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# Experiment Station Road

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EXPERIMENT STATION ROAD

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Drama and Communications  
Creative Writing, Fiction

by  
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## ABSTRACT

*Experiment Station Road* is an original work of fiction serving as a collection of short stories set in Hayford, Oregon and Las Vegas in 1962-1972. Each story presents the point of view of a resident in Hayford. The stories are written to function independently, but when read as a collection present insight to cultural diversity, intricate relationships and the ignorance of prejudice.

KEYWORDS: Pear, Orchard, Las Vegas, Hayford, *Abuelas*, Fog, Extension Service

## INTRODUCTION

Set in the earthy pear orchards of the Rogue River Valley, Oregon and the neon-lit streets of Las Vegas, from 1962 to 1972, the characters of *Experiment Station Road* come of age in their humanity, awaken to their prejudices, and experiment with their destinies. They live lives that explore middle-age angst, childhood advocacy, community choices, the ignorance of prejudice, codependent trauma and faith in action.

While the stories are designed to function independently, when read as a collection the characters step into each other's lives through cameo appearances on the page, brief encounters from chapter to chapter and intimate involvement woven into a linked storyline. From page to page the characters rub shoulders and expose one another's secrets, prejudice and reckonings with fate and the Divine.

## CALL ME NED

Ned Alfred's eyes gazed at a rose tattoo etched on the naked shoulder of a tough looking brunette, who cuddled a fifties businessman. His stare meandered and settled on the bare arm of a sailor. The Navy man, seated next to Ned at the bar, had a muscle perfectly positioned for observation. It displayed a dark blue design with the name "Betty" that was penned diagonally through the center of a heart.

"Thinking of getting a tattoo, buddy?" The man's gruff voice interrupted Ned's focus and he was embarrassed to be caught ogling the bicep of a man. He didn't know what to say.

"I could give you some advice." The guy drank Chivas Regal on the rocks and swirled the glass in his hand, letting the ice clink.

"Thanks, but I have an appointment," Ned said and left a five on the counter. He scurried between the chairs of The Blue Lilac Lounge at The Sands hotel in Vegas. The tables played host to tourists taking a brief respite from blackjack and the slots—the bar was filled.

Ned heard the sailor's voice beckon him back, "Stay away from that place, The Permanent Mark, just off the strip. I ended up in the hospital for a week." He pulled his tank top up exposing a ragged tattoo of a half naked lady riding a bull.

Relieved to move from the lounge to the gambling hall, Ned fought to control his hands. The noise decibels jumped once he left the lounge. The conga

music, playing at a ridiculous volume in the main hall, mixed with The Righteous Brothers, who were singing in a live performance area just off the main room. Ned stuck his fingers in his ears then quickly unplugged them. He didn't want the strangers around him to see this as an indication he was on his first trip to Vegas.

He rummaged in his blazer pocket for a roll of nickels to play the slots and discovered there was only a third of a roll left. No time anyway. The United flight for home left in an hour and a half. He had to get going. The concierge accepted the dollar Ned offered and in exchange handed him a blue Samsonite suitcase.

Ned slipped in a cab and headed for the airport. He mentally pictured his calendar and a date six weeks away. Maybe his second trip alone to Las Vegas would be better. The taxi sped to the airport, and light swirled by the windows of the cab, making it impossible for Ned to read a single sign. Neon advertised everything in Vegas, lighting the way to entertainment and taking the place of any heavenly glow. How different from the Oregon skies he was used to.

The federal government had assigned Ned Alfred his job in Hayford, Oregon running the government extension service in the late 50's. In his five years of managing the Hayford office, he'd been relegated to a de facto counselor for the orchard owners in the Rogue River Valley of Southern Oregon. His office recorded each of the men's complaints and concerns on a 429 form, and Ned made a point of listening. That's all he could do. The kind of experiment station that

had been signed into existence by President Grover Cleveland in 1887 had folded a few years back, at least in Hayford. Studying soil, climates and pear development was what Alfred always planned to do, but the closure of the station had left only an office deluged with forms, files and memos. As occupations go, this was a disappointing second.

Ned had hired Janice Mason the September after her high school graduation. She'd sat in his office dressed in flashy clothes that were out of character for a resident of Hayford. Maybe she'd just been trying to impress and went a little overboard. Her skirt was shorter than he'd seen on most high school girls and the leopard print on her t-strapped sandals made him wonder if styles were changing. He wasn't much for fashion but he knew his own teenage daughters would never dress like that. During the interview he asked, "What have you been doing this summer, Janice?" No answer. She stared at the library shelves, so Ned persisted, "Summer job?"

She twisted the end of a curl in her short bleached hair. "I've been on vacation."

"And now what?" he prodded.

"I'm not really interested in college, Mr. Alfred. I just want a job."

"That's good. Just fine." Ned liked the way she called him "Mr. Alfred."

Manners were important in the workplace. He referred to a list of interview questions compiled for him by the government, to be used for all office managers



and staff. “What was the last book you read, Janice?” By this time he was getting used to her hesitation and guessed this might be her first interview.

“*Crime and Punishment*--but I never read it—just the *Cliff’s Notes*.”

Did Ned have a place for this girl in his office? Not really. But an eerie premonition of his own fifteen-year-old daughter’s future haunted him. Phyllis, his office manager, could help anyone with her nurturing style and expertise of business procedures. Janice could be trained.

“Miss Mason . . . Janice, you’re hired.”

Janice stood up, letting her black patent leather purse drop to the floor. “Thank you.” She stooped to pick up her bag and Ned noticed her tight-fitting sweater.

“You start Monday.”

He felt guilty watching her hips swing back and forth as she hustled out the door. He adjusted the shadow box on the wall of his private office. Filled with Las Vegas memorabilia, including one of his lucky chips, a receipt for his hotel room at the casino where he won his first thousand bucks and a picture of him at the blackjack table shaking a reticent dealer’s hand. His wife, Trish, stood uncomfortably in the background, embarrassed but smiling. A thousand bucks could make anyone smile. Ned never bet excessively and allowed only a certain percentage of his gambling fund to dwindle before he put the brakes on his now-

frequent trips to The Sands. He liked controlling the gambling as much as he liked the game.

Ned never started gambling on purpose. He and Trish had attended a government conference in Las Vegas the previous year. The lights were stunning, captivating--hypnotic. He'd lived a quiet life with camping vacations and limited relatives visiting on the holidays. He liked the contrast. Ned knew how to control his pleasures. Nonetheless, the shadow box looked a bit strange beside a picture of his wife and kids at the lake, in a boat, with two twelve-inch trout displayed proudly.

Several weeks after Janice had been hired, she sat at her desk trying to release the stuck carbon from the middle of a 429. Ned leaned over her shoulder and demonstrated as he said, "When you first pick up the form, fold the bottom right corner up—like this. That avoids sticking." Ned could smell a sweet musk on Janice. Was it perfume or hair spray? He wasn't sure.

Ned critiqued the ever-stable Phyllis as she rushed to her desk, answering the ringing phone. Somewhere between lifting the receiver, a "hello," and grabbing a notepad—Phyllis set her latest paperback romance on the edge of her desk. Ned chuckled. His little laugh seemed to bristle his office staff. He noticed that, even as Phyllis set the receiver down, he was making her nervous.

Ned picked up the paperback book from Phyllis' desk and read the title out loud. "*Infamous Vacations*, Joyce Hancock's latest romance novel—she takes you there." Janice giggled, and Ned jerked around to face her.

"This isn't funny, Janice." He dumped the book into the wastebasket. "These books fuel frivolity, and as representatives of the federal government we certainly want to present a more conservative image." He turned away, straightened the napkins on the table by the coffee pot, entered his office and closed the door. He thought this office to be a far cry from his work as a research assistant at the agricultural university upstate.

Twenty-four and energetic, Ned had collected moss samples from irrigation ditches that had distributed water to every orchard in the county. The green moss had lived in seeming harmony along the edge of the ditches' muddy banks.

One summer morning as the sun spilled over the mountain ridge Alfred knelt beside a ditch and gently lifted the moist moss from its habitat. Within an hour it started to dry and by the end of the day the color faded and the moss withered. In its wrinkled state, it didn't look nearly the threat the orchard owners feared, but, when living, the moss eventually plugged drains, clogged pumps, and disable sprinklers from sending water to the orchard pears that drove the valley's economy.

By the end of the summer during his last year as a research assistant, the moss problem had been solved. Pesticides in the water had killed it with amazing finality. Then Ned received what he thought to be the break of lifetime. Assigned to work under some of the best minds in agriculture research, his team determined to expand the size of the pear. During brainstorming sessions, his knee bounced up and down in uncontrolled excitement. The nerves in his stomach kept time and caused his breakfast to swirl. Paid to research. It couldn't get better.

Half a dozen men in their early thirties met in a small lab on the Oregon State University campus. The room vibrated with cautious ponderings, shouted arguments, and sudden revelations. Experimenting with original thought. The lab seemed charged with electricity and so was Ned.

He wasn't sure if it was his idea, suggested somewhere between the exhale and inhale of his Camel cigarette, or if it was Morrison that had the first word. "If we thin the fruit buds—we trick the trees—stress them. Make them yield larger fruit." They set out that night to formulate the plan. Then came the research, the tests, and the forays into the orchards. All of it exhilarating to Ned. Within a year the orchards in his town, his neighborhood, were using the technique that had been sketched out that night by the idea-men of the science lab. The pears grew bigger. Education, brainstorming, and a multitude of fine minds had tricked nature and done it well.

Two years later, the *Oregon Agriculture Journal* had printed an article of concern regarding the growing number of Mexican migrant workers who had visited hospitals with burning on their skin and persistent coughs. Alfred had remembered the greatest exposure to pesticides had been to workers who thinned the buds on the trees. He turned the magazine over and stuck it in his bottom desk drawer.

“Mr. Alfred.” Phyllis called Ned back to the outer office. Just as he stepped through his door twelve year old Ellen Merrill marched by the front window.

“Phyllis!” The irritation in his voice was evident. “You’re supposed to insulate me from the pesky customers—especially that one.”

Phyllis defended herself, “It can’t be that bad. She’s probably doing another science experiment.”

“Remember the system, Phyllis. I have so many more important things to do than answer her questions. When you see her coming—you just say ‘Ellen’ and I’ll stay in my office.”

“I *didn’t* see her coming, Mr. Alfred.”

He turned to Janice. “Did you?” But before she could answer he took note of the color of her lipstick, a shiny orange, and recalled yesterday morning when he told his daughters to lay off the make-up.

Ellen marched by the front window. Ned saw her copper-colored hair shining as she passed on her way to the door. Before he could escape, she looked his way and waved. Trapped. Her rusty hair, pulled back in a ponytail, reminded him of the spot on the downspout at home. That spot, caused by the perpetual drip from the leaves in the gutter, grew bigger whenever it rained. She came by a couple times a month to drip away at his patience, and today he had none.

Ellen opened the door, let the bell ring, closed the door, opened it to hear the bell tinkle a second time, and finally shut the door and let it rest. “I like that bell, Mr. Alfred.”

“I know, Pebble.”

“I don’t use that name much anymore, Mr. Alfred. Just around home.”

Ned saw a smile creep across Phyllis’s face as she turned away and headed for the file cabinets that lined the back wall. No support from her at all. He would talk to her about that later. “What can I do for you today?” He didn’t really want to know, but he saw Janice observing and thought his interest in a child might be considered an admirable trait.

Ellen stated, “I have a hypothesis: Orchard smudge pots do damage to human lungs that breathe the smudge on a consistent basis.” The smudge pots lined each row of pear trees in every orchard, and the containers held an oily sludge-like substance that was ignited on freezing nights to keep the fruit trees warm.

“Why don’t you come in.” He waved his hand towards his private office, and Ellen entered first. Just before Ned followed her, he noticed Janice was watching all the action with what Ned thought to be real interest. He was certain she would hear his entire conversation with Ellen.

The pest opened her notebook, poised her pencil and asked “Now, how many complaints have you received this year from residents who live by the orchards?”

“What kind of complaints?”

“You know—lung and esophagus pain or irritation of the nasal passages.”

“I only deal in pears, Ellen, not diseases of the respiratory system.” Ned looked in her direction, but he focused on the map of Nevada that hung on his wall and framed Ellen’s head. He feigned interest in the pictures she’d taken of her nostrils that were mounted on poster board, all the while estimating the time it would take to drive time from Hayford to Las Vegas, the town caption on the map hidden by Ellen’s head.

Ellen read from what looked like a school report. “Even when every window was shut tight and locked with plastic sheeting stretched across to protect the family from the winter’s cold—the black smudge crept into homes and slipped its way into the noses of the sleepers.” Ellen stared at Ned as he looked past her shoulder to the run in Janice’s stocking. Ellen persisted, “Mr. Alfred, aren’t you

and the federal government concerned about the long term effects of smudge on people and their nasal passages?”

“It’s on the top of my list, Pebble. Want to fill out a 429?”

“That’s what I came for.”

“Janice can help you with that?” He escorted Ellen from his office and noticed a group of Mexican children standing outside the storefront window. He looked suspiciously at Ellen. “Did you bring those children with you?”

“Yes, I did. I’ll need a second form for them.”

“There is no form for them, Ellen, they make their complaints directly to the orchard owners.”

“But they have rashes from the pesticides on the trees.”

Janice stood up to retrieve a 429, and Ned glanced down at her leg just long enough to see the run in her nylon climb higher on her leg. “Ellen—you want to help them complain—go see the orchard owners yourself.”

“Thanks, Mr. Alfred, I’ll tell them you sent me.” He glared at her and opened the front door, shooing the Mexican children away. Ned wondered why he couldn’t shut Ellen off the way he did others.

He had developed adept listening skills at home, honing his conversational responses. Vacation plans his wife and daughters suggested, he’d agree to every year. During parent-teacher-meetings, he daydreamed about the creation of a new



species of pear. While enjoying holiday activities, he left all the scheduling to his wife. Ned Alfred was only along for the ride.

The destination Ned had planned for his life took a turn down a road he had never expected. The real solutions to the blight, the drought and the worms that plagued the orchard owners of the valley should have come from his work at the experiment station, but that was boarded up and left to rot on a little dirt road in the middle of an orchard. The agriculture department of the university regularly toured experiment stations in the state, but they skipped Hayford. All it had was a storefront and an office with a window marked *Government Extension Service*, but the station for experiments remained closed. After the week of their planned visits throughout the state, a carbon-copied form came with a line slashed through it from the bottom of the right corner to the top of the left. A diagonal rejection that simply said: No station, no visit.

More than once Janice had worn long sleeves and slacks on afternoons when temperatures soared into the nineties. After six weeks of working together Ned thought he could anticipate what she might wear on certain days. He liked to imagine they shared a system of wardrobe selection and that all he had to do was mention an outfit and she would appear wearing his suggestion. But the day Janice showed up with a black eye Ned was convinced that her odd choice of fashion had to do with a jealous boyfriend and his vicious temper. Ned's anger rose in a

fatherly-protective way, but his thoughts were tainted with romantic rescue. Ned couldn't sort the feelings out.

On the last Friday of the month, Phyllis headed for Ned's open office door. "Janice," Ned overheard Phyllis say "did the travel agent deliver Mr. Alfred's ticket to Las Vegas yet?"

"Not yet. You mean ticket-s?" Janice asked.

"No, there's just one ticket. He's going alone. Trish said she's taking the girls back to the lake this year. Guess she misses fishing."

"He's going all by himself?" Ned held his breath wondering what Janice would think of his solo travel arrangements.

"The slot-machines will be company enough."

Ned looked at the red pear sitting next to the plastic dish of leftover spaghetti Trish had packed for his lunch. Fingering the pear, he took a bite. A decade of experimenting had paid off. It was bigger, and, he thought, tastier.

"Mr. Alfred." Phyllis rapped on his doorjamb, "Mr. Alfred, I'm going to lunch now."

"Fine, Phyllis." He could see Janice at her desk in the outer office as Phyllis turned to leave. "Phyllis, what should I bring Trish from Las Vegas this time?"

He saw Janice lean in the direction of his office.

"You've got two teenage girls. Have them go through her closet and make a suggestion."

“Shoes.” Janice’s opinion slipped out.

Ned chuckled. “Shoes? What do you think Phyllis?” She didn’t have time to answer before Janice pushed past her into Ned’s office.

“T-straps are the rage this summer. What’s your wife’s favorite color?”

“Not sure. Maybe red.”

