in the beginning

It starts with the earth. How can it not? Imagine the planet like a split peach, whose pit forms the core, whose flesh its mantle, and whose fuzzy skin its crust—no, that doesn't do justice to the crust, which is, after all, where all of life takes place. The earth's crust must be more like the rind of the orange, thicker and more durable, quite unlike the thin skin of a bruisable peach. Or is it? Funny, how you never think to wonder.

On one small section of that crust—small, that is, by global or geologic measure—in Power County, Idaho, where the mighty Snake River carved out its valley and where volcanic ash enriched the soil with minerals vital to its tilth, there stretched a vast tract of land known as Fuller Farms.

Vast, by human scale. Vast, relative to other farmers' holdings in the region, like the Quinns' place down the road. And as for the description, "land belonging," well that's a condition measured in human time, too. But for one quick blip in the 5 billion years of life on this earth, that three thousand acres of potato-producing topsoil and debatably the slender cone of the planet that burned below, right down to the rigid center of its core, belonged to my father, Lloyd Fuller.

It used to be the best topsoil around. Used to be feet of it, thick, loamy. There's less of it now. But still, imagine you are a seed—of an apple, or a melon, or even the pit of a peach—spit from the lips of one of Lloyd's crossbred grandchildren, arcing through the air and falling to earth, where you are ground into the soil, under a heel, to rest and overwinter. Months pass, and it is cold and dark. Then slowly, slowly, spring creeps in, the sun tickles the earth awake again, its warmth thaws the soil, and your coat,

which has protected you from the winter frosts, now begins to crack. Oh, so tentatively you send a threadlike root to plumb the ground below, while overhead your pale shoot pushes up through the sedentary mineral elements (the silt, the sand, the clay), through the teeming community of microfauna (bacteria and fungi, the algae and the nematodes), past curious macrofauna (blind moles, furry voles, and soft, squirming earthworms). This is life in the Root Zone, nudging your tendril toward the warmth of the sunny sun sun.

And then imagine the triumphant moment when you crack the crumbly crust, poke your wan and wobbling plumule head through the surface and start to unfurl—imagine, from your low and puny perspective, how vast Lloyd Fuller's acreage must look to you now.

Of course, during most of his tenure and the decades that followed, these three thousand acres were given over primarily to the planting of potatoes, which means that you, being a random seedling, a volunteer, an accidental fruit, will most likely be uprooted. Just as you turn your face into the rays and start to respire, maybe even spread out a leaf or two and get down to the business of photosynthesizing—*grrrrrip,* weeded right out of there. Sayonara, baby.

That's what it felt like when I was growing up, like I was a random fruit in a field of genetically identical potatoes. Burbanks—that's what people planted. Centuries of cross-pollination, human migration, plant mutation, and a little bit of backyard luck had resulted in the pride of Idaho, the world's best baker, the Russet Burbank. From one side of the state to the other spread a glorious monoculture of these large, white, long-bodied tubers with rough, reticulated skin, high in solids content with a mealy texture when cooked and a pleasing potatoey flavor.

Honestly, I never liked potatoes much. I preferred rice, a taste I inherited from my mother, Momoko, and which, in a state of spuds, was tantamount to treason. Momoko used to make me rice balls, the size of fingerlings, to take to school in my lunch box. Lloyd called them "Tokyo tubers"—this was his idea of a joke—and when I was a little girl, I thought it was pretty funny, too. I used to look forward to lunchtime, opening my plastic Barbie box, where, nestled next to a slice of meat loaf or ham, I'd find the two little *o-musubi* sitting neatly side by side. They tasted faintly salty, like Momoko's small hands. If the other kids thought my lunch was queer, they didn't say much, because Lloyd Fuller had more acres, and

thus more potatoes, than almost any other farmer in Power County, and I was Yummy, his only child.

No one said much either when Lloyd brought my mom home from Japan after the war, at least not to his face. Just that she was the cutest thing they had ever seen, so delicate and fragile looking, like a china doll, and how was she ever going to handle the work of running a farm? But she did. Lloyd had inherited five hundred acres, adjacent to the Quinns' place and up from where the Snake River was dammed, and he and Momoko rolled up their sleeves and went to work. People used to smile, call them Mutt and Jeff, because Lloyd was one of the tallest men in Power County and Momoko bought her work clothes in the little boys' department at Sears. You can imagine the two of them, standing in the fields, side by side, Lloyd as tall as a runner bean stalk and Momoko barely coming up to his buckle. Dressed in jeans turned up at the cuff and hanging from her shoulders by suspenders, she looked like Lloyd's son instead of his wife. The son they never had. After twelve years of trying, they had me instead—named me Yumi, only nobody in Liberty Falls could say it right. *Yummy, yummy, yummy, I got love in my tummy.* People said I was the apple of Lloyd's eye, the pride of his heart, until I went rotten.

As it turned out, Momoko was a born gardener, or, as Cassie Quinn's mom used to put it, "She may be yeller, but her thumb sure is green." Maybe this was meant to be a compliment, and we all took it that way. Over the years Momoko's kitchen garden grew into a vegetative wonder, and she planted varieties of fruits and flowers that no one had ever seen before in Power County. I remember her whispering to her pea vines as they curled their way up her trellises: *"Gambatte ne, tané-chan!"* "Be strong, my little seedling!" People drove for miles to see her Oriental ornamentals and Asian creepers. Their massy inflorescence burst into bloom in the spring and stayed that way throughout summer and deep into the fall. It was truly exotic.

Momoko must have been proud of Fuller Farms, in the early days. Lloyd surely was. In the first years of their marriage, they battled droughts and early freezes, mildews and viruses and parasites, and a host of pests that nobody could imagine why God had even bothered to create:

Seedcorn maggots, leatherjackets, and millipedes.

Thrips and leafhoppers.

False cinch bugs, blister beetles, and two-spotted spider mites.

Hornworms, wireworms, white grubs, and green peach aphids, not to mention corky ringspot . . .

And, most dreadful of all, the rapacious Colorado potato beetle.

All these creatures were dealt with, and thank God for science.

"Insect infestations are one of the greatest threats to the production of high-quality tubers," Lloyd used to say in the introduction to the speech that he gave every year to the Young Potato Growers of Idaho. "It is crucial to plan the applications of pesticides to harmonize with seasonable cultural practices."

