1999

Pam Houston

The Best Girlfriend You Never Had

FROM *Other Voices*

A PERFECT DAY in the city always starts like this: my friend Leo picks me up and we go to a breakfast place called Rick and Ann's where they make red flannel hash out of beets and bacon, and then we cross the Bay Bridge to the gardens of the Palace of the Fine Arts to sit in the wet grass and read poems out loud and talk about love.

The fountains are thick with black swans imported from Siberia, and if it is a fine day and a weekend there will be wedding parties, almost entirely Asian. The grooms wear smart gray pinstripe suits and the women are in beaded gowns so beautiful they make your teeth hurt just to look at them.

The roman towers of the palace façade rise above us, more yellow than orange in the strengthening midday light. Leo has told me how the towers were built for the 1915 Panama Pacific Exhibition out of plaster and papier-mâché, and even though times were hard the city raised the money to keep them, to cast them in concrete so they would never go away.

Leo is an architect, and his relationship to all the most beautiful buildings in this city is astonishing given his age, only five years older than I. I make my living as a photographer; since art school I've been doing magazine work and living from grant to grant.

The house Leo built for himself is like a fairy tale, all towers and angles, and the last wild peacock in Berkeley lives on his street. I live in the Oakland hills in a tiny house on a street so windy you can't drive more than ten miles per hour. I rented it because the ad said this: "Small house in the trees with a garden and a fireplace. Dogs welcome, of course." I am dogless for the moment, but it's not my natural condition.

You never know when I might get overwhelmed by a desire to go to the pound.

It's a warm blue Saturday in November, and there are five Asian weddings under way at the Palace of the Fine Arts. The wedding parties' outfits do not match but are complementary, as if they have been ordered especially, one for each arch of the golden façade.

Leo reads me a poem about a salt marsh at dawn while I set up my old Leica. I always get the best stuff when nobody's paying me to shoot. Like the time I caught a bride waltzing with one of the caterers behind the hedgerow, his chef's cap bent to touch the top of her veil.

Then I read Leo a poem about longing in Syracuse. This is how we have always spoken to each other, Leo and I, and it would be the most romantic thing this century except that Leo is in love with Guinevere.

Guinevere is a Buddhist weaver who lives in a clapboard house on Belvedere Island. She makes cloth on a loom she brought back from Tibet. Although her tapestries and wall hangings have made her a small fortune, she refuses to use the air conditioner in her Audi, even when she's driving across the Sacramento Valley. Air conditioning, she says, is just one of the things she does not allow herself.

That Guinevere seems not to know Leo is alive causes him no particular disappointment, and that she forgets — each time she meets him — that she has met him several times before only adds to what he calls her charming basket of imperfections. The only Buddha I could love, he says, is one who is capable of forgetfulness and sin.

Guinevere is in love with a man in New York City who told her in a letter that the only thing better than three thousand miles between him and the object of his desire would be if she had a terminal illness. "I could really get behind a relationship with a woman who had only six months to live" was what he wrote. She showed me the words as if to make sure they existed, though something in her tone made me think she was proud.

The only person I know of who's in love with Leo (besides me, a little) is a gay man named Raphael who falls in love with one straight man after another and then buys each one a whole new collection of CDs. They come, Leo says, as if from the Columbia House Record Club, once a month like clockwork, in a plain cardboard wrapper, no return address and no name. They are by artists most people have never heard of, like the Nields and Boris Grebeshnikov; there are Andean folksongs and hip-hop and beat.

Across the swan-bearing lake a wedding has just reached its completion. The groom is managing to look utterly solemn and completely delirious with joy at the same time. Leo and I watch the kiss, and I snap the shutter just as the kiss ends and the wedding party bursts into applause.

"Sucker," Leo says.

"Oh, right," I say. "Like you wouldn't trade your life for his right this minute."

"I don't know anything about his life," Leo says.

"You know he remembered to do all the things you forgot."

"I think I prefer it," Leo says, "when you reserve that particular lecture for yourself." He points back across the lake, where the bride has just leaped into her maid of honor's arms, and I snap the shutter again. "Or for one of your commitment-phobic boyfriends," Leo adds.

"I guess the truth is, I can't blame them," I say. "I mean, if I saw me coming down the street with all my stuff hanging out, I'm not so sure I'd pick myself up and go trailing after."

"Of course you would," Leo says. "And it's because you would, and because the chance of that happening is so slim, and because you hold out hope anyway that it might . . . that's what makes you a great photographer."

"Greatness is nice," I tell him. "I want contact. I want someone's warm breath on my face." I say it as if it's a dare, which we both know it isn't. The flower girl across the lake is throwing handfuls of rose petals straight up in the air.

I came to this city near the ocean over a year ago because I recently spent a long time under the dark naked water of the Colorado River and I took it as a sign that the river wanted me away. I had taken so many pictures by then of the chaos of heaved-up rock and petrified sand and endless sky that I'd lost my balance and fallen into them. I couldn't keep separate anymore what was the land and what was me.