“Perfect. You’ll see them everywhere. Just know her size. You can’t go wrong.”

Ned looked at Phyllis for confirmation, but his gaze wandered back to Janice. Her skirt was orange. Phyllis repeated, “You can’t go wrong. It’s the rage.” She left for lunch, and Janice returned to her desk, leaving Ned’s door wide open.

He studied Janice for a minute more. Her sense of fashion was upbeat and on the cheap side, but he liked it. Close in age to both his daughters, Janice looked much older—more mature. His eyes lingered on the hem of her skirt and meandered up her yellow sweater. If Janice knew he watched her, she didn’t let on. Ned strolled from his office to the coffee pot by Janice’s desk and drained the leftovers into his mug.

“Ned, you want some cream in your coffee?”

He edited his thoughts before speaking, knowing full well his expected response would be a discussion of office etiquette: *Mr. Alfred—not Ned*. Besides,

he normally drank his coffee black. But his body relaxed a bit, and while staring at the pendant around her neck he said, “Yes, cream and one sugar too.”

Janice passed him, easing through the arched entry to the back room. She opened the refrigerator, took out the cream pitcher and fumbled with the waxed-paper covering. “I like it when you call me Ned,” he said.

Janice seemed nervous. “I slipped. It won’t happen again, Mr. Alfred.”

He stretched his hand forward, holding the mug out to her and waiting for the cream. “You *could* call me Ned.” Janice poured the cream in his cup, and he was shocked that her hands shook.

The bell over the door rang with rescue in its voice. “Mr. Alfred? Mr. Alfred—it’s Ellen Merrill. I need a 429.” Janice put the cream back on the second shelf and hurried to help Ellen.

Ned’s stomach was sick. He’d made Janice nervous, afraid of him, and that was not what he’d intended. Now, she would think him a dirty old man. He was frantic at the thought she might foresee the direction his imagination had taken him. He had committed not to act on his inner thoughts, but now this slip revealed too much. And he couldn’t take anything back.

Ned made a point not to look at Janice but confronted Ellen. “Office is closed for lunch, Ellen.”

She glanced at the round plastic clock on the wall. “It’s only three minutes to noon, Mr. Alfred.”

“We’re on a strict schedule. Try again at one-thirty and Phyllis will help you out.” Before she could butt in again, he stepped into his office calling to Janice over his shoulder, “Can you go across the street, and pick up my ticket from the travel agent?”

She sounded timid. “Right away, Mr. Alfred. Come on, Ellen, I’ll walk you out.” Janice didn’t look Ned’s way but asked, “Will I need a check to pay for it?”

“I have an account.”

Ned straightened papers on his desk, intending to leave everything in order for his coming weekend in Las Vegas. When he finally noticed Janice standing in the doorway, holding the ticket envelope in her hand, he wondered how long she had been watching him. “Come in.”

Janice’s stilettos clicked against the fir floor as she crossed to stand in front of Ned’s desk. She presented the envelope, and Ned noticed Janice’s hands were not shaking anymore. “You can lay it on the desk.” He determined not to look her in the eyes, but she didn’t leave and held the envelope towards him. Finally, he glanced up at her.

“Don’t you want to check the departure time?” She sounded kind, not nervous anymore, and Ned was sure he’d misinterpreted her feelings earlier. He took the ticket and glanced inside.

“There’s two tickets here, Janice—they were only supposed to issue one.”

They continued to stare at each other across the desk.

“Isn’t the departure time eight o’clock tonight, Ned?”

He chuckled, “Yes, yes it is.” Her smile looked nothing like his daughters, he decided in an instant. Ned stared at Janice’s pearl pendant. It hung around her neck, moving ever so slightly as she breathed. “I guess we’d better hurry.”

## EXPERIMENT STATION ROAD

In the summer of 1962 when the orchard pears were ripe for the picking, my brother Charlie and I decided risk made life worth living. The liturgy of rules wasn't long at our house, but at the top of the list was the one unbreakable regulation. We could wander and explore any of the orchards that edged the three sides of our property or ramble past the country intersections connecting our streets with other roads, but Mom and Dad had placed a prohibition on our traipsing anywhere close to the trash-shacks where the Mexican migrant workers lived. Even in the winter when the transients moved out and the shacks on the hills of the Rogue River Valley in Southern Oregon, the declaration was enforced. Charlie missed his freshman homecoming dance just because old Mr. Redmond, three houses down, thought he saw Charlie heading up the road to the transients' quarters.

At twelve years old I argued constantly with my mom and I knew she'd never let me head out to explore on a Saturday without determining a destination. So I thought about a plan that utilized the institution of Scouting and its reputation for integrity. "Set the alarm on the stove to go off in two hours. Charlie will go with me to sell the Girl Scout cookies and by the time the buzzer goes off we'll be home. Promise."

Mom said, “Transients might be out, Pebble. You know what’s been going on with the Mexicans.” She tried to get on my good side by using my nickname. Four summers ago, after my eighth birthday, I threw pebbles into the river for two straight hours to get one to skip across the water, but they all sank. Dad and Charlie laughed at me, and finally Charlie examined my pile of small rocks.

He emptied his bulging pockets of stones into my pile and said, “Next time—try a flat stone and not a pebble.” Part of me wanted to say “Thank you,” but most of me wanted to kick him for not telling me sooner. Right then and there I skipped a stone.

Mom turned her back on me and continued cleaning carrots at the kitchen sink. That meant: argument over. She never listened to new ideas I suggested regarding my independence. I’m pretty sure it was that day that I decided to call her by her first name out of spite. So I told her in my soon-to-be-teenage-voice, “Nadine, Charlie will be with me. I won’t be alone. Nothing will happen Nadine.”

She swung around from the sink. “Don’t call me by my first name.” Her voice seemed mad, but there was a little smile on her face that I didn’t understand, and I wondered what she’d do the next time I called her “Nadine.”

Not sure if I should be defiant and stomp off down the road or subservient and retreat to my bedroom, I looked to Charlie, fourteen, pushy and not a Girl Scout, for advice. His eyes suggested he was hatching a plan that would let us do whatever we wanted without confrontation or consequences.



We left Nadine alone at her sink, headed for the living room, and Charlie said, "Timing is everything." I knew what he meant. Every week on Saturday Dad returned from his logging job in the woods of northern California around four in the afternoon. And every other Saturday was Nadine's bridge game with the ladies across town. If she and the girls started tipping too many Manhattan's, Charlie and me would get another two or three hours of freedom for our adventure. Nadine would forget about the carrots she'd cleaned earlier and we would get a dinner out. Nadine wouldn't be cooking.

Shortly after our mother, dressed in her light turquoise church dress, driving the '59 Ford coupe, departed I slapped the screen door open and my right foot left a dusty footprint on the front page of the *Hayford Tribune* that was lying on the top of the cement steps. Nobody had picked it up from last night. Only Dad read all the paper. The rest of us read the Sunday funnies, and Charlie looked up the movies playing at the Starlight Drive-in and the Crestview Movie Theatre.

Charlie followed me out the door and stooped to scoop up the paper. He snapped off the rubber band and the paper sprung from rolled to flat exposing a big black and white photograph on the front page. We were on a schedule and Charlie's timing always stunk.

"Come on. Read later," I told him. "If we go now we'll miss the heat."

Charlie held out the paper. "Here's her picture, Ellen. Sure you want to go?" he taunted. The caption announced Janice Louise Mason's name and followed

with the phrase, “twenty-one days missing.” For three weeks the local television stations hinted at how Janice might have disappeared. Maybe she had fallen on her head and forgotten how to get home. Perhaps trouble had met her in the orchards or someone traveling through town gave her a ride she never expected. Mostly, the gossip regarding her disappearance centered around the Mexicans and their desire for white girls.

Charlie knew Janice, and I’d seen her a couple times last spring at the agriculture extension office where she worked as a clerk. She was three years, eleven months and fourteen days older than him. I knew because they printed her birthday the first week she went missing. Tension built in our community on a daily basis and the local police did the best they could to follow up leads on where she might be. It seemed all paths led to the orchard workers.

Charlie waved the picture of Janice in front of me. “Still want to head out for an adventure today, Pebble?”

I stared him down. “Let’s go.”

In a network of back roads, rambling through the pear orchards, our short road ended in a T after the last of five houses. Turn to the left and pear orchards lined the one-lane side road for a half a mile before Experiment Station Road became a real street and led to the grade school. Turn right and more orchards provided green rows as far as eyes could see, and a bend in the road urged walkers to take a

look around the corner. Dad took Charlie and me around the bend one day, I guess for a history lesson.

Beyond the crook, at the end of the road, a boarded up house, a little smaller than where we lived, seemed deserted. The paint, faded from weather and blistered by the sun, looked moldy green. Dad led us up the creaky set of three stairs covered with sun-baked dirt. “Government named this road Experiment Station Road. Used to experiment on pears here—trying to make them bigger, better—trying to improve the economy.”

“What’s economy?” I loved to ask questions.

“Never mind. It didn’t work.” Dad had a way of getting out of answering everything I asked him.

“It’s a stupid name,” Charlie said. Sam’s street’s named ‘St. John’s Wort Highway’ cause it smells like the yellow flowers on the side of the road.” Charlie had a point.

A big cardboard sign with faded letters read *Experiment Station Closed*. A bolted two-by-four hung diagonally across the door and kept trespassers from entering. Charlie poked his finger through the rotting screen and boosted me up to peek through a small broken window at the top of the door. An empty house. A file cabinet with no drawers stood in one corner and that was all. I wanted it to look like a laboratory and imagined gigantic pears hidden in the closet by the window across the room

We stepped off the porch, and Dad looked up at the roof. “Look at that weather vane. Ain’t gonna be enough wind all summer to make that spin.” Most of the gravel on the road had disappeared, worn away by winter rains, and dirt clods the size of baseballs rolled around the road. Squatting down, I picked up a clod. Perfect fit. I flung it at the metal chicken on the weather vane, and it started to spin. Dad laughed and chose his own clod. Charlie collected three or four. That hen spun around so many times it must have been ready to heave.

“Good shot,” Charlie hollered at me. “Who taught you how to throw?” He knew the answer.

“You did.” I flung another clod.

Just before Charlie and I headed out on our bikes, I grabbed a package of Girl Scout treats from the brown bag that waited on the porch. I needed to sell all the cookies and promised myself I’d put 50 cents in the envelope later. I stuck the box on the outside of my shorts between the waistband and my belt.

Charlie’s bike spokes held the King of Diamonds card that fluttered when the wheels turned. He rode fast and hollered over his shoulder, “Let’s go spy on the trash shacks and the Mexicans.” I followed.

Mexican workers showed up in late May every year to pick the pears in the orchards. The men who owned the orchards hired the transients and provided them with a place to stay as part of the deal. That was the place Charlie wanted to spy.

Two miles from home we stopped by the side of the road where the irrigation creek narrowed. Charlie threw his bike across the ditch, and it landed in the tall soft grass where no one driving by could see it. I kept a look out for cars while he did the throwing. He tossed my bike across too. I watched it sink into hiding in the middle of the milkweed stems and stickers, like fingers covering the handlebars.

“Come on.” He leapt over the ditch, and I backed up into the street then ran full force at the far bank. My navy blue tennis shoes and me landed right in the middle of the muddy irrigation water.

“Stupid, Pebble.”

“I wanted to get wet.” I crawled up the sloping bank. Dark brown mud caked into my white shoelaces. Charlie turned and led the way up the hill through the orchard to the transients’ housing.

Sweat dripped from my scalp into my eyes. I remembered the TV weatherman on last night’s news saying the temperature would be over ninety today, and records of the widest temperature range might be broken tonight if it dipped into the low thirties. That meant smudge pots would be fired up, and that had only happened once before in fifty years during the month of July. Spring months, sure, but not July.

The buzz of flies warned me we were coming near a patch of rotten pears that had fallen off the trees. When I heard the sound, I looked the other way so I

wouldn't have to see a pear crawling with black bugs. It was creepy, and I needed to keep my mind on business.

The sound of Spanish words wove through the milkweed. Mexicans. Charlie ducked low in the crab grass that grew three feet high on the edge of the orchard and pulled me down beside him. My knees landed in the middle of the dirt, hard from summer's dry days. Hiding, I felt my heart take big steps around my chest the way it did when I followed Charlie off the twenty-foot-jump-off rock at the lake.

Crouching in the grass—just before the crest of the hill—I listened and heard women's voices talking back and forth, and even though I did not understand Spanish, the voices were loud and urgent. A voice screeched one long, painful cry—like when our puppy, Mish-Mash, got hit by the milk truck backing out of the driveway. I grabbed Charlie's arm and started tugging. She sounded hurt and I knew we should help, but Charlie whispered, "Stop it, Pebble. No." His eyes were big and looked like my baby doll's eyes when they got stuck in open position after she laid outside, forgotten in a windstorm.

The high-pitched female voice stopped, and I heard lots of grandma-type voices yelling, "*Rapido!*"

Charlie yanked my arm and pulled me up to go, but I dug my feet in the grass, and he let go of my wrist. "Time to leave." When he realized I wasn't going with him, he glared at me and hurried off. I'd seen Charlie do this before

when his huge adventure plans turned into a lot of talk. I hunched down lower in the grass and felt the sharp blades brush my cheek.

The woman's shriek came once again and then was silent. I inched the rest of the way to the top of the hill and peeked through the milkweed and the crabgrass. Down the hill, I saw six Mexican men sitting in the back of a rusted-out Ford pickup. Thick blue-gray smoke sputtered out the tail pipe that hung about three inches off the ground at the back end of the truck. I guessed these were the orchard workers who'd come home for lunch and were headed back to pick. They seemed to be waiting for someone, and several of them yelled toward the row of trash-shacks that lined the orchard's edge. A Mexican man ran out of a shack, then stopped and turned to stare at the shed-like structure. I remembered the woman's cry, and at first I thought he might be a murderer, but it seemed he wanted to go back in the house—a murderer wouldn't. Finally, he leaped on the back of the tailgate. I watched the truck pull away from the shacks and travel down the dirt road.

Everyone in the truck bed, except the man who came out of the house, sat down. That one man just kept staring at the house even as they rounded the corner of the road and I couldn't see them anymore.

A snort made me jump and turn around. Behind me, three snotty-nosed Mexican kids stared at me. Their wide eyes matched mine. I started breathing again when I realized it wasn't Janice Mason's killer. I couldn't tell if they were

boys or girls because each wore a dirty, short-sleeved man's dress shirt. All three had their hair cut the same way, like someone put a stew pot on their heads and traced around it with kitchen scissors. Their arms cradled bruised pears. I knew they'd collected the fruit that fell off the trees last night. I'd picked up pears like those all summer long. Fruit on the ground, that didn't have crawling flies on it, could be taken by anyone. Owners didn't keep any of it that fell in the dirt.

The biggest kid, much smaller than me, started to smile, but before I could smile back a baby's screech let loose, and the Mexican kids ran right past me over the top of the hill towards the row of shacks. I stayed hidden, peering down at them. The shed on the end, that the Mexican man had come out of, had a window with no screen and no glass. The kids peeked in the space and started to giggle. They stacked their pears in a basket by the shed. Then, making a circle, they connected hand to hand. They danced around as if the baby screeches were music. The littlest kid broke away from the group and stood at the bottom of the hill. He looked straight at my hiding place like he could see right through the weeds and yelled in my direction. "*Bebe! Bebe. Rapido!*" I didn't know Spanish, but I was pretty sure the kid wanted me to come quick and see a baby.

A sweet song drifted out the window, and the baby stopped crying. I noticed a boy sitting under the oak tree, the only source of shade in the housing area. He had a bloody rag on his foot, but his good foot tapped to the tune of the Mexican baby song.



I don't know what came over me, other than the commitment to finish my adventure, but I stood up, ran right down the hill, joined their circle and pretended I knew how to dance.

The group of children led me to the windowsill. My throat constricted in terror and my heart beat to the chant: Janice Mason is twenty-one days missing. I pushed down the fear from my throat to my stomach and looked through the open window where the pane of glass should have been.

White sheets soaked in a corner bucket and the water in the bucket looked pink. A grandma-like woman combed the hair of the mother who lay on a low cot caressing her baby. Five or six other women sat on the floor in rapt attention, focused on the young woman and her child. They sang a lullaby in unison. I wished I could understand the words. The tiny infant nursed on its mother's breast. The only mother I'd seen nurse had put a blanket over her chest, and I couldn't see the baby or the breast. This new kid looked like it belonged, still connected to its mom.