"Seasonable cultural practices"—how he liked the sound of that! I remember him practicing the phrase, standing in front of the mirror in the bathroom, and when I stood there and looked at my reflection, I would practice saying it, too. Fuller Farms seemed living proof to us all that with the cooperation of God and science, and the diligent application of seasonable cultural practices, man could work in harmony with nature to create a relationship of perfect symbiotic mutualism. The first five hundred acres had grown to a holding of three thousand by the time I turned fourteen.

That was 1974, the year Nixon resigned, the year Patty Hearst was kidnapped and Evel Knievel attempted his historic leap across the Snake River Canyon on a rocket-powered motorcycle. But most important of all, it was the year of the Nine-Dollar Potato.

Consider the economics. Year after year you teeter along in a stable 'tater market, breaking even at $3.50 per hundred pounds of premium grade. When the price goes up to $4.00, you make a little, when it goes down to $3.00, you lose a little, but generally you fall in the balance and scrape by. Then, out of the blue, nature blesses you by cursing others. She sends an early frost to Maine, too much rain to California—1974 was certainly an odd year for weather, everywhere except Idaho. The failure of the nation's crops, combined with the explosive demand for french fries created by the burgeoning fast-food market, resulted in a potato shortage that sent prices rocketing into the clear blue heavens. Across the country, housewives who paid $1.29 for a ten-pound bag last year were now paying $2.39, and all of this translated into an unheard-of, unbelievable bonanza, the $9.00 per hundredweight that made my father a rich, albeit flabbergasted, farmer.

So there was Lloyd, in his prime, a Depression-born agriculturalist exer-

cising pride in his new capitalist muscle. *And who gives a flying fuck what happened after that?* That's what you would have thought anyway, if you were me, on a predawn winter morning in 1974, stuffing your clothes and diary into your father's army duffel, lifting the keys to his pickup truck from the hook in the kitchen, and creeping down the porch stairs, out into the frigid night, careful not to slam the door behind you.

cass

Every year in November, as Thanksgiving approached, Cass Quinn would find herself wondering about Yummy Fuller. There was a reason for this. When they were growing up, Liberty Falls Elementary School put on a yearly Pilgrims' Pageant. It was supposed to represent a big feast, and every kid had to play a different food in it. Cassie had started out as a pea. Up through the third grade she was content in this role, but by the time she got to fourth, she had gained so much weight they made her a potato. She said it was fine, said really she didn't mind—that's just the kind of girl she was—but inside she minded a lot. You'd think in Idaho playing the potato wouldn't be so bad—in fact, might even be an honor, but it wasn't. Everyone knew that the side dishes were typecast. The carrot was a tall redhead named Rusty. The green beans were a pair of skinny twins. The cherry tomato went to a rosy second-grader with shiny cheeks. The corn was a tawny kid named Kellogg. Face it. What is a potato? A potato is a fat, round, dumpy white thing, wrapped in burlap, rolling around on a dirty stage.

Some kids never had to be vegetables at all. Some kids got to be human beings—Pilgrims or Indians—and eat the rest of the kids for dinner.

Like Yummy Fuller. As Cass recalled it, Yummy was always the Indian princess, even in first grade, when everybody else in their class was still playing gravy.

"Noble Pilgrims," Princess Yummy used to say, "my people and I welcome you to our land. We know that your journey has been a hard one, and we will help you. Pray, take our seeds and plant them—"

It wasn't like they didn't have real Indians in school. They did. But back then even the Shoshone kids didn't seem to mind, or maybe they just knew

better than to care. Year after year Yummy's lines stayed the same, while slowly she grew into her role. Tall and slim, wearing love beads, a buckskin miniskirt, and a headband with a jaunty hawk feather stuck in the back—by the time she entered ninth grade, Yummy made a luscious ambassador.

"Pray, take our seeds and plant them—"

From her position, curled on the dusty stage in her burlap sack, Cass listened to Yummy recite her lines and tried not to sneeze.

That year Yummy started wearing peasant blouses to school, and hip-hugging jeans that she'd turned into bell-bottoms with wedges of upholstery fabric. Sometimes she wore a gold dot, the kind you stick on filing folders, in the middle of her forehead. "It's my third eye," she told Cass. "It's called a *bindi*. Indians wear them."

Cass didn't recall any of the Shoshone kids with filing dots on their faces, and she said so. Yummy rolled her eyes. "*Real* Indians. The ones from *India*."

She would lean against the mailboxes at the end of their road, smoking an Old Gold Filter. They used to meet there after dinner when the summer sun lingered at the edge of the fields, low in the sky. Dump their bikes in the dirt at the side of the road and smoke, while the sun's oblique rays stretched their shadows out long. Cass used to love her summer shadow. Even next to Yummy's it was tall and slim, with legs that just went on and on forever.

It was safe there at the crossroads. The fields spread out in all directions, as far as the eye could see, some dark green with potatoes, some light green with wheat. There was nobody around, and if someone did show up, you could see them coming for miles by the dust they raised. Plenty of time to stub out a butt and flick it into the field, unless it was a truckload of Mexican farmhands, in which case you usually didn't bother. Yummy would squint at Cass and offer up the cigarette, filter first, and Cass would take it between her thumb and forefinger, narrow her eyes, and drag deep. Then she'd hand it back the same way. When the sun set, taking her shadow with it, she'd sit on a large chunk of black stone at Yummy's feet. They'd continue to smoke until the tip of the cigarette glowed red against the indigo sky. Yummy would take a foot out of her sneaker—she'd stopped wearing socks that summer—and place it, storklike, against the inside of her thigh. It's a yoga pose, she told Cass. Her bare feet were long and slender. She wore a silver ring on her second toe, where dirt collected.

Cass had a brainload of pictures like that, even now, twenty-five years later.

"You don't have to keep on with it," Will said. "If it gets too much."

He was sitting at the table with his morning coffee, looking over some specs on seed potatoes for the spring. He put down the pages and watched as she bundled up a few eggs, still warm from the chickens, tucking them in next to a bread loaf.

Cassie shrugged. "Jeez, Will. What *else* do I have to do with my day?" The sarcasm was lost on him.

"There's always plenty to do around a farm—"

Cass straightened her back, rotating her fists into her kidneys. She eyed her husband, the stolid, broad-shouldered bulk of him, and tried to breathe away impatience. Of course there was plenty to do. Too much. There always had been, and ever since she and Will had bought up the last of Fuller's acres, and she'd taken on the old man and his crazy wife, there was more to do than ever.

Cass sighed and went back to her packing, slipping a small jar of preserves in with the loaf. It wasn't worth the breathing for an answer.

