman in this scary dream I used to have as a kid. But she was real, I'm sure about that. When she sat down on the edge of my bed, I could smell her perfume.

"I didn't want to come home, but I knew you'd worry, so I did." She sighed a little. "Met a friend, and we went out shopping and to dinner and had a few drinks and went dancing," she said.

I put my hand on hers which were folded nervously in her lap.

"Have a nice time?" I asked.

"Oh yes." She smiled. "It's just what I needed, I think."

"That's good."

I yawned and was thinking that she'd be going back to her room now, when all of a sudden she was pulling off her clothes and sliding into bed next to me. Woke me up in a hurry, not that I minded all that much; I had thought about something like this plenty of times.

"I wondered how long you'd go on being a gentleman. Don't you think it's about time? Seems to me we'd have less laundry to do if we only had one set of sheets to wash," she said.

My grandmother used to tell me, "Don't take what's not offered to you, but if it is, it's impolite not to accept." I think she was talking about being a guest at someone's dinner table, but I thought her words fit here too.

The four phases of my life--before Audrey, living with Audrey, living and sleeping with Audrey, after Audrey. I don't think I'd ever been so happy before. Roselyn at the garage told me I better learn how to be romantic; she couldn't do this for me like she could pay my bills, so I learned a thing or two about flowers and was considering moving on to jewelry when things started going wrong. I was getting

happy, but Audrey wasn't. I probably was a fool not to see it.

I had fixed up her car real nice for her, but once that was finished, I didn't really have much to tell her about what went on at the garage. She'd ask, but she really didn't seem interested. I don't blame her; I wouldn't care about other people's car repairs either; I only care since I get paid for it. And the same with her job. I didn't care who in town came in for a loan.

I wanted to go to a tractor pull in Kansas City one weekend; she didn't; she wanted to go to a rock concert. Neither of us went anywhere. We lay in bed that night, listening to each other breathe.

"We're not going anywhere, Joe."

"I know, you already made that clear. But this tractor pull was the championship, and I didn't want to miss that."

"That's not what I mean." She sat up in bed. "You don't even understand what I'm trying to say to you."

"Well you haven't said anything yet. Only thing I know is that you're mad about not going to the concert." I stretched and rolled onto my side.

Audrey grabbed my shoulder and rolled me back.

"I'm trying to talk to you, and you don't even try to listen. And you don't talk to me. How can this work if we never talk? What are your dreams? What do you want from life?"

I rolled back over.

"I'm tired, Audrey. I want to go to sleep."

"Then just forget it, Joe. If it's not important enough to talk about now, it never will be."

Audrey got out of bed and left the bedroom. I couldn't fall asleep after that; I just stared up at the ceiling and listened to the muffled sounds of a late-night movie on the tv in the living room.

She left the next morning, and I didn't try to stop her. Maybe if I had tried it would have meant something to her. She thanked me, kissed me on the cheek, and said she'd call. She sat in the Plymouth for a few moments, letting it idle out at the curb, before pulling away.

I didn't go into work that day. Roselyn could handle things and tell Bobby Lee what to do. Max came by and told me to call him if I needed anything. Bobby Lee had seen Audrey's Plymouth heading east that morning on his way to work. It didn't take long for the word to spread.

I sat on the porch most of the day drinking beer and watching the squirrels, Duke and Kitty. Duke was being a daredevil. That morning he finally got up the gumption to try to jump tree to tree. Maybe he was trying to impress Kitty because she was fed up with him. His jumping attempt fell a little short, and he fell on my front sidewalk, he even bounced a little, but the next time he hit, he was on his feet and running. One crash wasn't enough; about noon he tried jumping to a tree across the street, a shorter job, but he still didn't make it. Poor Duke scabbled desperately at the thin twigs but couldn't get a good hold. His body fell onto the roof of an Oldsmobile which was driving by and then slid down the back window and trunk to the street.

I lost it that night; too many beers. I went to the station and got my wrecker, the same wrecker that towed Audrey's car, and tried to tow away the bandshell in the town park. Why the bandshell, I don't remember anymore. Must have seemed like a good idea at the time. I couldn't figure out how to winch it up so I got back in the cab for another beer and to think it over. The Daylor police, well, just the night officer, found me there passed out with my head on the horn.

I didn't do any actual damage so no charges were filed. Besides, the town can't survive without a good mechanic. Sitting in the police station until I sobered up was enough for me. But they did make me start seeing Doc., one of those whatever-they-are-kind-of doctors for psycho-weirdo people. I don't know what he is, all I know is that

now I have to go see him once and week and talk. Talking really ain't my thing as Audrey used to frequently point out.

So I get to go sit in a blue and mauve office and stare at the ferns for an hour. It ain't exciting, but I guess it's helping. Doc. says I have a lot of repressed anger I need to let out, but Max says not through his front window.

"Today's the last day you have to come, Joe," said Doc., "but I think you could benefit by a decision to come back on your own."

I shrugged and plucked a few fern leaves. "Yeah? Why?"

"Like getting to understand the roots of your anger."

I stood up, walked over to the window, and stared out at the parking lot.

"I thought I was doing ok," I said.

"Oh you are," said Doc. I could hear him shuffling through his notes on his desk.

A woman exited the building next door and stood on the sidewalk gazing across the parking lot. Long tan legs, hair waving around shoulders. A car pulled up next to the woman. She got in and kissed the man driving. I crumpled the fern leaves in my hand and threw them on the floor.

"What are you thinking?" asked Doc.

I sat down in the chair. "I don't know."

Doc. glanced at his watch. "Time's up," he said.

I got up, shook his hand, and had my hand on the doorknob when he asked, "Next Tuesday at 10:00?"

I looked back briefly. "I'll let you know."

I pick up the bottle of beer from the table but set it back down again. A fly lands on the table near the sweat ring left by the bottle.

"Hey, Max." I call, watching the fly, "how about an ice tea?"