I felt a tug on the back of my belt where I'd put the box of Girl Scout cookies. The smallest child looked at the picture of the vanilla sandwich cookie printed on the box. Twelve icing-filled treats filled the package—that meant two for each of us and some left over. I split them up.

The boy leaning on the trunk of the tree eased his way to his feet and limped across the dirt yard to join us. Pointing at himself, he said “Juan.” I handed him the rest of the cookies in the box.

When I pronounced my name they said it back. “Peb-lito.”

The littlest Mexican kid ran to the window and pointed, “Inez. Bebe Inez.” Together we chanted Inez’s name like it was her first day of school and the teacher wanted to know if she was present.

By the time we played hide ‘n seek and learned each other’s names it was almost dark and, just like the weatherman said, it got cold. The kids followed me up the hill to say goodbye. Across the orchards, Mexican workers lit the oil-burning smudge pots. Tall, cylindrical, rusted metal tubes three feet high were lined up between each pear tree. Once, Dad had shown me the tar-like oil in the bottom of a smudge pot. He ignited it with a match, and I was able to see the glowing ball of fire turn to hazy black smoke that sailed out of the pot. I stepped back from the uncomfortable warmth the smudge created.

But there were hundreds of pots in the orchards tonight, smelling like fresh tar on a road. The chimney-shaped containers burped a bit, then puffed gray smoke and flamed with a small fireball that glowed from inside the thin canisters. We giggled as, one after another, the small bursts of fire lit up the hillside and seemed to celebrate Inez’s new birthday like hundreds of birthday candles lighting up the orchard. Every birthday since my fifth, my stomach felt the good kind of

excited while I waited for family and friends to come and celebrate. I felt that way tonight.

After a few minutes, the flames turned to a glow and a dark smudgy fog poured out, warming the air and keeping the pears from freezing.

Charlie had lied for me. He had entered my room just after I'd snuck home from the orchards. It was Dad's first night home after a week working in the woods. "Mom and Dad haven't seen each other in a week and could care less if you were spending the night with Stella." Because of Charlie's quick thinking Nadine and Dad thought I was tucked away safely at a friend's while I was really watching the smudge pot birthday candles in the freezing cold of nighttime in the orchards.

The next morning I walked in the kitchen and watched as Nadine examined my muddy tennis shoes. I asked if we could take bread and blankets to the trash shacks. She said she'd never seen those houses. How did I know where they were? She said, "They're transients. They'll be gone in a month anyway." Then she stopped peeling potatoes and turned from the sink to face me. "I don't want you up there with those people, Pebble, but I think it is real nice that you want to do it—give them something."

I looked hard at her, studying her face. "Please, Mom."

"No. Not a good idea. Maybe next year." She turned back to the sink and the steady rhythm of the potato peeler nibbled away at the spud skins while I

picked at my nails. I wondered if the Mexican mama had diapers for the baby and if she was wrapped in a man's short-sleeved dress shirt. Did the baby have a blanket? Even when it was ninety-five degrees in the daytime it still got cold at night. I worried for baby Inez. The boarded up experiment station, with its peeling green paint, was a better place to live than the little sheds where the transients stayed. I made a plan to sneak out at midnight.

Up in the dark sky, the moon shone bigger than any August night I could remember. It looked like the color of peach fuzz. No smudge pots were cranked up, and the temperature was resting in the high fifties. Plenty of light spilled down from the sky, so I rode my bike and didn't bother throwing it across the ditch because it was late, and no one would be driving on the road at night anyway.

I jumped the ditch and made it across without my feet getting wet. I ran past the patches of rotting pears, smelling the fermentation of the decaying fruit. I hurried up the hill. My spine began to prickle as I convinced myself I was not alone in the orchard. My mind etched a picture of Janice Mason's killer in my imagination. He was brown-skinned. My feet found their way, sneaking down the slope to the collection of houses.

The porch creaked as I placed one foot after the other on the steps of the shack where I knew baby Inez lay sleeping. The crickets seemed like they were performing for the shadows, and the bull frogs joined in, intermittently adding their

croaks to the moonlight chorus. Their music almost drowned out the snores of the Mexicans that slept inside the house. I wondered why all the noise didn't wake up the baby. I left my favorite ratty yellow baby blanket folded neatly by the door and on top of it I laid my doll with the stuck-open eyes. The snoring stopped for several seconds and I held my breath. When the sound began again, I slipped back up the hill and headed for the ditch.

I galloped in a dead run and didn't slow down. The pear trees looked violent in the shadows, stretching out their powerful limbs, just missing my arms. I escaped their clutching fingers and leapt over the creek, outrunning Janice Mason's killer and leaving behind the unidentified threats in the pear orchards of Experiment Station Road.

Mom watched my every move for the next month. She suspected something, I was sure. Finally, one day late in August, she went to a wedding shower with the cross-town ladies and left Charlie at home to watch me. He worked on his bike in the garage where the cement kept the room cool, and he didn't even notice when I snuck off to visit Baby Inez and Juan and the other kids. The irrigation creek had dried up to a trickle and there wasn't any mud. The summer sun had scorched away the moisture.

I didn't peek through the grass this time but charged down the hill and straight up the porch steps. The door was open to the shack and everything was

quiet. “Hello?” No one answered so I stepped inside. The room was empty. I ran down the steps and looked in the yard. No old Fords, no kids, no men sitting around the fruit crates playing cards. No giggles, no baby crying, no smell of beans and no stacks of pears gathered from the ground the day before. They were gone. Mom told me they would leave.

September came and I did a science experiment about pears and went to Girl Scout camp on the weekend. A box in my room overflowed with used toys that I’d collected. I knew next summer Inez would be old enough to use them.

November brought the fog. It caused school to be cancelled, weddings to be delayed, and accidents to take lives. Walking in the fog worked best for me in the daytime. It seemed quite dangerous, surrounded by the cloudlike white that prevented me from seeing anything. I memorized how many steps it was to the orchard and listened to the cars driving slowly by on the highway, but I couldn’t see a thing but white. Fog in November reminded me of the smudge in March. Both kept me from seeing the orchards on the side of our house. I guess smudge was scary too. I’d wake up most mornings from March through May with thick black soot in my nose, a scratchy throat, and red eyes. I wondered if the Mexicans were picking fruit in a place where there was no fog or smudge--a part of the country with sun.

In late May I saw the transients coming into town when Mom parked the car at the Piggly Wiggly grocery store. Two broken down pick-up trucks, with more rust than paint, led the way with the truck beds full of Mexican families coming for the summer to pick pears--the men in straw hats; the women with scarves around their faces to keep away the dust; and the little kids in dusty men's dress shirts, their hair freshly cut in the shape of a pot. I wanted to follow them to see if these were the families that would live in the shacks through our orchards, but we needed to shop.

Nadine handed me a list and said, "You need to help. Meet me back here by the check-out in fifteen minutes with your items. And Pebble—stay away from the pickers."

I found everything on my list, met up with Nadine, and we stepped up to the checkout counter. I liked checking the groceries out. The castle I arranged out of a pound of butter, two cans of baked beans and a package of hotdogs traveled down the black rubber conveyor belt. I always tried to build something before the clerk took the top item, wrecked the castle, and punched in the price on the groceries.

A Mexican woman was in line before us, and she had a toddler on her hip. The baby patted the counter while her mother paid, and I mimed faces at the baby to make her laugh. When it was our turn to check out, Nadine put her clean handkerchief between her hand and the counter on the spot the baby had touched. I grabbed her hand away, letting the handkerchief fall to the floor. The grocery

clerk kept checking, and Nadine seemed embarrassed. She looked me in the eyes and said, “Sorry, habit.”

We left the store, and a big box stood empty on the sidewalk. A sign said *Food Drive For Mexican Children*. After we passed the box, Nadine stopped and took the two cans of baked beans out of our sack. She handed them to me, and I just stared at her. “Pebble, I know you always like to help.” I took the cans and placed them at the bottom of the empty box and promised to thank her later.

After putting the groceries away, Nadine called Aunt Linda. I slipped a note to her by the phone. “Going to see Stella.” She nodded in approval. A year had passed, and Janice Mason’s disappearance had faded to a memory that made my life easier

It was no surprise that the trash shacks looked the same as last year. The Mexicans tried their best to understand me when I showed up and asked about Inez. But, I could only fold my arms like I held a baby and repeat her name. It seemed Inez was not there.

Four kids were squatting in a long strip of dirt in front of the houses. Some younger children, a grandma and a couple of men looked familiar, and I recognized Juan from last year. He walked with a slight limp and had grown taller over the months. Almost taller than me. “*Baby Inez?*” Juan just shrugged his shoulders like he didn’t know.



He held a stick with a pointy end and drew in the dirt. When he finished he passed the stick to the next kid. I crossed to the group and kneeled down to look at the picture. It seemed to be a river. The kid with the stick added a house on the bank of the river and then an anxious little girl took over and sketched in a tree. She handed the stick to me. I added a funny-shaped pear hanging on the branch. It didn't really look like a pear but everyone knew what it was, and they all pointed to the hill that led to the orchard. We laughed. I passed the stick to a boy about four who, with shaky hands, added another pear about the size of a cantaloupe. The smallest child drew a final pear shaped like a crabapple.

By the time the afternoon faded, a mural extended from one end of the row of shacks to the other. Already, at one end of the long dirt picture, two toddlers scooted around on their rears and erased the artwork. I smelled beans cooking and thought the smell must have been coming from inside one of the sheds. Kids started disappearing, and I figured supper was on, so I headed home. The used matchbox cars that I collected and added to the other toys, in the container in my room, waited in a pile, and I thought I might bring the toys tomorrow to the kids.

The hill on the road home seemed extra steep, so I climbed off my bike to take a breather under the tree. My favorite oak made shade by the irrigation ditch, some dry branches fallen and scattered in the brown grass. I hoped lightening wouldn't strike here in the middle of an August thunderstorm. My bike rested on its kickstand, but I couldn't stay still. Every oak branch looked to me like the

perfect drawing stick for making pictures with the Mexican kids. I collected. Deciding the best size—checking out the ends for the right kind of points—stacking the chosen sticks together. Maybe I'd bring the box of toys and matchbox cars on another day. After all, there were pictures to be drawn and friends to be made. Tomorrow, these sticks would keep us busy.

## NOSOTRAS, LAS ABUELAS

We, the grandmothers, *nosotras, las abuelas*, packed the trucks after dinner. The late May sun stayed in the sky longer than other spring months, and we needed the light to make our trip to the orchards of Oregon. Last summer, in the year of 1961, the orchard manager had promised us work for the summer to come. But then we were a full family of workers, and now our numbers are down by one. If we arrive at the orchards first, we will show the manager that, even without Juan, we are the hardest workers.

We never liked the unexpected announcement. “We leave tomorrow.” The men made the decision that sent us scurrying to do the packing. We worried about collecting all of our possessions, fretted over having room in the truck and tiptoed out of concern for our little children. We whispered to each other, “Let them try to sleep through all the commotion. We can wake them in the morning.” A nervous feeling filled us, yet, we received energy from one another, encouraging each other to accomplish the packing before the dawn broke and the men started the trucks’ engines.

Juan, our favorite of the grandsons, limped to the pickup, opened the door and threw his homemade willow crutch inside the cab, then drove the truck to the center of the clustered wooden sheds that had been our home for two months. He came dangerously close to hitting one of the doors, and we chided him for even

trying to operate the truck. His foot had been bitten hard by the blade of the tractor one week earlier. We scolded, “Get out of that truck or something worse might happen to you!” Of course, he was quick to obey--we were *las abuelas*--but the twinkle in his eyes led us to believe we should keep a close watch on him.

Juan’s uncle, Geraldo, came to the door, half empty whiskey bottle in his hand, to see what the commotion was. He said, “Leave the truck alone. You are already no good to us. You wreck that truck, it will be useless too.” Geraldo turned and staggered back into the shed, shutting the door and leaving Juan standing by the truck looking younger than his fourteen years.

We tried to shift Juan’s concerns back to packing. If he picked pears again we would be thankful, but today must be a useful day for him as well. We asked Juan. “Got the cast iron pan?”

He grabbed his crutch and joked with us. “Even with a crutch I will load the truck faster than the three of you.”

“And we will pack you at the bottom of the truck with the mattresses—and cover you with the little children and the babies.” Juan laughed and we continued the work, winking at one another. We told jokes early in the evening, but by midnight we would be tired, and nothing would be funny.

We had liked having Juan with us during the day. His sense of humor and the stories he told the children kept us laughing and the little ones attentive for hours. Stories or not, injuries meant less money and little food for the family.

Every day after Juan's accident, we had sat together on the porch in the late morning darning socks and mending work clothes, our dry, brittle hands knew how to make the stitches quick and sure. We fumed about the orchard manager—the nerve of ordering a boy, who had never driven before, to drive a tractor! He was too young, and there were plenty of men who knew about tractors.

The Arizona desert opened its arms to the light of the night sky. No mountains interrupted its brilliance, and the heavens smiled on our departure, flooding the trucks with pools of moonlight and beams from far off planets.

On this packing night, the men drank too much, and we saved loading Geraldo's shed for last. We avoided his home until the muffled cries and muted punches haunted us into action. We knocked on his family's door and asked to pack the house. Geraldo's speech slurred, "Come back later." But we stood with Juan and listened to the stifled sobs of his Aunt Consuela.

Juan knocked on the door again. "Uncle Geraldo? We need to be ready for the morning. Please let us in to pack." Juan persisted until the door opened. Geraldo grabbed hold of Juan's shoulders speaking loud and breathing whiskey into the night's air.

Looking right into Juan's eyes, he said, "You women pack and then us men will tie it all on the truck when you are done." He gave Juan's arm a powerful punch before he stumbled off to join the men by the fire.

One by one we passed Consuela with a nod of our heads, a quick exchange of the eyes and a hope that we might comfort her in the morning. Only Juan gently touched her shoulder as he passed. She grabbed his hand for a brief second.

We slowed our pace to take longer in Geraldo's house—twice maybe three times as long. We worked until he slept by the fire, and when we finished the morning light had dawned and it was time to go. Juan helped Consuela to the truck.

We are three families sharing space in two trucks. One, a fine Ford with mostly green paint that runs well. The other, we bought last spring for thirty-five dollars, broken from the time of purchase. But our boys know how to fix trucks. They teach each other, and what they do not know, they figure out together. Juan is good with fixing, and if the men will let him, maybe he will repair the trucks instead of climb the ladders to pick the pears. But knowing how to use tools on vehicles does not make wages. Perhaps, in Oregon, there will be a priest to pray for Juan's foot.

Our teenage boys lifted and planted a mattress on the bottom of one truck bed—the other bed sacks the men hoisted to the roof of the cab and bound them with twine saved from other journeys. The thin rope cut into the beds and they would need stitching at our next camp in Oregon. Two chairs, a stool and a bench were strapped on top of the cab. The next layer—our bundles of clothes--tied securely on the top. If the load did not shift, the belongings would be safe.

The sleepy children huddled in the corner of one empty shed, and at five-thirty we woke them. *Nosotras, las abuelas* directed the seating. Seventeen children's backsides arranged in two trucks, and every little rear-end assigned its place in one truck or the other. Older children usually held the younger, our daughters rocked the babies.

We sat together in the back of the truck bed. *Abuelita Esperanza, Abuelita Luz, and Abuelita Maria*. We held tightly onto our most valuable possessions—the bottle of bleach, the box of *mais* and oil, the jars of water. And the children. At our new home we would unpack in reverse. We always duplicated this procedure, and we liked the sameness and the fitting together of every item to the next, every body to another. Crowded, but it did not bother us.

The orchard's injured sat next to us. Juan and Consuela. Her eye swelled shut, and she kept it covered with her straw work hat that she wore when picking the pears. After Juan's accident, we begged our sons to take us back to the smaller orchards—the ones with no tractors. They said there would be food only if we worked where the tractors ruled. So we kept silent, nursed Juan's foot, and urged him to tell stories until he was well. Juan could not work for the rest of the season. Still, we found ways to make him useful.

We needed to watch Juan's bandage. When blood seeped through, we cleaned the wound and reattached new cloths saved for the trip. We planned to stop for gas at a station by a river so that he might soak his foot. We sang quiet

lullabies to remind our families that the songs traveled with us. The children slept and none of us looked back.