Will knew when he'd got something wrong. "I didn't mean to criticize," he said, catching her wrist as she passed. "It's real sweet of you to look after them."

That's right, thought Cass. She looked down at his wide face. His hair was pulled back tight into a blond ponytail and fastened with a rubber band. She gave it a tug, then bent to plant a kiss on the top of his head. I *am* sweet. Why not? You could always count on Will to find the good in things. But if this was comfort, it quickly passed. Because it wasn't just about sweet, although some sweetness did enter into it. Curiosity? Pity? Cass pulled away and went back to her packing. Resignation. Too many years spent as a potato.

"Maybe you should write to that daughter of theirs," Will said. "Tell her she has to come home."

"Sure thing." Never mind that she hadn't heard a word from Yummy in close to twenty-five years, or had any idea where she lived. "That'll make her hop right to." She gave Will a look as she headed out the door. "You don't know Yummy Fuller."

"Yummy, yummy, yummy, I got love in my tummy,
And I feel like a-lovin' you. . . ."

It was her theme song. You could almost hear it playing in the corridors at school when she walked by. Pigtails swinging. It stuck in your head. Cass could still catch its boppy little melody on the cold fall wind. She swung her basket onto the passenger's seat of the Suburban and set off down the road.

The screen door at the Fullers' house had slumped off its hinges, and the mesh was clogged. The aluminum was dull and spotted with age. The old Japanese woman shuffled through the kitchen. She peered up through the dirty screen.

"Yes? May I hel-pu you?" After fifty years in Idaho she still spoke with the deliberateness of a foreigner, carefully pronouncing words, lining them up one after another, and launching them tentatively into the air.

"Hi, Momoko. It's me, Cassie. Can I come in?"

The old woman backed away from the door and held it open.

"Yes. Plee-su."

All the lamps in the house were off, and the shades were drawn. Cass set the basket of food on the kitchen table and yanked the cord on the roll-up blinds, letting in the cold, dim light of the morning. The plastic blinds were torn in places and patched with Scotch tape that had turned yellow and brittle. She could hear Momoko saying something in Japanese behind her. She talked to herself, always had.

Cass looked around. "Did you and Lloyd have breakfast?" she asked, hoping to see crumbs on the counter or dishes in the sink, some sign that a meal had been eaten, but the kitchen looked barren, like a dusty exhibit in a wax museum that no one visited anymore. It was the labels. Lloyd had written them out in black marker on index cards and taped them to the furniture and the various appliances. TOASTER, read one. MR. COFFEE, read another. Momoko was forgetting the names of things. Cass went to the REFRIGERATOR and took out a macaroni casserole she'd left a few days before. Some of the cheese had been picked off the top, but mostly it had not been touched. The old woman watched.

"You want to play with Yumi-chan? Maybe she is in her room. I call her."

A bad day for Momoko, Cass thought. The woman was having more and more of them, days that dissolved backward, dragging Cass with her

until she could almost believe she was six years old with pigtails and had come over to play. It was the air in the house. Smelled funny. Maybe a gas leak? No, not gas. Something unpleasant. She opened a window.

"Mrs. Fuller, didn't you fix your supper last night?"

Momoko nodded her head. "Oh, yes, thank you very much."

"What did you have?"

She blinked, slid her eyes from side to side behind her glasses, looking for clues. She pointed to the casserole dish in Cassie's hands.

"I make that one. Nice whatchamacallit. Lloyd's favorite." She nodded.

Cass took the lid off the macaroni casserole and showed it to Momoko.

"Yes," Momoko agreed, looking in. "Pot roast. He like it very much. He is meat-and-potatoes kinda guy."

Cass sighed. "Good for you. I'm glad you had a nice supper. Now, how about some breakfast?"

"Okay. I go upstairs to call Yumi."

"I don't think Yummy's here, Mrs. Fuller. Why don't you go up and get Lloyd? See if he wants to come down for breakfast."

"Okay," said Momoko. "Then you go out and play."

The old woman shuffled from the room. Cass poached up some eggs and heated water for coffee. She sliced the bread, annoyed with herself for forgetting to buy Wonder. The crusts of her home-baked loaves were too hard for Lloyd. She had seen him struggling one day, sucking on the crust to soften it and then mashing it between his gums. She was out of the habit of store-bought since Will had gotten her the bread machine for Christmas several years back, when potato prices were up. What she'd wanted was a new oven. What she'd really wanted was a whole new kitchen, but that was another story.

She heard Momoko upstairs, talking to her husband. He wasn't bedridden, but he liked to take his time getting up. Mornings were difficult. It was hard for him to get downstairs, and he liked it when Cass could give him a hand.

"You're a big, strong girl," he joked. "Momoko's too small. She'll just buckle. Look! I'm afraid I've bent her in half already!"

"Oooooh, he is *so* big man!" Momo said, slapping him. "I carry him all the time on my back! How you say? Like on back of piggy? See? He make me crooked all over!"

Sometimes the three of them could share a laugh.

"You so old man!" Momoko would scold him. "How you get so old?"

And Lloyd would smile. "How'd you get so pretty?"

Sometimes it wasn't so bad.

"Breakfast is ready!" Cass called. "Lloyd, do you need a hand?"

She walked to the foot of the stairs in the living room and waited. The room was still and close. It was a nice room and had potential, but it would have to be entirely redone. She rubbed the shiny banister. She could still hear Momoko, muttering upstairs.

"Lloyd?" she called again.

The heavy curtains shut out the morning sun, except for a single shaft of light that shot through the gap where the fabric panels didn't quite meet in the middle. The light touched the air, made it substantial, made it come to life with motes and particles, flying things. Maybe it was the tilt of the shaft, but Cass felt the room shift, no longer familiar. She held on to the banister. Probably just hunger, she hadn't had her own breakfast yet. Still, there was a feeling.

The light came to rest on a dusty horsehair love seat. She had a history with that chair. The last time she'd sat there, feeling oversize, was a year ago, when she and Will signed the last of the documents that Duggin had brought over for the closing. Lloyd sat across from them, sunk deep in his ancient recliner. Momoko had brought them all coffee in stained cups, then joined them, sitting on a small, hard-backed chair, her worn flip-flops dangling a few inches from the floor.

"My colon this time," Lloyd told the lawyer. "Cancer. Nipped it in the bud, but they took out close to a foot of the darn thing. Have to wear a contraption now."