In the cab, later in the day, Geraldo slept while our other sons took turns driving. The radio blared, and we could see their cigarette smoke creep out the open windows and vanish with the wind. The tires rolled with the rhythm of travel, counting the miles with each rotation. The wind blew, caking the sweat on our faces and hands. The children met their sticky palms together in clapping games that brought a lilt of joy to our highway caravan.

We arrived on the coast highway in just over seven hours. The ocean made its presence known with a salty smell and crashing waves. We heard the water even before we rounded a steep-banked curve and saw the sea. Majestic, never-changing waves rolled, and the ocean roared above the road noise, making us a part of its dominion.

The sun beat down directly overhead. Our babies nursed, but the children were stiff and getting hungry. We banged on the window of the cab and pointed to the sky. Our sons knew it was time to eat, but it was our noise that made them stop. A state park with four picnic tables on a hill, not far above the ocean, allowed us to easily prepare the meal and watch the children.

We set the box with our oil and flour on the table and started the preparations for lunch, all the while calling orders to the older children and their



mothers. “Do not go past your ankles in the water. Every seventh wave will be higher. Don’t forget to count. Older watch the younger. Tortillas will be ready soon. Listen for our call.”

The stone fire-pit welcomed the driftwood pieces we collected. Sheltering the sparks from the wind, the circle of rocks made our fire-making easy, and soon the crackling sound signaled us to place the iron skillet on the flame.

The great sea beat a rhythm of steady crashes on the sand and called our sons to siesta. They would not sleep long. We must make good time up the highway to the new orchard jobs, be first in line, waiting for the orchard manager to say, “I remember you. You worked hard last year. You are hired. All of your family is hired.” If we can arrive before others there will be jobs, a place to live and food for the months of picking. We would let the men sleep for an hour but no more. Juan headed for the shade of the trees to rest with the men, but we called him back. He would need to help watch the children.

Enough tortillas covered the plate for both lunch and dinner. Every meal—two tortillas for the men and one for each of the rest of us. We would sneak Juan an extra, hoping his foot would be better soon. The cooking finished, we covered the tortillas with a dishcloth and let the men sleep. The waves teased the children’s toes and splashed their feet, sending salt water up their legs. They squealed in delight, turning away from the waves and outrunning them in victory.

We walked to the beach and grabbed our skirts knee-high. Cooling our feet in the waves turned to play, and we felt like children for a short time, running in the surf, until we heard the babies cry and the men calling us to load the truck.

*Nosotras, las abuelas* gathered everyone together, placing a tortilla in their hands and Juan herded the children in with a promise of a story.

That night we kept driving to make up the time we had lost at the beach. Just after dark the truck hit a rut and the headlights blinked out. The men took turns at the wheel, our truck crawling along in the darkness, on the coast highway. The stars created their own headlights—just enough shine to see the road and highlight the steep embankments. The cliffs waited for our vehicle to hit a loose rock or venture too close to the edge. In the daylight, we had seen the beauty of the rolling Pacific waves, but we had also seen cars lying on the steep slopes between the highway and the sea. Heaps of rusted metal—windows busted out. We tried not to imagine what happened to the passengers, but we knew the cliffs were beautiful graveyards calling those who stared too long at their beauty.

Under the sky's canopy Juan told us stories of Venus and Jupiter—some from his imagination and others from the books he had read at school. A few adventures he told us in English. We knew he could not speak this new language well enough to communicate with strangers, yet we suspected he was the best of storytellers. He convinced his captured audience that his English was perfect, a master when he wove the tales. Juan lulled the children to sleep with a Mayan

prince's journey, and tickets to Incan villages were available just for the listening. In our minds we traveled far beyond our borders.

Our bodies relaxed when the day broke and the road once again became a path to familiar orchards, new jobs, and food for our table.

Our little trucks pulled in to the pear orchards of Oregon. Only a few others arrived before us. Everyone in our family, except the children under six, Juan and *las abuelas*, received a picking job. Before we unloaded any supplies, we brought our bottle of bleach and the buckets from the truck. The 55 gallon water barrels were lined up at the side of our housing row, and we filled our buckets then added bleach. Wetting our cloths, we scrubbed the porches, the walls of the sheds, and the latrine. Each time we dipped our rags in the water with one hand, we would touch a rosary bead around our neck, and together we would pray for Consuela. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus." Then we would squeeze the water from the rags and continue cleaning. Consuela still wore her straw hat, even in the shadowy evening light when the sun sank and the air cooled.

Over the next day, we unpacked our belongings. The windows in our sheds had no panes and the flies were constantly buzzing in and out, making the most of our tortillas. Experience told us that by nightfall they would be quiet but would rise with us each morning.

Juan played with the little ones in the shade of the only tree—an aged oak that sprawled cool shadows over the dirt yard in front of our homes. Quick to his feet, despite his injury, he performed every task we gave him. We raked a large flat area for a garden and rolled the discarded tires from a pile in back of our sheds. Kneeling on the ground, Juan helped arrange the tires in a row. Other children carried water from the barrels and poured the liquid on the dry earth.

When the earth was moist, Juan hollowed out holes for our tomato starts. “We bring Mexico here to the middle of an Oregon pear orchard,” he laughed as he patted the soil around the roots so the plants might take hold and grow. Still, we knew he thought about how many pears he could have picked if his foot had not been injured. The water on the earth smelled like summer rain, but no clouds sailed the sky.

The night before the family went to the orchards to work, we found Juan, under the oak, crying. “Don’t tell my father that I cry and don’t tell my Uncle Geraldo that I am upset,” he begged.

Our answer showed compassion, and we patted his shoulders with our wrinkled hands. “That is what *nosotras, las abuelas* are for—to keep secrets and wipe your tears.” He cried even harder, and we knew the reason. A boy must work to earn money for his family’s food.

“I cannot work.”

We laughed and laughed and put our fingers to our lips quieting ourselves saying, “Shhh. Shhh. Only silent laughing.”

“Why do you laugh at me?”

“You do not know how valuable you are to us, grandson.” We had given this speech many times to others besides Juan. “We labor and toil every day without a man to help us.” Now his tears were easing. “We have prayed our beloved Madonna would let us have a man from the fields. A man such as you.” Juan listened intently. “You answered our prayers.” He smiled then laughed at the idea. “Amen,” we made the sign of the cross to confirm our seriousness.

“Amen.” Juan followed our actions with an appropriate cross of his own.

The next morning rising-time for *las abuelas* came at three-thirty. Our bodies knew the time to wake, but most of us did not sleep anyway, anxious for the first day of work in the orchards.

The heels of our hands beat the breakfast tortillas, waking the men with consistent thuds. The children, we were sure, heard the same sounds but rolled over on their mats and slept until the work hour demanded open eyes and full stomachs.

Today the buds, new and green, ready to split with the white of blossoms, would be thinned by our family and others. *Nosotros, las abuelas* were part of those labors not so many years ago.

\* \* \*

Our husbands had laid the ten foot ladders on the trees. Secured among the branches and leaves, the one-sided ladders did not usually fall. We had climbed all the way up and had thinned from top to bottom. Reaching our hands deep through the branches, we heard the brushing of the leaves on our cheeks, foreheads, necks, arms, hands and fingers. By mid-day we had rolled long-sleeved shirts up past our elbows and the branches scratched our arms.

We did not even need to see the buds, and we felt our way along. They were small and hard and we needed to estimate, leaving every third one. This thinning, the orchard manager said would be a little lie to the fruit trees, convincing them, that because there were less buds, the fruit remaining should grow bigger. He had told us to wash our skin every night with very hot water, as they had sprayed the trees before we started the picking season. There had never been enough water to heat and take the kind of bath he had suggested.

With Juan as an additional worker, we kept a tidy place to live, a healthy vegetable garden and fresh tortillas on the table. One day, Juan organized all the children into the back of the truck, and Consuela was kept home from picking. She drove to the city park where a spigot gushed and water was plentiful. We had run out of water. The managers had filled the barrels every other day, but a problem with a

tractor took much longer to fix than anticipated, and there wasn't time to fill the water barrels.

The children jumped out of the truck, each carrying one container--a tin cup, glass canning jar or empty coke bottle. We left the barrel on the truck bed. Once it was full we knew we could never lift it back onto the truck. So, one by one the children filled their containers, brought them to the truck and dumped the water in the barrel.

Screeches of laughter came from the nearby swimming pool, and we watched Juan cross to the safety fence surrounding it. He stood for a long time, looking. We observed, too, and were sure he noticed there were no brown bodies in the pool. He returned to the children saying, "Did I ever tell you about the giant I met in the Redwood forest?" He whispered his tale just loud enough for the children to hear as their caravan continued from the water spigot to the barrel—back and forth. If they stopped the procession, his stories would pause as well. We went home with a full barrel of water and very tired children.

It was that night that the rashes began—the itching, the stinging—on the back of their necks, in-between their fingers and crawling up their forearms. Anyone who had worked in the orchards, thinning, had the water blisters too. The blisters started as raised bumps and quickly turned to tight white skin, later breaking open into festering sores. "Juan, go to the manager and ask for ointment." We hurried Juan out the door. He used his crutch well, and even with

the dry clods of dirt in his way, he did not stumble. The children cried, but the men only scratched and winced when they thought we were not looking.

We took all the clothes and boiled them on the outdoor cook-stove. Then we washed down the children who had worked that day, and dabbed their arms with salve from the one small tube the orchard manager had sent back with Juan. The ointment was gone before we reached the men. The nights cooled off and we passed around the quilts when dusk arrived--covering dreams and pronouncing the blessings of *abuelitas* who had come before us

Morning came early, and the clothes were not dry. Grumbles and groans all around while dressing. From then on we could not wash the clothing every night. No one likes working in wet pants and shirts. The rashes did not go away, and we commissioned Juan to see if the clinic in the town, just five blocks away, would issue ointment. Sometimes he came home with nothing, and on those nights it took longer for the children who had worked in the orchards to go to sleep. They would drift into dreams, almost restful, then jerk awake with little whimpers in their voices. We would never sleep ourselves until deep slumber came over them. There was only two weeks left of thinning. After that there would be less contact with poison on the trees. We would wait it out. And so we sang to the children. The quiet melodies and the peaceful lullabies.

On Saturday night of payday, the men bought a bottle of whiskey. It did not take them long to get loud and liquored. We watched Consuela twist and pull her



long black braid, and there was a shake in her hands when she dried the dishes from dinner.

Crimson ribbons of sky lay over the horizon, and when the children and the men were in bed, we joined Juan under the oak tree to watch the sky fade to midnight blue. We enjoyed the star-spattered heavens until a groan sounded from Geraldo's house. Then muffled blows of fist on flesh were punctuated by slaps interrupting the silence. We said nothing.

Juan limped from the oak to cook stove and back again. Such a big worry for a young boy. Stacked on an upright pear crate our nightly dishes sat—clean and ready for the morning. Juan grabbed two spoons and started singing our children's lullabies. The spoons, one in each hand, he clicked together, tapping out ringing rhythms on the metal. He crossed to Geraldo's shed and stood facing the door, singing. The beating continued. We picked up our own spoons and stood beside Juan, singing the songs with him, clicking our silverware into the night. Soon the house was quiet.

The next day, Geraldo was angry, and we kept Juan away from his uncle and busy with the garden. Every Saturday, when the liquor came out, so did our lullabies—so did our spoons. During the week when we walked to the orchards to bring the workers their lunches, we would hum the little tune every time we passed near Geraldo.

We sang and clicked all through the summer and finally, in August, on a hot afternoon, Geraldo leaped off the ladder and lunged at us like a madman. We put ourselves in front of Juan, and Geraldo charged into our group, sending us into a heap on the ground. Even from the pile we sang and clicked our spoons and several of our sons came and stood by us, staring at Geraldo. He left and took the fine Ford with him.

We took care of Consuela, nursed her bruises to health and cleaned her wounds each day. In two weeks, she didn't have to wear the straw hat in the evenings anymore.

One week after Geraldo had packed we sat, at dusk, by the fire. The children tried to play by the oak tree but stinging mosquitoes herded them fireside with us. Juan had missed dinner and our brows furrowed with worry until we saw him limping towards us on the road from town.

His left fingers wrapped around the top of a brown bag and, at the same time, the handhold of his crutch. Across the dirt play yard he came, and before we knew what was in the package he carried we said many times, "Where were you? We worried. What is in the bag?"

He did not answer but made his way to the edge of the fire where the men told stories. He smiled and drew us into his tale. "I said to myself, 'my family must have ointment—more than a tube—to sooth the blisters from the orchard poisons.'" Juan handed the sack to his younger cousin who sat on a rock, holding

the bag, eyes fixed on Juan, waiting for the next part of the story. At first, the men would not listen but the mention of the blisters got their attention. Their faces were hard without expression.

Juan continued. “An Anglo priest understood our language and thought I spoke remarkable English.” The children groaned, having listened to Juan’s English before. “He had heard the stories of the orchard’s poison on our skin. He argued with the nurse at the clinic about the salve and she handed me two tubes, instead of one.” We all complained, knowing that two tubes were not enough—not even for one day. “The priest came over to me, and his back was to the nurse so she could not see his face. He asked if I could tell a story to the nurse about how bad the blisters were. And then he whispered, ‘A *long* story.’ He winked at me and the nurse came over to take notes in her record book. I explained what the blisters looked like—on papa’s neck, and Consuela’s arms—on Fernando’s face and Brother George’s fingers. Each time I mentioned a name and a blister she took her notes. All the while, the priest opened a cupboard behind the counter, pulled out a big jar of salve. I could see him, but the nurse could not. She looked at me and listened to my answers—writing, writing. He opened the jar and held it up for me to see. It looked just like the ointment in the tube. He put it in a brown sack—this jar filled to the very top.” Juan pointed to the bag and his cousin held it high.

“I finished my list of relatives and the nurse closed her book. ‘We must make an appointment for your family,’” she said in Spanish. “Ask them when they can come in.” She left down the hallway of the clinic.

The priest handed the package to me. ‘*Gracias,*’ I said, and he said, ‘*De nada,*’ and then rushed me out the door.”

*Nosotras, las abuelas,* clapped and praised Juan for his success, and the children danced around chasing the mosquitoes. The men went back to their stories, but just after dark, as they headed, one by one, to their sheds, they looked Juan in the face and nodded. We watched Juan’s father’s face. He was the last to leave, and he opened his lips in a half-smile just before he said, “*Buenos Noche.*” .

The next day Juan held his head high and worked hard for us, carrying water to the stove and collecting broken branches for the fire. We knew his foot would heal and by next season he would go back to the pear trees. He would pick again and help feed our families. He would be proud of his work and the long hours, and at the end of the day he would tell tales with the men by the fire. We would be glad that Geraldo’s stories were gone and rejoice that Juan had new ones to tell. And when the day’s light disappeared, we would bring the ointment jar to Juan’s shed and rub the salve on his neck and arms. Then, we would sleep. Morning would come early, and we would be ready.

## TAKE A SEAT

Charlie sat in the back seat of the 1966 Rambler station wagon and ate a pear. The Rogue River Valley absorbed heat in the summer. The mountains trapped the sun rays and they radiated enough warmth to grow all sorts of things, especially pears. The hot breeze whipped in all the open windows, blasting Charlie from every side. Shopping for the ingredients to make pear-ginger marmalade—not a Friday morning Charlie had planned. His mother had forced the schedule on him and his sister, Ellen. Seventeen was too old to shop with a mother and way too old for him to get stuck making marmalade in the Merrill family kitchen. Charlie hoped his dad would put a stop to this.

They pulled over on the way out of town at Ted's Barber Shop to pick up Charlie's dad. Three Mexican men and a teenage boy sat on the porch by the candy-striped pole, waiting their turn. By mid-May the transient workers, in their beat-up pickups and dilapidated cars, rolled into the valley to pick, but they rarely came into town from the orchards. While school would start in a week and picking season would be over, Charlie still hadn't been able to find his friend, Juan Gomez. Had Juan returned with his family to work the orchards for the summer? With football practice almost every day, Charlie hadn't had much time to look for Juan.

The Rambler idled, and Charlie became impatient. "Mom—I got football practice at three."

“It’s only noon, Charlie. There’s plenty of time for football—and marmalade.”

Ellen mimed a laugh. Charlie knew at fifteen and a half she was ready to give up the marmalade activities as well and would be upset if Charlie were excused from his duty while she had to fulfill hers.

Through the shop’s picture window Charlie could see everyone from the waist up. One barber had a John Lennon haircut and buzzed Charlie’s dad’s head as he sat in a chair. Another barber lounged in the second customer seat, drinking coffee from a white clunky mug. On the porch, the older Mexican man rubbed his palms together, massaging joints as if it were the dead of winter, while the other man silently whittled the branch of a poplar tree. A yo-yo traveled up and down from the hand of the Mexican teenager to just above the plank porch.