He paused, contemplating his breached innards, then continued, with something like pride. "Always thought my heart would kill me. Never expected this—"

He looked around for confirmation, but no one would agree, or even answer. No one would say, *Yes Lloyd, it sure is funny.* Or, *Absolutely right, Lloyd, with a trigger heart like yours.* Will was looking down at his lap. Duggin was aligning the edges of the contract of sale. Cass stroked the upholstery on the arm of the love seat. She found a hard bit lodged in the nap and worried it with her fingernail. The silence was long, until she broke it.

"You're doing great, Lloyd," she said, too late to be quite convincing. She'd had a run-in with cancer herself, so she could sympathize, but while

she was doing great, she knew he wasn't. Recently she had taken over helping him with his colon bags, too. His thick, hardened fingers had trouble with the snaps, and Momoko couldn't remember how the appliances got attached.

Lloyd sighed. "Not likely I'll ever be up to running three thousand acres again, eh, Will?"

"No, sir," said Will, looking up. Blunt. Honest. The old man hadn't run three thousand acres for years.

"It's a lot of work—" Duggin said.

"Don't mind the work," Lloyd said. "That's never been the problem. God knows I worked hard when I could, and we surely were rewarded." He looked over at Will. "Ever tell you about that year? 1974, it was. We got nine dollars per hundredweight. . . ." Then all of a sudden his shoulders sagged. "Don't know what we were thinking, eh, Momo? What were we thinking?"

Momoko didn't hear him. She was watching Cass. "You are Yumi's friend?"

Cass nodded. "I used to be."

"She not here, you know."

"I know. Have you heard from her . . . ?"

"She was too-pretty girl," the old woman said. "If she was more ugly, maybe she not get into trouble."

"Momoko!" Lloyd struggled to stand, but the old chair seemed to stick to his buttocks. His skinny knees flapped open and closed and he looked like some long-legged marsh bird caught in a sump pond, throwing his weight forward again and again. Finally, breathless, he sat back. His bony chest heaved. He closed his eyes.

Will coughed. "If this isn't a good time, we can take a break—"

Cass frowned at him. No point in putting it off.

"Good time?" asked Lloyd, voice tight, speaking to no one at all. "There's no good time. There's no time at all."

He opened his eyes and spoke to Will. "My wife and I want it guaranteed that we can go on living here in this house. That is nonnegotiable, Will. And we keep five acres for Momo's seeds." He turned to the lawyer. "We've made quite a nice little business out of the seeds in the past few years. All Momo's doing, really. Haven't been much use, ever since my heart . . ."

"Of course, Lloyd," Duggin said. "The house and five acres are guaranteed. For as long as you like. Or until—"

Lloyd closed his eyes again and let his head fall back against the upholstery. "I'd always hoped . . ." He rolled his head from side to side as though his hopes were a muscle he could loosen. "Don't know who we're going to get to take over our seed stock. We got hundreds of varieties, some of 'em quite rare."

His white hair, fine spun and charged with static from the friction, clung to the nubbly fabric. When he opened his eyes again, the pale blue irises were covered in a greasy film. He blinked, then let his watery gaze roam around the room to the lawyer, then to Will, to Momoko, and finally to Cass. Looking for answers. Cass looked away.

"All right," he said. "Give me a pen, then. Let's get this over with."

"That's right, Lloyd," Duggin said, handing him a ballpoint. "It's the only sensible thing to do."

"Lloyd? Momoko?"

Cass slowly climbed, listening to the groan of the stairs underfoot and Momoko's murmuring from above. As her head came level with the floorboards, the odor she'd noticed downstairs grew stronger. She ran up the remaining stairs.

She knew the house. She'd known it since she was a child, running along the creaky corridors, adding scuff marks to the doors, sliding down the rickety banister and fingering the scratches in the plaster walls. For all its flaws it was a far better house than her parents' ranch-style prefab, where she and Will lived now. She was looking forward to the day when they could move in and start fixing it up. The door to the master bedroom was closed. She knew that the knob was loose, that it wiggled, and its screws were in need of tightening. She knocked, then peeked in. The bed was messy, but no one was there. She hurried down the hallway to the bathroom.

Momoko was perched like a child on the edge of the bathtub, rocking back and forth and talking quietly to herself. Lloyd lay on the floor in front of her, toppled like a giant on the slick tiles in front of the toilet. He had apparently been using it when he fell, because there was dark yellow urine pooled on the tile around him, and his pajama bottoms were wet in front.

His toes, normally pale and waxlike, had turned dark, the color of a bruise. The small nub of his penis stuck out from the slit in the damp flannel.

Cass knelt down and put her hand on the side of his neck, then felt for his pulse. The acrid smell of old man's urine made her gag. She cupped one hand over her nose and the other hand over his mouth. She felt warm breath in the palms of both. She slid open his eye with her thumb.

"When did this happen? When did he fall?"

Momo shrugged her shoulders.

"When did you find him? Was it just now?"

Momoko pointed to her husband's penis. "*O-chin-chin ga dashite iru wa panashi* . . ."

There was a phone in the hallway. Cass dialed for an ambulance. If it gets too much, Will had said. Yes, suddenly it was much too much.

From the bathroom, Momoko cried, "*Damé! Damé! O-shikko tarashite!*"

Cass finished with 911 and ran back to the bathroom. Momoko was squatting down next to Lloyd, slapping his thigh with her tiny, crooked hand.

"Mrs. Fuller! Don't!"

The old woman looked up at Cass, her silver hair hanging down on either side of her face. She shook her head, sternly.

"*Damé!* Very bad. He did *o-shikko* in his pants!"

Then she stood up as straight as she could, which wasn't very straight at all, brought her hands to her eyes, and let out a low, keening wail. She shuffled backward, two baby steps, just far enough to bump the backs of her knees against the edge of the tub, whereupon she sat abruptly on the tub's rim, then kept on going, sliding with her behind first into the smooth porcelain depression. She lay there on the bottom, in a small curl, sobbing quietly.

"It's his heart," Cass explained for the hundredth time to yet another social worker. "He's had a couple of heart attacks, plus a bout with colon cancer. He had a colostomy last year and wears a bag, but he can't change it himself. And she's pretty senile. They really need services."

The social worker nodded. "I agree, but it's just not practical to be sending aides all the way out to the farm several times a day. In a case like this, usually we recommend one of the children or a family member helping out. . . ."

"I'm not a family member," Cass said quickly. "I just live next door."

"Don't they have any children?"

"A daughter. But nobody knows where she is."

"Have you asked them?"

Cass tried, but she knew there was no point. "Lloyd? Can you hear me?"

Momoko shook her head. "He can hear. He don't want talking."

"Wouldn't you like Yummy to come home and take care of you?"

Lloyd lay perfectly still under the thin sheet.

"He don't want nobody," Momoko said.

Cass sighed. "Momoko, do you have any idea where Yummy is?"

"Yumi?" The old lady's eyes turned inward. "Oh, yes. She is at whatchamacallit."

"Where?"

"Where you go for studying."

"You mean, like a school? A college?"

"That's right," she nodded. "You know, too. You go to same one. How come you not go today? You sick or something?"

Lloyd shifted his long legs under the sheet. "She doesn't know anything," he said, keeping his eyes closed. "We haven't heard from her in years."

"I know! I know! You playing hooky!" Momoko screeched with laughter.

Will jerked on the sagging screen door to see if he could straighten the hinges.

"Don't bother," Cass said. "We'll have plenty to fix once we take possession." She looked around the kitchen. The air was close and still, and her voice sounded loud. "I'll start in here and then go upstairs. You do the living room. Look for bankbooks, too. Maybe they sent her money."

Will hesitated. "Bankbooks? That's awfully personal . . ."

"What else can we do? Lloyd said they hadn't heard from her in years, but that means they heard from her sometime. I want to know when, and where she was living, and—"

"Maybe she phoned."

Cass tugged at the top drawer. It stuck. "I'll bet she wrote. She was always writing things down." She pulled harder, forced it open.

The contents illustrated the virtue of thrift gone mad. Nothing had been

taken out in years, just added to, until each drawer was crammed full of rusting twisties, wads of cling wrap that had lost its cling, twists of tinfoil filled with crumbs, crumbling rubber bands. There were miniature shower caps made of grimy vinyl for popping over leftovers. Dingy sandwich bags that smelled of old onion. Stained paper towels folded and stacked for reuse. Cass longed to discard, to disinfect, but she finished the kitchen quickly and went upstairs.

She searched the master bedroom, then continued down the hall to the bedroom that had once been Yummy's. She remembered the room as it used to be, with shelves of books and a plastic record player and albums in stacks on the floor. Flower Power decals on the walls, the ceiling speckled with constellations that glowed in the dark. The room's only ornament now sat on top of a white wooden dresser. It was a small framed photograph, in black and white, of a solemn Indian princess standing in front of the screen door of the farmhouse, hand in hand with Lloyd. Noble Pilgrim. The tip of her feather barely reached his hipbone.

Cass opened the dresser drawer, expecting to find the good linens or Lloyd's spare winter underwear, but it was filled with Yummy's old clothes. Socks, some underpants, T-shirts and jeans, all neatly folded, but musty. Cass lifted a T-shirt speckled with blue paisleys and held it to her nose. A familiar smell clung to the fibers—a little animal, some sandalwood, a hint of patchouli. A mother would hide things here. Cass dug beneath a pile of underclothes. Sure enough.

It was a small bundle, carefully wrapped in a worn freezer bag and secured with a thick rubber band. Inside, wrapped in yet another plastic bag, was a collection of photographs and letters. Cass set the photos aside and flipped through the envelopes. There weren't many, maybe two dozen or so, all addressed to Momoko in Yummy's wild, loopy handwriting. The earliest was on the bottom, dated April 1976. The most recent was from 1997. Cass slid her fingers under the rest of the clothing but found nothing more. As she leaned on the drawer to close it, the blue paisley again caught her eye. She pulled out the T-shirt and held it up against her. She'd lost so much weight, it might fit her now. She tossed it around her neck like a gym towel and went downstairs.

Will sat at the old rolltop desk. Cass draped her arms over his broad shoulders and laid her face against the plane of his jaw. She waved the letters in front of his face.

"Got 'em."

"Good girl. You find an address?" He was poring over a ledger of old farm reports, handwritten in Lloyd's antique script. "Poor old guy. What happened in '75?"

"'Seventy-five?" Cass started flipping through the letters in her hand.

"The year he leased out over half his acreage to your father."

"I don't know. I was just a kid. Why?" She checked the postmarks: San Francisco, Berkeley, several from Texas—all places that Cass could imagine.

"He was doing so well up until then. Look at this. Those Nine-Dollar Potatoes in '74, and then next season he goes and leases to your father. How come?"

Cass looked up. "That was the year after Yummy ran away. He had a heart attack. His first one."

"Weird. Look at this. Two years later, after he took the acreage back, he was fighting soil contamination more or less constantly. From what he was spraying, he must have had a problem with leafroll."

"He did. I remember Daddy going on about the aphids. Lloyd hired Daddy on to run the operation for him, but they never saw eye to eye. Daddy was a lousy farmer and lost a lot of the crop to net necrosis. He blamed Momoko's peach tree for attracting those aphids. Wanted to chop it down, but Lloyd wouldn't let him. *Momo* means 'peach' in Japanese."

"I'm with your Daddy on this one. That tree's just asking for trouble. Do you think I can take these records? It's helpful to know."

"You mean, do I think it's stealing? I don't care if it is, Will. Anyway, we own the land now. We got a right to it, I should think."

"I asked him to show me these way back in '83 when we started leasing. But he kept putting it off."

"Well, now you know why."

"He's a proud man."

"Daddy said he was a cheat."

"Ornery, maybe. You know he's not a cheat." Will would always give anyone the benefit of the doubt, and he was right to do so.

Cass draped her arms around his neck again and held the stack of letters in front of his nose. "Look," she said, pointing to a postmark. "Where's Pahoa?"

yummy

Two peas in a pod. You remember how that went?

Lloyd would come in for lunch. He'd be sitting at the kitchen table, and you'd dance up behind him and throw your arms around his neck, still hot from the sun, and there would be dirt in the pores under his collar and the sour smell of fertilizer on his fingertips as he reached up to cup your chin and hold you still—remember what his cheek felt like, pressed against yours? Then Momoko, sitting across, would compare the two of you, her large husband and her eager little daughter. She'd peer, long and slow—the same appraising look she gave to a pair of melons, figuring how much longer until they'd be ripe enough to pick—and your heart would be racing. You were always so anxious. How did you know? That growing up meant you were becoming less of him. That this was something, inevitably, that any daddy would dread. Finally Momoko would press her lips together. "Hmm," she would grunt. "Two peas in a pod." Only she'd pronounce it more like "Tsu pi-su ina pod-do," and then she'd give a little nod that made it for sure. Did he teach her that phrase? She seemed to enjoy saying it, enjoy her role in your ceremony, although with that act of abnegation, she put herself outside the two of you. What did that cost her? At least a small twinge of belonging, because if your heart was any measure, your face must have lit up like the sun, to hear her pronouncement. Did that hurt her, too? It was triumph to you. Flesh of her flesh, turning from her—you would have banished her entirely, had you not needed the power of her affirmation. Oh, yeah, your allegiances were firmly with Daddy.