The barber whipped the bib-like plastic off his father’s chest with the flare of a bullfighter. Mr. Merrill opened his wallet, paid the barber and joined his family in the Rambler. As if on cue, when the car door shut, the three Mexicans entered the shop. Charlie thought back to two years ago when he’d invited Juan to come to The Bulldog.

When The Bulldog first opened, it took awhile for the high school kids to want to eat there or even call it their hangout. The menu named every burger and delicacy offered to the public with a bulldog reference. And, even though the Hayford High

School mascot was a scowling-faced bulldog, “Rare Bulldog Half-Pounder” and “Bulldog Pie” took a bit of getting used to. The hang-out was accessible during lunch-time, and any qualified upperclassman could scramble for the eight or so seats that lined the counter or grab one of the booths that hugged the walls. The football team was granted the open seats out of respect, or possibly fear. They were pretty big players.

His father had forbidden Charlie to play football his freshman year. Even though the JV team required fewer practices, his dad said he’d wanted his son to learn the value of steady work before he learned to run plays for the Hayford Bulldogs. Yet Charlie had still visited The Bulldog. He never went alone though. The senior football players were intimidating to a lone freshmen, but if he came in with someone—anyone really—the athletes would ignore him.

Charlie had always dreamed of a varsity jersey, the cold fall nights, the lit-up field, and the screaming cheerleaders. So whenever he entered The Bulldog, he was electrified by the sight of his school colors splashed across the red vinyl booths and the black and white linoleum. The school slogan—*Keep the Bite in Bulldog*—etched in the mini-juke-boxes on each table enticed him to save his quarters so he could choose six Top-40 songs to play back-to-back. In his final year of high school football he depended on the freshmen to load the jukebox, but two years ago it was Charlie and Juan who played the tunes.

The day Charlie took Juan to The Bulldog, he felt like a varsity player. Proud that he knew the ropes, he sauntered in and selected his favorite booth. He and Juan settled opposite each other then punched the buttons for the run of songs—Charlie pushing one and Juan selecting the next. Just as Charlie punched the fifth song, three huge linebackers abandoned their table and crowded in a semi-circle around Juan and Charlie's booth.

Charlie should have known not to take a Mexican into his hang-out. While the population of Hayford increased in the summer by a fifth, most of the time the transient Mexicans remained invisible. He just hadn't thought, but then in his head he listed off all the places he had been that summer: the A&W Root Beer drive-in, the bike repair shop on Grape Street, the Cedar Public Swimming Pool. He'd never seen a Mexican at any of them. He couldn't remember one brown body, one chestnut-colored face, and not even one word of Spanish. Charlie felt six years old, embarrassed and scared.

He slid to the edge of the seat, just wanting to leave, but the varsity boys blocked his retreat. The one with the *Coors* logo on his tank top, Charlie recognized as Timothy Hubbard, # 48. Hubbard said, "Brown boys don't like that kind of music, kid. What were you thinking? Play a little mariachi, why don't you. They like that." The ugly smirk on Timothy's face convinced Charlie he and Juan needed to go.



“We want to leave.” Charlie started to rise, and Timothy retreated just far enough to let Charlie stand. The first-string’s bulk pressed against Charlie, and he felt the football biceps threatening his own puny arms. The beefy player reeked of two all-beef patties, special sauce. Charlie quickly darted under the armpit of #48. As the football stars swung around to look at Charlie heading for the door, Juan jetted out the other side of the pack and rocketed, right behind Charlie, out the exit.

They hadn’t stop running until they reached the corner of Main and Stewart, four blocks away. They sat on the steps of the closed shoe-repair shop, sucking in as much air as possible, gulp after gulp, and laughing, proud of their escape. The laughter gradually petered out. For a long time Charlie hadn’t looked Juan’s way, and when he finally did, neither had spoken. Juan had gained the English skills to discuss this with Charlie, but neither one had a word to say. Not then. Not ever.

After Charlie’s dad closed the car door and Charlie’s mom commented on the quality of his haircut, things didn’t stay quiet long. Ellen reminded their dad about the promise Charlie had made to get help with the yard chores. He knuckled her leg and as Ellen howled, their dad asked over his shoulder, “Charlie, you find me a couple of your friends to help with the yard work yet?”

Charlie sent Ellen a look and whispered, “Had to bring it up again.”

She was even quieter. “You told him you’d get your football buddies to help.”

Mr. Merrill paid well, 75 cents an hour, but Charlie preferred picking pears for Crestview Orchards from five in the morning until nine, varsity football practice in the afternoon and hanging out at The Bulldog after dinner. Mr. Merrill had always said as long as Charlie was up at five and worked in the orchards that he was released from yard-work chores. But Charlie was still responsible for finding a helper. He cringed as his dad turned around from the front seat and said, “Well?”

“I’ll find someone for next Saturday, Dad.”

“No. Before the weekend is over—and I head out for work on Monday—I want a worker, maybe two.”

Charlie’s mother chirped in. “I know he’ll find you one, George. He’ll be home most of today making marmalade with Ellen and me.”

“Marmalade?” Their father’s laugh filled the car, and Ellen made sure she joined in the joke. “Ain’t it about time the boy stopped making marmalade, Nadine? He’s working, got football practice—good God, he’s going to graduate in the spring.”

“This is the last year I’ll ask. Just a couple hours—that’s all. We’ve had so many good times in the kitchen.” Charlie heard his mom’s teary voice and knew that her sentimental plea meant prison time for him slaving over the stove.

Somewhere around the same time every year, Charlie’s mom would get out the recipe box and flip through the cards until she came to the one entitled “Pear-

Ginger Marmalade.” Charlie wondered why she ever bothered to take the recipe box off the shelf. She knew the ingredients by heart, as did Charlie and Ellen, and she liked to create memories. This was one of the rituals she used to enlarge her collection of mental snapshots. Well, they’d be home soon and then it was—two hours and counting—soon she’d be making memories without him while he went to football practice. He couldn’t wait.

Later that morning, Charlie and Ellen scrambled to the orchards to collect the freshly fallen fruit. The pickers rose early and were out on the ladders working by 4:30 every morning. Worker’s boots had smashed many of the pears that lay mixed with the dry clumps of dirt between the rows. Often ripe pears were nudged off branches as migrants reached for one pear and brushed against another, sending the fruit to the ground. The fallen pears were the ones Charlie and Ellen were to target.

The ground between the trees was already bare of edible fruit, and Charlie realized immediately someone had been there before them collecting. Usually they could find a sack of pears in a half an hour, but this time only the smashed and molded ones remained.

After fifteen minutes of hunting and no pears in their bag, Ellen hollered, “Hey, Charlie, come see who I found.” All he could think of was Janice Mason, the girl who’d graduated from his high school a few years back. Janice had been missing for four years and there was never a lead on her disappearance. He

wondered if Ellen had found her, face down, left to rot in an anonymous row of the orchard. He couldn't wait to see.

Charlie crossed the rows, following his sister's voice. He found her talking to a Mexican kid. Turning to look at Charlie, Ellen said, "Look, it's Juan."

Juan had grown since the previous summer. Last year he had to look up several inches at Charlie. Now, they stood eye to eye. They punched each other in the shoulder with a familiar greeting. Charlie noticed right away, Juan's arms seemed different too. He'd bulked up, and an eagle-like bird with its wings spread in an Aztec design was tattooed on his forearm. Charlie didn't know anyone but his father that had a tattoo.

"*Hola.*" Charlie's Spanish had not improved, but he quickly realized from Juan's simple but precise sentences that he had been practicing his English.

"You can have these pears." He held a brown grocery bag out to Charlie. "I can get more for *Abuela.*"

Ellen started to refuse the bag, but Charlie cut her off, taking the sack from Juan. "You'd better get more. If I know your grandmother, she'll be hot if you don't bring home what you promised." He smiled at Juan. It didn't seem like a year since they'd last spoken.

"I'll give you the pears in trade for...a bottle of that...ginger..."

Ellen finished his sentence, "Liqueur?" She turned for home and Charlie knew she'd made the connection. If Ellen went home, she would tattle and their

mom would know that Charlie had made off with her bottle last year. He caught Ellen's arm and insisted she stay.

"Mom's got three bottles of that stuff and two are half empty. I have a plan and you can come," Charlie said to Ellen. He took the bag from Juan. Ellen handed Juan her empty sack.

*"Hasta luego, senorita. No habla Engles."* He did speak English. Why would Juan joke like that with Ellen?

Ellen smiled, not a kid-sister smile but a smile that took its time and captured Juan's attention. "Liar," she said.

Juan smiled back. "You're right. I practiced."

Charlie didn't like this, and now he pushed Ellen in the direction of home, calling over his shoulder to Juan. "Meet me here, in the orchards, tonight at eleven."

"Yes, tonight. Glad to see you both."

Charlie stopped and turned to face Juan. "Yeah, picking season's almost over. Didn't think I'd get to see you this year." Juan and Ellen raced for home.

By the time Charlie and Ellen had washed the pears and settled at the kitchen table there was only an hour left of Charlie's work commitment. Then Ellen would be stuck with his mom, the pears and the stew pot. "Charlie, divide the pears in half and cut the cores out." Charlie and Ellen's mom said, "Ellen—you know how to do the rest—peel them—six even slices per pear. I'll put them in

the stew pot and add the liqueur.” Ellen stifled a laugh, and Charlie bashed her leg under the table. His mom was always the one who added the syrupy ginger alcohol to the pot. Even though the recipe called for only four tablespoons, the level of the liqueur in the bottle went down considerably during the course of the marmalade morning. His mom never fixed supper on the days they made marmalade, and Charlie knew that if she felt tipsy by late morning, it might be easy to pour off some liqueur into a coke bottle. She would never miss it. Later, Charlie skimmed off the goods.

The orchard sprinklers were turned on every night at 11:30 by the manager and three Mexican workers. They only had to deal with the spigots at certain key points in the orchard, and no one ever came near the old boarded-up experiment station where Charlie and Juan had been sitting on the porch for well over an hour, sipping ginger liqueur. They would be reasonably safe there. The station that had been used for research on the orchard pears had been abandoned well over a decade ago.

Charlie was not accustomed to sipping anything, but the drink was so sickly-sweet it was the only way to get it down. Charlie burped, “Did it hurt?”

Juan howled in mock pain, rubbing his eagle tattoo. “Hurt? Pain was terrible. Five of us on the same night--my father, my uncle, and two brothers. I

went last. Not one of us ever screamed.” He displayed the tattoo for Charlie.

“Farmworker’s sign.”

“Cesar Chavez?”

“*Si*—Chavez sign.”

The two heard Ellen coming before they saw her—crunching through the gravel on the road. “Quiet down. I could hear you a block away,” she cautioned. Her warning was intended for both boys but Charlie noticed she only looked at Juan who stared back for what Charlie thought was way too long. Before he could interrupt their locked eyes, the sprinklers erupted into action. Charlie realized it was later than he thought. It took five minutes to get home and curfew was at midnight. There was just enough time.

Charlie striped down to his skivvies. “Let’s run the perimeter,” he said and sprinted down the nearest orchard row, carelessly leaving Juan to strip in front of Ellen. Soon both boys were racing from tree to tree, trying to avoid the spraying sprinkler. With ginger-clouded judgment, they were doused continually with icy water. Uncontrolled laughter sailed through the orchard.

Charlie saw Ellen scrambling up a tree a few rows away. She stopped on a branch, frantically pointing to a beam of light weaving through the rows. The orchard manager was hunting for the source of raucous screeches. While Charlie hustled up a trunk and peered through the branches, Juan climbed up the same tree after Ellen. Charlie sighed with relief, glad they were all out of sight, but

continued to peek through the pear leaves. He struggled to catch a glimpse of Juan and Ellen hiding in the tree.

Silent, the three waited until the sound of the manager's boots faded, and the beam of his flashlight disappeared. At the bottom of the tree, dripping wet, the boys quickly dressed and said their good-byes until next year. "Maybe I'll see you before you leave. You coming back?" Charlie asked.

"Maybe we will stay."

"That'd be good." He broke apart Juan and Ellen's hands, clasped in a farewell handshake. He shook Juan's hand and wondered if it was the dream of every migrant family to stay. Charlie guessed Juan's family would never stay. They'd be leaving to find a place where the fruit still grew and pickers were being hired. Charlie considered the possibility of Juan returning next summer. A year from now Charlie might be working somewhere else to earn money for college, and if that door didn't open, then he suspected Uncle Sam would open another one for him.

School began and Charlie liked Mr. Beckett's ancient history class so much he took it a second time. The administration urged Charlie to make that choice.

College admission would be difficult with an F in the history, so hopefully, this year would be better.



Charlie wasn't the only senior repeating ancient history. There were three more in Beckett's class, all Bulldogs, and they were the ones Beckett overlooked the rules for. They needed to graduate and this was their last shot at history.

Beckett's class start-time hedged to ten after the hour for the boys, and the teacher never disturbed the ones nodding off, offering make-up sessions to study for exams.

Some of these older boys worked for the orchards when the migrants were gone and still needed to pick from 5:00 to 8:00 every morning. Exhausted from the previous night's football practice or game and the early morning orchard work, ancient history came way too early. But it had its appeal.

On the first day of school, Ellen was already at her desk by the time Charlie arrived. She sat in the second seat from the front in a middle row, while Charlie's regular seat was in the back corner with the other players. He successfully ignored Ellen. This morning his mind refused to focus on Mesopotamia. He concentrated on making room in his day to hook-up with Juan—one last time. Juan's family would be packing to return to Mexico any day.

Pennington, the quarterback, finally gave in to exhaustion and let his head slump on his folded arms in front of him. Charlie moved the player's mug off the desk onto his own to avoid a spill. Charlie heard the classroom door open just as he was nodding off. He fought hard to rouse himself and determined not to give into dozing. Mr. Beckett glanced at the back of the room and made a point of

finishing a sentence or two of notes on the overhead. Pen poised for more writing, he glanced up again. “New student?” Charlie tuned around to take a look.

“Juan Gomez, sir.” His white long-sleeved dress shirt and creased black pants looked out of place compared to the blue jeans and T-shirts of other students.

“Well, take a seat.” Mr. Beckett went back to writing notes, and Juan didn’t flinch. He took out a piece of paper from his bag and a pencil from his pants pocket. His eyes drifted to Charlie for a brief second and then straight ahead at the board. There was no desk available in the room.

While Pennington continued to snore, another team member snickered, some outright laughed at the Mexican standing for the class lesson. Most of the students in the room squirmed, but no one said a word. Charlie suspected Juan’s father found a job and they’d be staying through the winter. Why else would Juan come to school? Charlie was embarrassed for Juan. Tension floated through the rows, but was unacknowledged by Mr. Beckett who crossed to his desk, reached for his book and bumped the empty teacher’s chair in the process.

The tension turned to disruption as Ellen stood and grabbed her book bag from the floor. Mr. Beckett stopped in the middle of his comments on the Tigris River and stared at her above the top rim of his glasses. Charlie fought a wave of nausea rising in his throat. He wanted to rush over and make her sit down, especially when all eyes focused on her. She unzipped the backpack and shoved in her pencil and papers from the top of the desk. Then, grabbing her ancient history

book, she stepped over the scattered bags on the floor and made her way to Juan. Ellen looked directly in his eyes and said, “You can have my desk.” Charlie didn’t think Juan would accept, but he did. He nodded at Ellen and crossed to the front of the room, taking Ellen’s seat while she stood in the back of the room leaning on the wall. Simultaneously, he and Ellen readied their papers and pencils and then glared directly at Mr. Beckett’s overhead.

Mr. Beckett looked down at the sentences, adjusted his glasses and said, “You can see--where the Tigris and Euphrates meet—a center for trade developed.” Charlie and all the other students pretended to take notes, except Pennington who roused himself long enough to wipe a dribble of drool from the side of his mouth and return to sleep.

All Charlie could see was the back of Juan’s head, and he wondered what his dad would think if he brought Juan home tonight to help with the yard work. After all, Charlie had made a promise.

## INCOMPLETE DESIGN

She takes his hand, allowing him to guide her out of the taxi. Janice feels herself resisting his insistence to move from curb-side to inside the door. Ned urges, “Come on, you’re not scared are you?”