And Daddy would chuckle. Pat your cheek. He was always as shy with his love as you were ferocious with yours, but even if its expression was tentative, the fact of his love was absolute. Then. *So what the fuck happened?*

It wasn't your fault! you wanted to cry. It was just *life,* filtering into your prattle at the supper table, that so offended him, and how were you to know? You'd always shared what you'd learned in school, playing teacher even then, telling him all about the Pilgrims, for example, or how the telegraph was invented, or the names for the parts of a flower. "Pistil, stamen, stigma . . ." He'd frown with concentration, repeating the names after you,

slowly, as though he'd never heard them before. "And what does a stamen do?" he'd prompt, pretending to be confused. And you would proudly teach, "A stamen does this and such," and he would nod and smile at you and say, "My, my, my!" like he just couldn't believe how one little daughter—and his, at that—could be so bright. His love for you was absolute, all right. Until you changed the subject.

It wasn't your fault that the sexual reproduction of flowering plants failed to hold your interest. You were becoming an adolescent, after all. When your conversation veered off like a car out of control, toward shades of frosted lipstick and the boys who smoked Pall Malls in the weeds behind the maintenance shed at school, Lloyd's face froze. He grew surly at the sight of your love beads, recoiled at any mention of rock and roll. The first time you used the word "groovy," he choked on his gravy.

"You are not leaving the house dressed like that," he said, catching you sneaking out the door in your worn jeans with all the holes and patches. "I won't have you parading all over town dressed like a beggar." You turned around to face him. "Your navel is showing," he added, eyeing it with disgust.

If he couldn't even tolerate your navel, then how was he to cope when life kick-started changes inside you that went deeper still?

The next year, in ninth grade, there was a man, a history teacher named Elliot Rhodes, slouching in front of the blackboard in a rumpled flannel shirt, stroking his mustache. When he read out loud in class, he looked right at you. At first you thought it was your imagination, but after a couple of times you knew it was for real, and your stomach heaved so violently you could hardly breathe at all. At first you mistook this passion for vocation—you'd always known you would be a teacher (or an explorer or a poet, you weren't exactly sure which), and now you understood why! The power of his knowledge made you weak in the knees. That fall, he taught you all about the great civilizations of the world. He pressed you to question your beliefs, to think about real ideas. He considered Japan to be spiritual and deep, and he taught you a koan: What is the sound of one hand clapping? You carried it home in your heart and whispered it to yourself every day, stunned at its poetic profundity. When you told it to Momoko, she looked at you like you were nuts.

"But, Mom, it's Japanese. It's Zen."

"Stupid. Make no sense."

"It's not supposed to make sense. It's supposed to help you reach enlightenment."

"Never heard of it. Anyway, why you need enlighten when you got good Methodist church to go to?"

"Oh, Mom." You sighed, glancing at Lloyd before going one step further. "I don't believe in organized religion."

Lloyd looked up and shuddered.

At church there'd been talk. Rhodes had just graduated from some liberal college in California. He was a hippie, a commie, an anarchist, a freak. What did they know? In fact, he was a conscientious objector, and you knew this because he told you, after school, the day you lingered in the classroom once the other kids had gone home. He'd protested the war in Vietnam. He'd marched on Washington. He admired Asian culture. He could never go over there, as a soldier, to kill. You leaned against the edge of his desk. He looked at you with an enormous aching, and for the first time you understood the tragedy that was war. He reached up, traced the slant of your eye with his thumb, told you he had a thing for—

Abruptly he turned away. Tugged at his mustache and sent you home, but even though you had to walk for miles because you missed the bus, you were brimming with such a wild joy it felt like flying. You'd sensed his struggle, the sudden gruffness in his voice, the violence in the muscles of his back as he attacked the blackboard with his eraser. The back of a grown man. The fall sky turned steely, then darkened to dusk. You did a skippy little jig in the gravel. The stars were out by the time you sauntered into the kitchen.

Momoko looked at Lloyd. Lloyd cleared his throat, wiped pie from the corner of his mouth. "You're late."

"I stayed after school." Surfing the edge of a long-suffering sigh.

"You in some kinda trouble?" Momoko asked, bringing a plate of franks and beans that she had kept hot in the oven.

"No." Pricking the rubbery pink lozenges with your tines. "I had to help Mr. Rhodes."

Lloyd hemmed and hawed, and you could feel the slow ache of his thinking. He took a toothpick from his shirt pocket and started excavating his back molars. When he got to the front incisors, he snapped the toothpick in half and placed it on the edge of his plate. Finally he wiped his mouth with his napkin. "I don't trust that man. He has dubious morals."

"He does not! He's an activist. A man of conscience! Just because he won't go fight a war in Asia. That's more than *you* can say!"

Lloyd drew in his breath like he'd been sucker-punched. Put down his fork and napkin and pushed to his feet. His eyes were as cold and bright as the sun on snow in winter. It was as if he could see into the corners of your mind, know thoughts before you had a chance to think them, track the rebel contents of your heart. As a child you were secure in his omniscience, knowing that everything occurring on this earth did so with his blessing, according to his will. Now you looked away.

"What's happened to *your* morals, Yumi?" His voice sounded dead.

You couldn't raise your eyes from your dinner plate. "I believe anything is okay as long as it doesn't hurt anybody."

Cassie's dad would have whipped her for talking back. You got sent to your room, which was where you wanted to be in the first place.

At the Thanksgiving pageant, Mr. Rhodes slumped in the front row, and standing center stage, you felt him watching. The play seemed silly, and you'd long outgrown your role, but even so, the words were never as rich in all the years you'd said them.

"Noble Pilgrims," you recited, voice trembling, "my people and I welcome you to our land. We know that your journey has been a hard one, and we will help you. Pray, take our seeds and plant them. . . ."

You wanted him to know that you welcomed him, understood him, even though there was a petition circulating at church to have him transferred out of the school district. You knew that Lloyd had signed it. Shoot, he'd probably started it.

When you returned for your curtain call, his seat was empty. Your heart sank.