She says, “Everything here is dirty,” and clutches her oversized bag to her side. He asks the cab driver to wait, and Janice knows he is making sure it is safe inside before he pays the fare. The heat stifles and she struggles to breathe. She doesn’t want to take a breath but fills her lungs out of obligation. Sporadic horns honk and speak for their drivers. The Las Vegas hurricane of casino sounds, traffic and tourist buzz undulate in waves toward Janice even though she is two blocks from the strip. She thinks she hears the voices of The Righteous Brothers coming from the direction of The Sands, but conga rhythms traipse through the lyrics, creating a whirlwind of ambient noise. She wants to hide, but The Side-Trip tattoo parlor doesn’t seem a likely haven.

A purple doorframe provides an entrance to the shop. Janice glances up and down the cluttered street. Eyes from a chaotic mix of prostitutes, vendors, and visitors who’ve wandered off the strip stare impassively, and she is sure the hookers wonder how much Ned is paying her. Janice looks at the front of the building, desperate for a window. No windows. She will search for a back door. An exit.

As she enters the shop, her bare arm brushes against the flakes of peeling paint. They prick her skin and she sees the pale yellow underbelly of the chips. Ned holds her arm tightly and leads her into the shop.

She is swallowed up in the stench of stale cigarettes, and her nostrils sting from the odor of booze. Scotch, bourbon. She is no connoisseur, but the smell is the common one she has learned to recognize as the odor that marks Sin City in 1962.

He whispers in her ear, “Bought us tickets for Sinatra. His hundredth show this year. A landmark show.”

She thinks, “He’s old, Sinatra. Sinatra, Ned—landmarks.” Janice nods and tries to smile.

A Chicano man is lounging on a tattered olive-green couch. The dirty sofa’s cotton guts spill onto the floor through a jagged hole in the upholstery. A faint patchouli smell from a long-gone hippie lingers. She tries to guess the color of the walls, but it is difficult to see. From the back of the shop, a shaft of light spills into the waiting room. Two army blankets hanging from a clothesline divide the room in two. There is only enough light for Janice to call the walls dirty.

Ned calls out, “Hey, here’s two twenties on the counter. Just to remind you this lady has a reservation.” She wishes she had never opened the apartment door to him this morning. She desires Ned to be her protector but has never desired

him. And together the two dissonant voices scream inside her simultaneously, “Help me,” and “Get away.” They fight for control, and Janice’s head spins.

From the back a man yells, “Yeah. Just about done. Take a seat.”

Ned looks at Janice and gives her a kiss. Not a quick lip-service on the cheek but a long indication that he’s not going anywhere. She concentrates and stops the nausea from rising. She wants to ask, “What are your daughters doing? Playing tennis? Screwing boys? Do you know?”

Susan and Elaine came into the government agriculture office to see their father, the manager, Ned Alfred. Janice had only been working there a month. She knew he had two daughters from the pictures on his office wall. “Is Dad here?” Susan asked the question.

“Hi, I’m Janice. I’ll go see.” Before she’d graduated, Janice had seen these girls at school. There were hundreds just like them—full of adolescent gossip and quick judgmental tongues. Those types always had plenty to say about her. The door to Ned’s office was across the room, and Janice made her way towards it. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled, and she was sure the girls were sizing her up. Eyes traveling from her legs, searing the length of her short skirt and resting on her bleached hair. Janice turned and said, “Don’t you two ladies have skirts like this?”

The girls ogled. “Sorry,” Janice told them, “you’re probably still in high school. I remember what it was like to have Miss Simpson in Home Ec. measure from the floor to the middle of my knee.” She abruptly entered Ned’s office and could hear the girls snickering from behind. Jealous. Janice was sure.

Later, after his daughters had left, Janice thought Ned was trying to be subtle. “Janice, my daughters are just a few years younger than you. They look up to you.” She stared at him and thought he looked a bit intimidated. Perhaps he expected her to excuse herself. “I’m just thinking about the length of your skirt. A little short?”

Janice continued her gaze without faltering. “A little *too* short,” Ned said. He looked down at the floor and headed back to his office.

“Mr. Alfred? Don’t you like my skirt?” Her voice challenged him. Twisting back in her direction, he stared at her but gave no answer. After that, there were many times she turned to find him looking at her. She sensed he no longer compared her to his daughters.

Ned leaves to pay the cab fare. Janice stands in the middle of the small tattoo parlor. A Chicano man swings his feet off the sofa and makes a place for her to sit. She is relieved for a chance to kick off her stilettos and hopes he doesn’t look at her. “*Hola,*” he says.

Janice nods in response to his brief greeting. The tattoo on his forearm flexes, and Janice is nervous that she might be the cause of the bulging movement. He holds his arm up to give her a closer look at the indigo blue design displayed on the backdrop of his brown skin. Janice recognizes the eagle with its wings spread open, its feathers tattooed in an Aztec style. She has seen the farmworker's emblem in the newspaper when Cesar Chavez came to Vegas and caused a stir with demonstrations for the rights of migrants.

She relaxes and is sure he is just trying to make her feel less nervous. She opens the top of her bag and feels inside. Like a blind person comfortable in familiar surroundings, she navigates with her fingers and locates a magazine picture placed in a side pocket. It is next to a neatly folded piece of paper containing the phone number for Ned's wife. Janice will use it if she needs to. She knows a daisy in a deodorant ad torn from the pages of *Ladies Home Journal*-- will not be missed by the *Vegas Doo* stylists. Ned paid for her hair color the first weekend they'd come to Vegas. It has been two and a half months and three visits from Ned since she visited the *Doo*, and she is long past time for another dye-job.

She holds the daisy up for the Chicano man to see. He nods his head, pointing to his forearm then to his bicep, and finally to his leg. Janice folds the picture, embarrassed to point to the area that Ned has selected for the tattoo. She can see the tattoo artist's hand through the crack in the curtain and thinks there must be a back door just past the pair of army blankets. A loosened sofa spring



uncoils itself on the back of her leg. She shifts positions. Janice knows how to sit still and wait her turn.

Elaborate tales of Middle East adventures had filled Janice's father's repertoire of anecdotes from his days in the Merchant Marines. He had set their four dining room chairs, audience fashion, in a row, with reserved seats for Janice, her mother and younger brother. Father would make a grand entrance from the bedroom and with a stunning bow say, "That final seat is reserved for anyone passing by who would like to come and hear the stories." Janice wanted to tell her own imagined tales, but Father always said, "Sit still. Your time will come."

One day, when she was six, her mother packed a suitcase for herself and a small duffle bag for her brother. "Why can't I go?" Janice asked again and again.

Her mother sat Janice on her lap and stroked her hair. "Next time, sweet girl. The next trip will be for you and me."

Janice wanted to remember her mother's voice and even more she fought to believe the promise her mother had made. Why had she not been invited? Travel must be easier with one child than with two. Only once had she received a letter since they sped away on the trip. The postmark said San Diego, but the top left corner of the envelope was empty, no return address. The picture inside was a colored photograph of her brother and mother with a note on the back that said,

“Miss you sweet girl.” Janice rocked herself to sleep that night, clutching the photo in her hand and whispering, “Next time. Next time.”

After her mother left, Janice’s father continued to tell his stories and to set up the four audience chairs, but Janice sat alone. He spewed wild, crazy, funny tales filled with characters so easy for her to visualize. A stowaway Jew who bribed her father by swearing he would take his father’s name to the Wailing Wall in prayer just for a guarantee of silence. The *policia* who chased him for three hours in Barcelona—through bars and brothels and Arabian baths. He’d met ambassadors, dined with chancellors, and shared secrets with a prince visiting the port in disguise. Long after his stint with the Merchant Marines, he still traveled. Indeed he traveled to Mac and Junior’s, the bar on Third Street. To the Copper Spike Lounge on Fourth and Bush. The apartment he and Janice shared shrunk, and the ratings on his stories went from G to R within a year.

The counselor at Hayford High tried unsuccessfully to convince Janice of the benefits of college. The SATs had been scheduled, but Janice had never shown up. Janice had always dreamt of winning a trip. She had longed to travel. By the time graduation came, she just wanted out of town.

The army blankets part and out staggers another Chicano from the back room with a navy blue eagle on his bicep. He looks like he might faint, and the waiting buddy offers an arm for support. Janice tries to smile in approval of the new tattoo but

her lip quivers and all the horror stories she's heard of tattoos-gone-wrong play out in her mind in vivid Technicolor.

The men head out to join the night, and Ned returns from paying off the cab. He looks at Janice for a long time, and she wonders what it would have been like to buy a prom dress and date a boy her age. Did Ned pay for Susan and Elaine's prom dresses? Janice thinks of Phyllis, the office manager she had worked with. A nurturing woman in her fifties, she had a kind, robust voice that decorated the office with laughter. Janice is sure that is what her mother's voice used to sound like.

Ned pulls the army blanket aside. "Are you ready for her?" he asks the tattoo artist? A cigarette, with an inch long dangling ash, hangs from the side of the man's mouth. Janice's appointment is about to begin. He swipes the low table with a towel and then wipes his hands with the same cloth. The shelves that line the back wall are empty save for a small suitcase, a big box of Band-Aids, a bottle of alcohol and some toilet paper.

Ned holds the side of the blanket back so Janice can enter the back area. "I'll be right here," Ned promises. An overflowing garbage can props the back door open. There is an exit.

"Well?" The man smiles at her as Ned lets the blanket drop. It separates Janice from his watchful eye. The half-smile on the man's face makes Janice think he enjoys his work way too much. She reaches out to him with the daisy picture

and he grabs it. After a brief glance he says, “Yeah?” She looks at the open drawer beside the table. A faded plastic silverware tray contains his tools—a clump of needles, some cotton balls, and some tiny pots of open paint. “What colors?” he asks.

Janice speaks and is surprised to hear her voice. “Green stem, yellow center—white petals.”

He laughs. “Just like a daisy. Should show up on that skin of yours. Where do you want it?”

Janice thinks to herself. He sees bodies everyday. I am no different, not unusual. She doesn’t want to breathe.

She turns her back to him and points to the left side of her butt—precisely the placement Ned has suggested. The man looks at her butt and says, “Good choice.” His hand sweeps in the direction of the table.

Janice says, “Don’t you have a sheet or something?”

He grabs a rumpled one from the corner chair and begins to set up the needle and the paint. Janice wiggles under the sheet and pulls her pants down just far enough to expose the targeted spot. She eases the sheet back for him to do his work. She sees the man glance from the needle to her butt.

“This might be easier if you were naked,” the man says.

“Hey,” Ned yells from beyond the blanket, “I put the money on the counter for a tattoo—that’s it.” Janice knows Ned will protect her. A tattoo is hardly payment enough.

She watches the tattoo artist move to the shelves and open a suitcase filled with plastic bottles. The labels are hand-written with the names of the colors. Janice wonders what will happen if he is called away in the middle of creating her tattoo.

Her father’s deep snores had brought a dangerous but welcomed pause, a window of time for Janice’s escape. With the skill of a parent playing Santa Claus, she had packed her small suitcase by the bluish light of the flickering TV, strategically placing contents before discovery.

She had slipped out of the apartment around five AM, rubbing the bruise on her left eye, feeling the sting of her father’s cigarette burn on her forearm and wincing from the pain where her low back had been kicked. She walked the mile to the office. The suitcase provided a seat behind the bushes across from the agriculture extension building while she waited for Ned to arrive. No one would see her behind the bush as she counted down the minutes. While he parked his car and opened the building door at 7:30, there were very few people on the street. Janice watched, and when she could no longer see him, she knew he was in his inner office. It was then she made her move. Her coat draped over the suitcase,

she slipped inside, crossed to her desk, and placed the luggage underneath. She slid her chair backwards and stood turned in the direction of Ned's office.

“Good morning, Janice.” He'd been watching.

“I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention this suitcase to anyone, Mr. Alfred.”

“Of course not.” He seemed to stare at the bruise on her eye and held out his hand. “Give me the bag.” She reached under the desk, fumbled for the luggage and walked it over to Ned. Without a word he took it into his office. She heard his closet door open and close. No one would see it now. Janice was glad she had come early.

All day long Janice wanted to tell Phyllis, the office manager, about her father, the suitcase and her trip out of town to somewhere. But she held her tongue. Not knowing where to start the conversation, she knew it might be best not to talk at all. In between helping orchard owners fill out complaint forms and filing yesterday's mail, she and Phyllis chit-chatted about a romance novel they were both reading. When Phyllis stepped out for lunch, Ned asked Janice to pick up his ticket for the Las Vegas trip. The travel agent was across the street. “You won't need a check. I have an account,” he said.

Within fifteen minutes, she stood back at his office door, waiting for an invitation to enter. He kept working so she approached his desk and handed him the envelope. She waited.

“Check them out, Mr. Alfred.” He opened the envelope and looked at her.

“My wife isn’t going. I only need one ticket.” He held the envelope out to Janice. She knew he expected her to return the extra ticket. She looked in the direction of his closet. He looked as well. He took one of the tickets from the envelope, handed it to Janice, and went back to his agenda.

She counted the hours until work was over. First hour, the Vegas lights blinked in her head pointing the way to freedom. Next hour, the lights snapped out, and she wondered what might be the condition of the ticket. The third hour rolled around, and explosions in her head chanted, “He’s a nice man. He’s a nice man.”

“Lady, you’re gonna’ have to quit jumping every time I poke you with the needle or this ain’t gonna’ look like a daisy.”

Janice tries to focus on the sounds from the street. She counts honks from cars and the pricks from the needle. How many pricks make a daisy? The sound of rhythmic breathing, just beyond the army blanket, comes from Ned. Accompanying each breath is a little guttural noise, a quiet snore, proclaiming his presence. She looks at her watch and thinks about the contents of her bag, packed this morning before Ned came to her door. Why did she open the door? The number of his breaths—ninety-seven before she loses count. She does not want him to spend the night.

\* \* \*

The day Ned had hidden Janice's suitcase in his closet, and agreed she could have the ticket to Las Vegas, they had, of course, been seated together on the plane. She asked, "How many times have you been to Vegas?"

Ned said, "Too many to count."

"Do you always go alone?"

"Usually. Sometimes I take my wife."

That was it. The void of any conversation for the rest of the trip made Janice nervous, though there was no lack of activity in her imagination. She thought of chatty things to say, but she remained silent. She had opened the door to her cage when she packed her bag that morning at her father's, but Ned had given her a hand out of the trap. She wanted to thank him for the ticket.

The plane taxied up to the terminal and Ned handed Janice a plain white box. She lifted the lid and peaked inside. The corner of a red negligee clarified the plane ticket and the gift. She would wear the gift tonight and worry about where to stay tomorrow.

For three nights Janice, on that first trip to Vegas, sat beside Ned at the slots. She held the chips, to be used later at the tables, while he pulled the handle on the machine that ate his nickels faster than he could unwrap them from their paper



tubes. She released a dozen poker chips into her lap. Falling, they created a soothing rhythm as they hit the fabric of her skirt. She scooped them up and patted them into a tight row then let them fall again. Collect, arrange and fall. The nickels danced down the slot and clanked their way to the stopping point. The machine spun the horizontal canister, and Ned talked to the slots, “Come on, line them up. That’s it.”

“Thanks for the ticket,” Janice said, her voice barely audible.

He looked her way and said, “I guess I need to find you a place to stay.”

Before he left Vegas, Ned dropped Janice off in front of an apartment building a few miles from the strip. “See you next time,” he said and handed her a key.

Janice climbed the metal and cement staircase to the second floor, and from below heard a woman call to her.

“I’m the manager. Let me know if everything’s okay.” Janice still couldn’t muster a word—even to thank to a stranger. “It’s forty-five dollars a month. You’re paid up for three months. Be thankful. There aren’t many like him around anymore.” Janice had put the key in the lock of room 24 and stepped inside.

Elvis Presley croons from the plastic radio sitting on the shelf by the tattoo artist’s suitcase—the one filled with the paints. She hears a metal stirring stick or spoon clicking on the side of the paint pot as the man stirs the mixture for the next color.

She counts the days since she left Hayford for Vegas and realizes she can't keep track.

"I'm dead, you know," Janice says. Her voice wavers, and she tries to laugh.

Ned cautions her from the other side of the curtain. "Janice..." It is clear to Janice she has said enough.