The following day he asked you to stay after school. He paced back and forth in the empty classroom, ranting about historical accuracy. "It's revisionist bullshit! It was genocide—we *stole* their land, and then we exterminated them. And now we call it Thanksgiving?"

He seemed very angry, like he was yelling at you. "Don't you know *anything* about the Shoshone and the Bannock who've lived on this land for thousands of years, before there even was an Idaho?" Staring at him, your eyes burned, and you wanted to cry. Then he stopped and stood in

front of you, and before you knew it, he had pinned you in his arms against the desk, and he was kissing you, hard. It was not at all what you'd imagined, involving a lot more bristle, more teeth and tongue than romance, but he whispered, "So lovely . . ." and ran his fingers through your long hair, and that was enough. It was plenty. This is it, you thought, shivering uncontrollably. It's happening, and you tried to pay attention so that you could remember how his hands felt against the skin of your heart and tell it all to Cass.

He had a baby blue Volkswagen Beetle in a town of Fords and Chevys. On Saturday you skipped 4-H and he picked you up behind the school. He was wearing jeans and an old fisherman's sweater. He took you to a tiny clapboard house on the outskirts of town, which he was renting for the school year. He made a big pot of split-pea soup on top of a woodstove. You helped him peel the carrots, and afterward you ate the soup with big hunks torn from a loaf of French bread. The crust was burned. He had no chairs, so you sat on a mattress in the corner of the living room. You put the empty bowls on the floor when you were done. The room filled with steam from the simmering soup, clouding the windows. The sheets were speckled with grit, and the flattened pillow smelled like the scalp of his head. It was the best smell in the world, and you buried your face in it, hugging it, wanting to take it home with you. There was no toilet paper in the bathroom, only a stack of dusty newspapers, and afterward you found yourself wiping his semen from your aching adolescent pussy with the headlines of an old *New York Times:* NIXON RESIGNS.

You phoned Cass right after dinner.

"I did it!" you whispered, and she cried, "No way!" and you could almost hear the screen door slam as she came rocketing out of her house, down the road, and up your driveway. You grabbed her wrist, hauled her panting through the kitchen and up the stairs, slipping past Lloyd, who was headed toward the bathroom. Barricading your bedroom door, the two of you sat, legs crossed Indian style, head touching head.

"I can't believe it!" squealed Cass, "You really—!"

You reached over to clamp your hand across her mouth. Lloyd gargled in the bathroom on the other side of the wall. When you could trust her to be quiet, you let your hand drop.

"All the way?" she whispered.

You nodded.

"What was it *like*?" Her eyes were glistening.

You savored her awe, lay back on the pillows.

"It was . . . unbelievably romantic," you said. "He made split-pea soup." You smiled dreamily, staring up past a constellation of phosphorescent stars. When you were little, Lloyd had pasted them onto the ceiling for you, following the diagram from a book that he had bought—Orion, Andromeda, and the Dippers. It had been years since you'd really noticed them.

"Split-pea soup?" Cass sounded unimpressed.

"Mmm. I peeled potatoes while he washed peas. He chopped up carrots and—"

"Yummy, I *know* what's in split-pea soup!" she cried, bouncing up and down on the bed. "What happened *after?*"

"I'm getting to that. The room was hot, so we took off our sweaters."

"And he was driven wild with desire?"

"No. He played his guitar."

"Ooooh, how romantic! What did he play?"

"Jefferson Airplane. Some Dylan. 'Lay Lady Lay.' "

"I *love* that! And then did you do it?"

"No. Afterward. First we ate the soup."

"Did it hurt?" she asked.

"Just a little. The first time."

"The *first* time! Oh, my goodness, Yummy! How many . . . ?" Her face was bright pink now as she pressed her fingers to her mouth. Sweet Cassie, you thought, feeling so mature all of a sudden—and that was when time did a weird, elasticky thing, like a cartoon slingshot, sending you zinging way out ahead of her in years.

"I don't know," you answered, from far away. "Three? Maybe four?"

"Did you, you know . . . ?"

"What?"

"You know . . ." She hesitated again. She sounded lonely, left behind like that. "Did it feel good?"

"Mmmm," you said, smug and inscrutable, adding to the distance between you. "It felt great. Totally far out. No . . . it was soulful. . . . I can't explain."

It wasn't really soulful, but you were already rewriting the experience.

The real story, as you dimly recall it, twenty-five years later, was that it didn't feel great at all, and it just went on and on. What you identified as pleasure started in the silence after the sex part was done and the winter afternoon was growing dark. You lay there, staring at the ceiling in dim light, and held a naked man for the first time in your life. For a little while, maybe fifteen minutes or so, you honestly felt that this was what it was like to be all grown up and happy. Then he rolled out of bed and put on his jeans and started looking for his car keys.

Lloyd left the bathroom and stopped outside your closed door. He cleared his throat.

"Aren't you girls supposed to be studying?"

"We *are*." Your tone ripe and condescending. "We're *doing* our *homework*."

Cass looked alarmed.

Lloyd hesitated. "Sounds like just a lot of chatter to me," he said. "Finish up and go on home, Cass. It's getting late."

You listened as he descended the creaking stairs.

"Lady," Elliot crooned, strumming at the strings of his guitar, *"you keep askin' why he likes you? How come?"*

You knew not to ask questions like that. Still, he teased you:

"Wonder why he wants more if he just had some. . . ."

He told you all about San Francisco, about the brown hills of Berkeley, about the scene. There was no bullshit, he explained. That's what was so great about it. None of the crappy materialism of middle-American capitalist culture. You looked around the bare room in the small house. There was very little materialism in evidence. He could use some new sheets for his bed. He slept under a military green sleeping bag with a nubbly flannel lining, printed with hunters and ducks. He could use a new frying pan.

You had an idea. There was some extra stuff at your parents' house. They were going to give it away to the church fair anyway. You could bring it next time? It was such a good idea, and you were excited and proud to have thought of it, but to your surprise he smiled and shook his head. "No thanks," he said. "I don't need 'stuff.' " And the way he said it made your heart sink, like there was a larger point you were missing completely.

He told you about his friends. One was an anarchist sandal maker. One built drums. Another walked through a plate-glass window while tripping on LSD.

"Was he okay?" you asked.

"He died." He was staring up at the ceiling. "He thought he was going to Europe."

You couldn't think of anything to say to that.

"You know," he prompted. "When he walked though the plate-glass window."

You still didn't get it.