Janice had ripped the large manila envelope open. There was no return address. She had known Ned had sent it. She turned over *The Hayford Tribune* to find her senior picture reproduced on the front page. The headline read: "Two weeks missing!" They'd spelled her first name wrong and quoted the police theories regarding her disappearance. Dead somewhere in a ditch. Picked up by a transient group, maybe of her own will or maybe not. Runaway. Murdered. Janice took her scissors and cut the article from the front page. She stuck it in the nightstand by her bed. She could never go back. Her father thought her dead, and her classmates would have assumed the same. Phyllis must have cried. Janice was sure. Ned's wife would be horrified, and his kids might think she got what she deserved, short skirts and all. Only Ned had known the truth.

Shortly after Janice received the newspaper, Ned came for his second visit. The morning after he arrived, he sat across from Janice at the kitchen table in the apartment he had paid for. Janice thought sex should be different between a

husband and a wife and a man and his mistress, but she wasn't sure how. Last night she thought Ned was confused as well. He was the kindest man.

Brushing the toast crumbs from the placemat into his open hand, he collected a pile of leftovers on the corner of his plate. The odor of burned bread hung in the heat of the morning, and the open window made no difference in the smell. It stuck in the air and refused to move.

Ned reached in the pocket of his shirt and pulled out a pen. He pushed a notepad in Janice's direction and informed her, "Shawn Kelby came to see me at the office Friday before I left. Had his deputy in tow."

Janice smiled. "Did they find my killer?"

"They think *I'm* your killer."

"But we went to the airport separately. You were only my boss. They should pin it on my father, if anyone."

"Your father's the one that sent them my way."

"They've got no proof."

"None. Write the note. No one comes looking."

Janice took the pen and wrote: "Dad—don't try looking--you'll never find me."

"I'm dead." Janice laughs and sobs simultaneously.

“Listen, lady, you can’t jump, you can’t laugh, you do anything that’s gonna’ move your butt. Can’t you hold still?”

“No.” She starts to shake all over.

“Listen. I don’t have anyone waiting. Take a break. Here.” He grabs a bottle of cheap bourbon from the shelf and pours Janice a drink in a paper cup.

“Come on—sit up—have a drink. I’m gonna’ take your boyfriend here next door and catch a whiskey. Get control. When I get back, we’ll finish the daisy.”

Ned peaks in through the blanket curtain, and Janice can only see his long nose. “You’ll be okay?” he asks.

“Fine. I just need a few minutes.” She listens to the two walk the few paces to the front door and shivers as the door shuts. The bourbon feels warm to her, sliding down, settling in her stomach and prompting courage.

The days had passed slowly since Ned had gone. At first she lay in the sun and improved her tan. She tried attending church, visiting the zoo and listening to conversations at the casinos. Ned left her rolls of nickels each time he visited so she played the slots, but she didn’t win enough to make it interesting. As a child, sitting in the audience for Merchant Marine story-time left her with few skills for developing relationships. The strip was a rough place. Janice wondered about her choices. There weren’t many. She had nothing but an apartment rented for her and an allowance that paid for food, utilities and a telephone.

She sat in the orange vinyl kitchen chair and fingered a ragged classified ad that she had ripped out of yesterday's paper. "Wanted. Part-time help. Hard worker required." So she stirred up enough courage to secure a job at the Two Hearts Wedding Chapel. Ned didn't want her working. "Too many sleazy characters out there waiting for a girl like you," he told her.

"I'm eighteen. I was working for you at your office," she gently reminded him and touched his forearm, noticing his pale skin peeking out of a recent sunburn. She thought he must be over forty. He didn't have to know about the job.

Janice's work at Two Hearts involved choices. Each perspective bride perused a long veil with an artificial white rose headpiece, a simple rhinestone tiara or a fingertip two-layered net caught at the top by seed pearls and ribbon. The veil never matched what the bride wore, and Janice was amazed that whether in blue jeans or brocade, the client always wanted a bridal veil.

After adorning the bride with the headdress, Janice presented the client with a choice of bouquets: plastic, silk or paper. Occasionally someone would ask her advice, and she relished the idea of recommending a selection.

She found the job on the first day of her second month in Las Vegas. \$1.15 an hour, six hours a day, five days a week. It was also the first day the *Hayford Tribune* ended the tally of Janice's days missing. On the second to the last page a two by one inch column said "Janice Mason's father reports having seen her with a small group of Mexican orchard workers before her disappearance. A recent note

found in the bottom of Miss Mason's work desk confirms her plans to run away.” It went on to quote the note Phyllis had found when cleaning out Janice's desk. The newspaper clipping had cleaned up her murder and blamed an innocent group of people in one inch of newsprint. Ned had orchestrated Janice out of the newspaper and deflected any suspicion off him with one small note. Janice might be content giving advice to the brides of Two Hearts for a very long time.

She jerks to her feet at the sound of the front door opening. She grabs her bag and hustles into the tiny bathroom in the backroom. The tattoo artist yells for Janice. “Hey, what is this?” He pounds on the bathroom door. “What is this? You need another drink? I can't wait much longer.”

Janice shouts, “I have to pee.” She is surprised at the volume of her voice.

“All right—all right—but hurry it up. Ned and me'll have another round next door.”

Janice clutches her bag and stares at the cracked mirror on the wall. She stands on the toilet seat and pulls her pants down to expose the unfinished tattoo. No green stem on the daisy. The petals are lopsided, some unconnected to the center of the flower and some off-kilter to the side. Many of the needle pricks are speckled with blood, and some of the dots are dried, almost black in color. The area aches.

\* \* \*

Janice's heart had ached as she set down the phone. "Sorry, I can't make it this weekend," Ned had announced two hours before his plane was to land. The calendar on the wall had a circle for every time Ned had come into town. She grabbed the calendar from the wall and drew a question mark inside the current date. Over and over she traced the mark until the crook was indistinguishable and the dot at the bottom was a scribbled mass. The loneliness beat her up with questions and confusion. With desperation picking at her brain, she traveled to their favorite casino, The Sands.

She chose their usual table, but just before the waiter escorted her to the spot, Janice spied Ned at a table of his own. In the middle of dinner with his wife, he smiled and placed a hand on her shoulder. She ran her fingers along the curve of his cheek. Janice stepped backwards and turned to go, fighting tears. He said he wasn't coming, she thought, but he's here. She's here.

By the time Janice returned home, her hands had almost stopped shaking. She opened the flour canister, by the kitchen sink and dumped the contents in a pile. She pushed aside a few partial roles of nickels left over from Ned's three day weekends and stacked some tens and twenties from the paychecks she had cashed at Two Hearts. Then she straightened the crumpled one-dollar bills that hadn't been spent from the food allowance Ned provided every month. Two hundred and

eleven dollars. More than enough for a plane ticket, not near the amount needed for an apartment and food.

The phone book for Vegas was a couple inches thick, and she thumbed through the pages that smelled of dried ink until she arrived at the T's. Travel Fast, Arrive on Time, Top Travel—how would she decide? The ad for Twenty-Four Hour To-Go Travel consumed a quarter of a page and promised to be open anytime of day or night. Janice stuffed the stack of bills in her purse, left the nickels and ones on the counter, scribbled the address of To-Go Travel on the back of an envelope and left the apartment.

A black limousine ran a red light as Janice stepped into the crosswalk, and she paused long enough to let it pass. A group of girls around her age twirled in circles of silliness a few steps in front of her. Carefree, they joked about boys, and Janice mentally listed the events she'd never enjoyed: homecoming dance, drive-in movies, church potlucks, parent conferences and anything else that involved parent participation or dating a boy her age.

Neon green splashed at the top of a casino in the form of a palm tree, and a flashing red light in the shape of a martini glass flickered on and off. A mixture of big band sounds floated through open casino doors, their tunes beckoning all on the strip to take a chance at Lady Luck.

The neon light for Twenty-Four Hour To Go Travel was more than half burned out, and Janice almost walked right by it. A woman with dyed red hair and



bad lipstick sat smoking. She read a paper-back romance novel that Janice was halfway through herself. Janice pushed on the broken doorknob, and the brass screw on the side of the knob shook and wobbled loose. She was sure it would come off in her hand. “How’s it end?” Janice asked.

The lady looked at Janice in disgust. “I wouldn’t tell you even if I knew. That’s the point, you know—suspense right up until the last kiss.”

“I hate surprise endings. It means so much more if I know what’s coming. I can look forward to it.”

“Yeah? Well, to each his own. Where do you want to go?” From behind the counter the woman pulled a map of the United States, covered in wrinkled plastic, and handed it to Janice. “Not sure? Let me make a few suggestions.” She pointed at some cities. “This one-way?”

Janice nodded, saying, “One-way only.”

“Well, you’ve got Dallas for \$74.00, Boston for \$252.00, Chicago for \$198.00. If you don’t know where you’re headed—just point.” Janice placed her finger on a city and the lady said, “I can do that.” She typed the details while Janice waited, sitting in a chrome chair with a green plastic cushion. Right away Janice felt the sticky sweat from her legs connect with the plastic, making the chair uncomfortable and waiting intolerable. She paid for the ticket and left.

Back at her apartment, Janice sat in the dark, holding a new bag big enough to pack the essentials under one arm and a plane ticket in her hand. She rocked

back and forth, thinking about the map of the United States, the broken neon light and the travel-lady's lipstick.

In the morning, when a banging on the door roused her from a seat at the kitchen table, she queried, "Ned?" Janice opened the door, and the landlady held out a receipt.

"Rent's paid for one more month," she said. "You got a winner there, honey."

Janice took the receipt, laid it on the table and packed her bag. A persistent knock interrupted her once more. Why couldn't this woman leave her alone? She opened the door and Ned stepped inside.

"I thought you weren't coming," Janice said without expression. She moved backwards as he entered the apartment. He claimed territory as he went, running his fingers over the back of the kitchen chair, turning on the faucet and putting his fingerprints on the clean glass. Coming near her. She cringed when his arm wove around her waist. His power moved up her spine. She recited silently, "Apartment rent, plane fare, utilities, and anonymity," and wondered if Ned would leave the mark of his sticky substance twice tonight. Inside his wife and a second time inside Janice.

He whispered, "You mean so much to me."

She smelled his wife's perfume on his coat. It was Channel. It was expensive. Janice remembered her father's voice, "I won't drink anymore. I won't ever hit you again."

Janice asked, "When did you fly in?"

"Just got here twenty minutes ago," he lied. "Came right over. Couldn't wait to see you." All of her father's Merchant Marine stories tumbled in kaleidoscope fashion inside her head.

Ned reminded her, "We talked about a tattoo last time. Did you find a picture?" His arm tightened around her waist. She couldn't breathe but wanted to.

She freed herself and picked a picture up from the counter. "I'm ready to go." Placing the picture on the inside of her bag, she headed for the door.

"New bag? he asked. "Bigger than your others."

"It's the rage," Janice quipped and opened the door. She thought about the ticket in her purse and the obligations she'd collected.

She pulls up her pants, sits on the chipped toilet seat and commands her fingers to search inside her bag. The envelope she locates is smooth, rectangular, a different shape from anything else she has packed. Feeling further, she mentally checks off an extra pair of tightly rolled jeans. One blouse, underwear, a toothbrush and a small metal box with a couple rolls of nickels, Ned had given her for the slot machine, and some bills. She knows exactly how much is there. Thirty-seven

fifty. It doesn't matter if it's enough. Time runs away, and she must travel with it. She hears the tattoo-man and Ned enter the shop, laughing and talking. "You okay to get on with it lady? Call me when you're ready and we'll finish your petals." The man sounds drunk. Janice withdraws her hand from the bag, opens the bathroom door and rushes for the back exit. The door is propped open with the garbage can. She slips out, and she is sure no one hears her go.

Janice hails a cab, and her breath comes in pants. She feels her rapid heartbeat and a heaviness in her chest. "To the airport." Now she looks inside her bag—rummaging, pawing, seeking confirmation one more time. She pulls out the envelope and opens it.

The cab driver asks, "So, where you headed lady—once you're flying?"

Janice runs her nails over the name "Las Vegas" under the column marked "Departure". Her fingers slide to the section captioned "Arrival." They linger on the city name. San Diego. She feels the tattoo oozing through her pants.

"Lady, weren't you listening? I said—what city are you going to?"

Janice looks in his rearview mirror and sees his eyes demanding a response. She doesn't answer. This time she has bought the ticket herself.

## SANCTUARY

Father Ferguson's ears grew deaf to his parishioner's confessions, and in the solitude of a summer morning he headed toward the garden for his early ritual. The brass handle to the heavy planked church door squeaked as the Father pushed it open to greet the morning. A wave of clean air enveloped him, and he remembered the thunder storm at two in the morning. He crunched along the pea-gravel walkway to the tiny metal shed at the corner of the garden. It held the gardening tools and the birdseed. This dawn routine of feeding the birds was not unlike the Monday morning communion he would offer after mass a few hours later.

Blue jays were the early birds in the summer. Zeroing in on the hanging bird feeder, they squawked their intent and then stripped the little wooden house of the seeds that the Father had purchased for an assorted flock, leaving the finches and the doves disappointed. After the jays flew away, the multitudes waiting in the nearby branches flocked to the feeder. There they would perch, twittering their complaint at finding empty troughs and dry bowls.

Sitting atop the garden fence, the Blue jays waited, their impatient eyes calculating the moment to assault the feeder. Father Ferguson took the seed jar from the shelf, and the birds dive-bombed from the fence, swooping by his ear—so close he felt their feathers brush his cheek. They landed on the roof of the garden shed, glaring down at him and the birdseed. He had no control. The jays would

steal the food, leaving him without enough birdseed to feed the other hungry birds who waited patiently. No matter how much seed he supplied, he would never have enough to feed all of them.

Father Samuel Ferguson used to like the confession booth. After Mass on Sunday mornings and Monday evenings, the light outside the small wooden booth at St. Andrews could hardly blink from green to red and back to green fast enough to accommodate the sinners. At thirty-two, with a voice that sounded like a seventeen-year-old's, he would practice letting his lower range and deeper octaves resonate. "Thereupon, I absolve you of your sins in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

The Monday evening shift, especially right after the weekend, was a juicy one. A young voice he recognized as Alicia's condemned her ponderings. "Father, there's an urge in me. I think it might have something to do with...I can't say it—but my parents would kill me if they knew. I'm here confessing. Make it go away."

He wondered why she would want this urge to go away and how it could possibly be considered a sin. However, the confessional was never intended to serve as a counseling office, so along with the required absolution statement, the Father thought it appropriate to encourage fledglings, new at contrition, with a word from the Holy Scriptures. After all, he had learned them in seminary to use for others, not just for personal recitation. "God is spirit; and those who worship

Him must worship in spirit and truth.’ You have been truthful here. ‘Go and sin no more.’” This, the stock line that Father Ferguson spit out when real wisdom failed him, had become part of his own liturgy.

Two people, a small community of secrets, and a separating grille. The confessional sharpened the audio senses, and Father Ferguson had loved that. One time in a grocery store, he recognized Mary Maginty’s voice, two aisles away, as she chided her son. She never would have registered on his radar if he hadn’t fine-tuned his ability to listen. But listening, over the last three months, no longer ratcheted up his adrenaline, and the scriptures that had rolled off his tongue for almost a decade seemed stuck on replay.

It was not unlikely for people to return week after week with the same confession. Eventually, his knowledge of scriptures ran dry. He’d used every verse he could recall. ”Go and sin no more,” seemed destined for deaf ears before he even spoke it.

He considered Donald Maginty a Monday regular. A man the Father believed to be truly repentant yet addicted to routine adultery. “Father, I love my wife, really I do.” The liturgy stuck in Father Ferguson throat. “Father? Father, are you there? Are you listening?”

“Go. . .” The priest couldn’t let the rest of the grace-filled line slither past his lips. Maginty had heard the complete absolution prayer plus the additional Scriptures every Monday for the eight years Father Ferguson had served at the

parish. The priest was certain that tonight the penitent felt cheated. He hadn't received the full blessing. Just one word. The Father repeated the clipped version of forgiveness with the faintest touch of irritation. "Go."

Maginty left without the customary thank you, and the father felt like a sinner himself, not wanting Maginty to ever come back. How tempting would it be for Father Ferguson to retrain his highly sensitive ears--never listening again?

Young Samuel's mother had been calling his name for over a minute. Finally he had awakened from the rhythmic sloshing of the garden hose and had heard her voice. "Sammy, I can hold a hose on that rosebush and refill the feeder with birdseed. Go play baseball! It's summer. The neighborhood boys need nine for a team."

"They're happy with seven. One more won't make a difference. I'll stay and water."

The older Samuel grew, the more intentional his loneliness became. He spent most of his high school years doing homework and running lights for the theatre department, alone in the light booth. And it was up there in the rafters of the auditorium, in a loft that housed a light board straddling two sawhorses, that Samuel Ferguson heard the call of God. Between act two and three of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Samuel was sure he heard an audible voice. Slow, steady and



far more professional than the amateur squawks of the floundering theatre troupe of Hayford High, the voice whispered: “Servants are in demand.”

Over and over it spoke, and Samuel did not tire of listening. He missed his light cue for act three and was jolted out of his enraptured moment with the Creator by the distinct clearing of a throat. When he finally raised the lights, the entire cast was glaring straight up in his direction. Shortly after the divine confrontation, Samuel broke it off with his first love, Marlene Danford. If he had kept on seeing her, his chances of remaining priest material would be slim.

Father Ferguson closed the heavy wooden door after the last congregational penitent left. The lights darkened as he hit the switch and began his walk down the silent aisle. The bishop had told him, “Priests don’t get depressed doing the Lord’s work. This is just a plateau—a dry point—the fire will be back. It always comes.” Bishop Turlow seemed so sure.

The front pew in the dim sanctuary begged him to sit down and reflect, and he did. Only the golden glass of Christ’s flowing robe, and his hand extended to the face of John the Beloved, was illuminated on the mammoth stained-glass window above the altar. Two small bulbs shining from the outside garden provided barely enough rays to highlight the lower three-quarters of the window. Father Ferguson longed to see the radiance of the face of Christ, but the underpowered beams fell short.

In a brief remembrance, he suddenly laughed out loud at his recollection of a young Presbyterian, Ellen, and her uncompromising comment about the dimly-lit picture. “If this were in my church, we’d buy a bigger bulb, Father Ferguson. What’s the deal? Just fix it.” Back then, at twelve, she was no less outspoken than at twenty. And even though she’d converted to Catholicism to marry Juan Gomez, the Father was certain she remained a Presbyterian in her heart.

Even at eighteen her feisty spirit had never dampened. Ferguson had patiently led her through catechism a year ago, answering her multitude of questions and attempting to deflect her Presbyterian arguments. He assumed responsibility for convincing Ellen she needed to comply with the dictates of the faith if she were to marry a Catholic in St. Andrew’s. His meetings with her broke all records for the longest classes he had ever taught, but in the end she embraced both denominations with gusto—one from within and one from without.

Nothing in his priestly education restricted him from marrying this Anglo girl and Mexican boy, nonetheless they met after midnight each week in preparation for the marriage. Ellen insisted her parents would ship her off to relatives in Oklahoma if they knew of the wedding. When Father Ferguson reminded her she was eighteen, she refused to change the clandestine hour of the meetings. They had been married a year.

\* \* \*

Father Ferguson had volunteered at the doctor's office where he first met Juan. At fourteen, Juan Gomez was small for his age, and the Father had felt compassion for the Mexican migrant worker. Nursing a foot injury, Juan had limped into town with a home-made crutch and struggled to enter the Jensen Street Medical Clinic.

"Hey, let me give you a hand." Father Ferguson held the door for Juan.

"*Gracias*, Father." Juan mixed English with Spanish and communicated well. "I need to see doctor."

"Have a seat. I'll just sign you up for an appointment."

"No money for appointment. I just need ointment." Juan handed Father Ferguson the empty tube. The Father didn't ask who needed the medicine and what their symptoms were. He knew.

In the evenings, the Father frequently made calls at the trash-shacks by the orchards where the migrants lived. At first he'd thought the infected water blisters on the side of Consuela's face were from severe sunburn, until he observed the same blisters on her children. After that, every time he visited the Mexican families who thinned the orchard pears, he documented the effects of the pesticides in detail and took meticulous notes about the condition of migrant housing. He made sure the lack of plumbing and running water were described accurately, and the Father always submitted the complaints to the government extension office

right down the street. No action had been taken. Father Ferguson's congregation was filled with orchard owners, and they all came regularly to confession.

Jake Thorson, owner of Crestview Estates, usually came on Sunday mornings. Two minutes into his confession Father Ferguson couldn't help himself and interrupted Jake. "Anything else?"

"Well, yes, Father. As I was saying...."

"I don't mean that, Jake. Nothing about the Mexicans that work for you?"

"What do you mean, Father? They come to confession on their own, don't they?" He laughed, "Surely I don't need to confess for them too?"

Father Ferguson said, "Confession's over. Say five Hail Marys, read Psalm 91, and go install running water and toilets for the workers in your orchards."

Jake was shocked, "What right do you have to tell me...."

The Father finalized it all, "Thereupon, I absolve you of your sins in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Sprit. Amen." His anger kept him from remembering the rest, but Jake prompted him with a bit of sarcasm.

"Aren't you going to pray for me, Father?"

"That whatever good you do or whatever evil you bear, might merit for you the remission of your sins, the increase of grace and the reward of everlasting life."

"Thank you, Father." Jake stopped halfway out the booth. "You want me to send in the next one?"

Father Ferguson yelled through the grille at Jake, “I *want* you to put in a toilet.” He slammed the confessional door, walked down the aisle of the sanctuary, over the altar and out the back exit to the garden. Jake never came back to St. Andrews and neither did the other orchard owners, but their wives and children showed up at confessional every Sunday evening.

The day the Father had met Juan, the nurse had rushed in behind the counter at the medical clinic and had found Father Ferguson rummaging through the medicines in the cupboard. She took the used tube of ointment from him, looked up at Juan, pulled out a replacement tube and handed it to the Father. “That’s not enough,” he said. She took out another, put it in the Father’s hand and started for the door. Father Ferguson grabbed her by the arm and turned her around to Juan.

He said, “You can listen to him for a minute or two? Take some notes on his condition.” She nodded and the Father turned around to face Juan, his back to the nurse. He whispered, “Tell her your very *long* story.” Then, he winked at Juan. The story Juan told was very detailed and involved the names of all his cousins, uncles and aunts.

All the while, the Father quietly opened the bottom of the medicinal cupboard and found six big plastic jars. Comparing the label from Juan’s empty tube to the large full jars in the cabinet, the Father confirmed identical ingredients. Satisfied, he picked up the jar of salve, grabbed a paper bag from the shelf and

placed the ointment inside. Juan finished his story and the nurse said he should make an appointment for his family to return.

Juan met the Father outside the clinic. “This should last you for a while,” the Father said.

“Story long enough, Father? Juan questioned.

“*Si*, Juan.”

“*Gracias*. Thank you, Father.” Juan had limped off and Father Ferguson had wondered who he should go to confess a theft.

The Father pulled off to the side of the road where Juan and Ellen lived. He extracted the keys from the ignition of his beat-up sedan, turned the headlights off and grabbed his guitar case from the back seat. He planned to walk the other five blocks to the defunct government experiment station. Just two weeks ago he had spent a Saturday scraping the peeling paint from the side of the building that just a decade ago housed a group who experimented on pears to improve their size for the orchard economy. The Father worked with Juan’s family to prep the boards for paint. The high point of the weekend came when a bucket of paint brushes was carried to the center of the lawn. Anyone who knew how to paint—grandmas, aunts, uncles and teenagers—grabbed a brush, and by Sunday night they’d turned the aging station into a house for Ellen and Juan.

The first light fog of autumn gently arrived, and the October moon waned. It lit the way, causing shadows to fall from the trees and shivers to run up Father Ferguson's spine. He tried to talk himself into steadiness and calm, but the pit of his stomach revolted with nerves and he couldn't help pose questions about what waited at the end of the experiment station road.

Ellen had sounded terrified when she called, "We can hear them walking around the house."

"Who?" Father Ferguson roused himself out of bed, trying to sound attentive and alert on the phone.

"They keep throwing rocks against the house, Father. We can't look out the window—we're a target. The baby's here." He'd been called out to their house before.

Three nights in a row the ghostly visitors had torn up Juan and Ellen's new little pear tree in the front yard of the experiment station. Word had traveled quickly in a town like Hayford. Mexicans had just begun to settle there a few years back, and the idea of Juan taking up residence with a white girl—even if he married her—didn't sit well with some. Father Ferguson hoped the invaders were not from his congregation.

Each morning Juan would carefully water the empty hole and place the struggling tree back with some shovels of new dirt. After the second incident, he

had staked the tree's delicate trunk to an iron rod and gently propped up its branches. Still, the invisible vandals came and wrenched the tree from the ground a third time. So the Father joined Juan for an all-night vigil on the porch—Juan on the cushion of the swing and Father Ferguson on a camping pad he hadn't used since high school. They stayed awake all night to protect the tree. No one came.

Several days later, after Juan returned to sleeping in his own bed and the Father returned to the rectory, Ellen found a scarecrow with brown fabric skin leaning across their fence. In its back a pitchfork pierced the white lettering that scrawled: Wet Back. Father Ferguson helped Juan and Ellen take the scarecrow off the fence and put it in the metal barrel to burn with the garbage.

That night they shared a meal, and the Father said, "Let's wait for them ourselves. My mother has a shotgun. We'll make sure they don't return." Juan and Ellen had allowed a moment of respectful silence, but the Father hadn't intended they would take him seriously. He had pointed at the plaque on the wall, embroidered by Juan's grandmother. Juan read Cesar Chavez's words out loud, "The thing that all of us want when we're concerned for one another is to build and not to destroy." The irony had made them laugh and the truth had sobered them.

The Father knew the reason Ellen had called him and not the police. She slipped rent money every month to Ned Alfred, the man in charge of the government extension service. But she and Juan had no legal permission from anyone to stay



at the experiment station—to fix the place up. “No one ever comes down here,” Ellen had told Ned when she handed him an envelope full of cash for the first month’s rent.

Father Ferguson hesitated before he approached the house, and for a moment he regretted coming—tired of the late night calls, the hollow confessions and the bigoted little town. A few steps closer and he knew he’d been spotted. Human forms darted away from the experiment station, reaching the perimeter of the lawn and the anonymity of the orchard trees. The first fog of the season rolled in with a transparent haze. Unlike the November white-outs that hung thick like curtains, this fog wove through the branches in wisps, like ghosts dancing through the pear leaves in an ethereal mourning ritual. They invited the Father to watch their eerie invasion, but instead he pounded on the Gomez’s door. He announced his presence and let those that watched from the orchard know that the Holy Ghost had arrived, and Father Ferguson had brought him.

The door opened a crack, and the Father pushed it wide enough to enter. Scores of eyes stared at him, and no one said a word. Three Mexican grandmas rocked laps full of young children. Ellen nursed her baby, Miguel, and the men smoked cigars in the moonlit room. The Father was always amazed at how Juan could somehow telegraph a message to a neighborhood of family and draw them together at a moment’s notice. To funerals, christenings, weddings and now to huddle together and wait for an attack.

Father Ferguson put his hand on the light switch and turned it on. There was a communal gasp of disbelief as he stepped over *Abuelita* Maria and the three children who slept next to her. He found every switch in the house and turned them all on. Most of the women held rosaries and counted off the beads as they prayed. What were they waiting for—him to arrive and be the target?

Father Ferguson pulled a rocking chair in front of the window and opened his guitar case. He stared at Ellen. The fire in her eyes that led the tiny group of protestors in the streets of Hayford for migrant worker rights had turned to a determined protection for her baby son. Juan came and sat next to the Father, and a grandma picked up some maracas in a basket by the fireplace. Now that Father Ferguson was there, they were a courageous band. He led them in all the hymns he knew. The Father winced as a blow from a rock pounded the side of the house. His fingers faltered on the guitar string, and he missed a chord.

“Hey, Father, that’s one of our Presbyterian hymns. How do you know it?” Ellen tried to joke. More rocks pelted the wooden siding.

“You’re a Catholic now, Ellen,” he smiled. “Our hymns belong to everybody.” The Father sang with them, even when the thudding rocks seemed louder than the music. But the group outlasted the rocks. And as the pelting quieted early in the morning, the Father realized that the assailants were probably working men. The families began to disperse for home, and the Father took up his watch on the porch, waiting for the invisible enemy.

He didn't know how long he'd be dozing on the swing of the experiment station, but the moisture from the cushion, damp from the night's fog, had found its way through his priestly robe and cotton pants. The mix of the wet clerical robe and the heat of the early morning sun made him strip off his outer garment. His t-shirt and jeans would dry quickly.

He heard a transistor radio playing Spanish music, and he stared at the orchards that trimmed the edge of the experiment station lawn. Each tree rippled with the bodies of pickers, balancing on the rungs of ten foot ladders that lay propped on the branches of the trees. The lush green leaves framed each pear, protecting them—letting them grow to edible proportions. The workers, sleeves rolled up in the heat of the morning, leaned into the greenery to pluck the pears and place them in their baskets, and as they did the leaves rubbed against the pickers' necks, arms and faces.

Father Ferguson's clerical robes may have scared off the intruders last night, but the police had not been called. And the workers met their morning schedule, picking. They would return tonight with water blisters and open sores and send their children to the clinic for ointment.

He couldn't be there every time a rock was slung or the pear tree was dug up, and he didn't have the energy to catch the scarecrow-makers or talk orchard owners into changing the living conditions of their workers. Father Ferguson peeked through the window before he left, and Ellen was sleeping on the sofa with

her baby resting on her chest. He made his way back to his sedan and wondered how long it would take to become a teacher. Two years, he thought. He knew he could pump gas for the local Texaco or check groceries at the Safeway store—anything to keep him from the booth of absolution.

The Father approached the back entrance of St. Andrews through the garden. The jays were angry at his tardiness. He pushed the wood door open and felt some satisfaction that he could make the pushy birds wait for their morning seeds. 8:15 AM—he'd been with Ellen and Juan all night and was glad he'd put the sign on the front door of the church canceling the morning mass.

A steady knock persisted from the front of the church, calling him down the aisle of the sanctuary. He saw the colors of the stained glass filtering out from the window and glittering on the back of the church pews. He turned to face the window. Brilliant in the morning sun, each colored pane shown with radiance—their diverse colors allowing the entire picture to be unveiled. No face was in a shadow, and every part sparkled.

The knock turned to an urgent pounding as he approached the door. Exhausted from a lack of sleep, his eyes stung as he tried to focus on the lock, his fingers fumbling with the deadbolt.

He cracked the door open an inch or so to find two penitents standing on the church stairs. Consuela Gomez, who had been at Juan and Ellen's the night before,

did not look patient, and he wondered if she had intentionally arrived at the church before him. The second was Mr. Fenimore.

“We’ve been waiting, Father,” said Consuela. She adjusted her straw work hat with a bandaged hand and entered the church. The Father knew if she hadn’t been injured in the orchard last week, she’d be working with the others. She would pick until the pears were done growing and come to confession whenever the doors were opened.

As she passed him, the Father patted the sign on the church door, “Didn’t you see the note—mass was cancelled this morning.”

“You didn’t say confessional was cancelled, Father.”

Mr. Fennimore, the oldest penitent in the congregation, had come without taking his slippers off. As Consuela marched in to begin a line of two at the confessional booth, Mr. Fennimore nodded from behind, saying, “Ladies first, go right ahead.”

Father Ferguson opened the confessional door and hesitated. The air inside was rank and stifling. He remembered the words, “Servants are in demand.” He slipped inside, using the toe of his shoe to stop the bottom of the door from closing, and the spring-loaded coil from releasing to slam shut the door. He sat down and kept his foot in place, leaving a crack and letting the tomb air out. Maybe there would be a breeze. He took his position behind the grille, turned on

the green light and, as he always did, he said, “God is spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

## VITA

Gwen Mansfield graduated with a BA in Theatre from Seattle Pacific University in 1985, a MA in Theatre Production from Central Washington University in 2004, and will be receiving her MFA in Creative Writing, Fiction from University of New Orleans in 2006.

Gwen has taught both high school and college level classes, most recently for twelve years at King's West, a private college preparatory school, and Olympic College.

Her awards include:

--Washington Federation of Independent Schools, ACSI Distinguished Teacher of the Year, 2005-2006

--Second Place, Screenplay, Pacific Northwest Writers Conference, *Crocus in China*, 1992

--New Harmony project, Screenplay, *Common Ground*, 1992

--Shenandoah Playwrights Festival, runner-up, *Hot '56*, 1992

--Northwest Theatre Short Play Competition, *Memories on the Shelf*, 1993

Gwen's plans include publishing her work and continuing to write stage plays, screenplays, and fiction. She would like to continue teaching at the college level, run a marathon, travel and complete yearly projects as an actress and director.