He sighed and lit a cigarette. "Larry was tripping, and he wanted to go to Europe. So he walked through the window, as though the physical laws of gravity and, like, *glass,* didn't apply to him anymore. Like he'd transcended all that. But he hadn't. And he fell. And he died."

Wow. You took the cigarette from his fingers and dragged, hoping that this was an adequate response. You worried about other girlfriends. Surely he must have had lovers, way more experienced than you, who would have known how to participate in a conversation like this. Had he ever been in love with them?

"'Made for each other, made in Japan.'" He crooned the lyrics of Grace Slick's song, grinning as he wound a strand of your long black hair around his finger. When he sang, sometimes it sounded like love, and you imagined it at night, under the glow-in-the-dark stars, where the air was thick with your dreaming. He would look deep into your eyes. "I love you," he would say. "I love you, Yumi." And you would sob and hug your diary, where you were writing it all down, doubled over with a heartache that was the closest thing you knew to a body's pleasure. "Oh, Elliot," you whispered under your father's starry sky. "I love you, too."

"Woman with a greasy heart," he sang.

What was he talking about? Your heart did not feel greasy, but you wished it could be, if that would make the song be about you.

"Woman with a greasy heart, Au-to-ma-tic Man."

You faced each other, naked and cross-legged on the mattress, and he reached out to trace your nipple. He moved his fingertip up the center of your rib cage, like a zipper to your mouth, and you sucked on it like a lollipop to make it wet.

"Mmmmm, Yummy," he murmured, as he drew the finger back down

your stomach and slipped it between your legs. "You're so open. I love that about you. . . ."

And there it was. He'd finally said it. He loved you.

You threw your arms around his neck. "Oh, Elliot," you breathed. "I love you, too!" Pressed your cheek against his, feeling the tickle of his mustache, the rasp of his unshaved skin, holding him for a long time. Then, slowly, you realized that something was wrong. That you were the only one doing any holding. That he was not holding at all. In fact, he was merely sitting there, his arms at his sides. You let go of him, sat back, hugged your legs to your chest. If you could have died, you would have done so, gladly.

"Oh, wow," he said.

You had nothing more to add.

"Of course, I love you, too, Yummy," he said. "It's just that there are so many different levels of love, you know. . . ."

You didn't know, but you were finding out.

"What a downer. I don't want to hurt you, Yummy. Maybe we should just—"

"No!" you cried out, too loudly. "I knew that. That's what I meant, too." You pressed your chin into your naked kneecap. You were shivering, so you pulled his sleeping bag up around your shoulders. The metal zipper was ice cold and bit into the skin of your neck as you wrapped yourself tight in the grimy flannel with the hunters and the ducks. The bag was so old that the waterproofing was peeling off the surface fabric. You concentrated on scraping the flaking plastic with your fingernail. It came off like dead skin. He reached over and placed his hand on yours, to stop you fidgeting.

"Yummy?"

You snatched your hand away. "Don't call me that."

He was surprised. "Why not? It's your name. . . ."

"My name is *Yumi*."

"Yummi?"

"No. Not like *gummy*. Like *you*. And *me*."

"You-me."

"Say it quicker."

"Yumi."

"If you can't pronounce it right, don't say it at all."

He laughed. "You're fantastic. This is what's so great about you. You're

very mature for your age." He reached for your hands again. "Yumi, Yumi, Yumi. . . . Life can be complex, but you understand that." He played with your fingertips. "I'm glad we can talk about this stuff. It's so important to stay open." He lay back on the pillow, pulling you toward him. *"Don't ever change, lady,"* he sang.

Your heart swelled. You couldn't help it.

"Mmmm," he whispered, nibbling your neck. "You'll always be yummy to me."

lloyd

How do you tell a story, after so many years? How do you peer into other people's hearts, when life is so complex, and your own heart has grown over, close and impervious?

Lloyd's heart, multiply bypassed by now, had once again been jump-started, leaving him in a rehab ward, curtained off from the other beds. He lay there, an old Bible heavy in his hands, its spine digging into his stomach. He struggled to keep it propped up. His stiff hands fumbled with the pages. The skin on his fingertips was so callused he could barely feel the softness of the paper, and as the book slipped once again and he grasped for it, the tissue-thin pages of the psalm tore under the clumsiness of his touch. *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?*

That was it. He wanted to roar.

Momoko sat next to the wall, in a reclining chair on wheels. Her head lolled back, and her mouth gaped open. Her woolen hat, which she wore indoors even with the heat on, had tipped off and was lying on the floor by her feet, upturned like a beggar's. Her white hair was tamped down. Her cheeks glowed like old wax.

Maybe she will die before me, Lloyd thought, and no sooner had the notion crossed his mind than he reproached himself for the relief it brought. He closed his eyes. He was very tired. *I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels.*

The nurse snapped back the curtain.

"How you doing there, Lloyd? Hope you're good and hungry!"

She balanced a tray on her palm, slid it onto his bedside table. "Just let me do your fluids," she said, pushing up his sleeve. "Then I've got you a nice piece of Thanksgiving turkey for dinner. You'll enjoy that."

He kept his eyes shut as she tapped the needle of the intravenous tube. *They pierced my hands and my feet. . . .*

She traced the line to the valve and changed the bag. *They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture.*

"Now, how's about sitting up and tucking in to some turkey. Hold on, here we go." She touched the button that raised the back of the bed.

Lloyd grimaced. "Let us eat and drink," he said, "for tomorrow we die. . . ." His eyes stayed closed. "Is that you, Grace?"

"Yes, Lloyd. You seem a little peaked today. Anything the matter?"

"Well." He sighed. "It's dinnertime. What do you expect?" He still kept his eyes closed. "I can't eat that slop. You can take it away."

"You haven't even looked at it."

"I don't have to. Take it away."

"You have to eat, Lloyd." Her voice contained a warning.

"Let me out of this hospital and I'll eat just fine."

"Can't let you out until we know you're eating."

"I'll eat when I get home and get some real food."

He opened his eyes to stare her down. The nurse leaned a hip against the guardrail of his bed and crossed her arms.

"You don't have anyone at home to take care of you."

"We'll manage. We always have."

"Well, that's just what we don't know. Your wife can't manage. I'm sure you realize that."

He struggled to sit up taller in bed. He looked past her to Momoko, slack jawed and sleeping in the chair.

"Doc says you have a daughter. Maybe she—"

"No," he said. "I have no daughter."

"Why you crying?"

"I'm not crying."

"Look like crying to me."

The nurse was gone, and Momoko was awake now. She gripped the