There was a man there named Josh who didn't want nearly enough from me, and a woman called Thea who wanted way too much, and I was sandwiched between them, one of those weaker rock layers like limestone that disappears under pressure or turns into something shapeless like oil.

I thought there might be an order to the city: straight lines, shiny surfaces, and right angles that would give myself back to me, take my work somewhere different, maybe to a safer place. Solitude was a straight line too, and I believed it was what I wanted, so I packed

whatever I could get into my pickup, left behind everything I couldn't carry, including two pairs of skis, a whole darkroom full of photo equipment, and the mountains I'd sworn again and again I couldn't live without.

I pointed myself west down the endless two lanes of Highway 50 — *The Loneliest Road in America* say the signs that rise out of the desert on either side of it — all the way across Utah and Nevada to this white shining city on the bay.

I got drunk on the city at first, the way some people do on vodka, the way it lays itself out as if in a nest of madroñas and eucalyptus, the way it sparkles brighter even than the sparkling water that surrounds it, the way the Golden Gate reaches out of it, like fingers, toward the wild wide ocean that lies beyond.

I loved the smell of fresh blueberry muffins at the Oakland Grill down on Third and Franklin, the train whistle sounding right outside the front door, and tattooed men of all colors unloading crates of cauliflower, broccoli, and peas.

Those first weeks I'd walk the streets for hours, shooting more film in a day than I could afford in a week, all those lives in such dangerous and unnatural proximity, all those stories my camera could tell.

I'd walk even the nastiest part, the blood pumping through my veins as hard as when I first saw the Rocky Mountains so many years ago. One night in the Tenderloin I rounded a corner and met a guy in a wheelchair head on, who aimed himself at me and covered me with urine. Baptized, I said to my horrified friends the next day, anointed with the nectar of the city gods.

Right off the bat I met a man named Gordon, and we'd drive down to the Oakland docks in the evening and look out at the twenty-story hydraulic boat lifts, which I said looked like a battalion of Doberman pinschers protecting the harbor from anyone who might invade. Gordon's real name was Salvador, and he came from poor people, strawberry pickers in the Central Valley, two of his brothers stillborn from Malathion poisoning. He left the valley and moved to the city when he was too young by law to drive the truck he stole from his father's field boss.

He left it double-parked in front of the Castro Theater, talked a family in the Mission into trading work for floor space, changed his name to Gordon, changed his age from fifteen to twenty, and applied for a grant to study South American literature at San Francisco State.

He had his Ph.D. before he turned twenty, a tenure-track teaching job

at Berkeley by twenty-one. When he won his first teaching award, his mother was in the audience; when their eyes met, she nodded her approval, but when he looked for her afterward, she was nowhere to be found.

"Can you believe it?" he said when he told the story, his voice such a mixture of pride and disappointment that I didn't know which was more unbelievable, that she had come or that she had gone.

"If one more woman I used to date turns into a lesbian," Leo says, "I'm moving to Minneapolis."

The wedding receptions are well under way, and laughter bubbles toward us across the lagoon.

"It's possible to take that as a compliment," I say, "if you want to bend your mind that way."

"I don't," he says.

"Maybe it's just a choice a woman makes," I say, "when she feels she has exhausted all her other options."

"Oh yeah, like you start out being a person," Leo says, "and then you decide to become a car."

"Sometimes I think it's either that or Alaska," I say. "The odds there, better than ten to one."

I remember a bumper sticker I saw once in Haines, Alaska, near the place where the ferries depart for the lower forty-eight: *Baby,* it said, *when you leave here you'll be ugly again.*

"In Alaska," I say, "I've actually had men fall at my feet."

"I bet a few men have fallen at your feet down here," he says, and I try to look him in the eye to see how he means it, but he keeps them fixed on the poetry book.

He says, "Aren't I the best girlfriend you never had?"

The last woman Leo called the love of his life only let him see her twice a week for three years. She was a cardiologist who lived in the Marina who said she spent all day with broken hearts and she had no intention of filling her time off with her own. At the start of the fourth year, Leo asked her to raise the number of dates to three times a week, and she immediately broke things off.

Leo went up on the bridge after that. This was before they put the phones in, the ones that go straight to the counselors. It was a sunny day and the tide was going out, making whitecaps as far as he could see into the Pacific. After a while he came down, not because he felt better but because of the way the numbers fell out. There had been 250 so far that

year. Had the number been 4 or 199 or even 274, he says he might have done it, but he wasn't willing to go down officially with a number as meaningless as 251.

A woman sitting on the grass near us starts telling Leo how much he looks like her business partner, but there's an edge to her voice I can't identify, an insistence that means she's in love with the guy, or she's crazy, or she's just murdered him this morning and she has come to the Palace of the Fine Arts to await her impending arrest.

"The great thing about Californians," Leo says when the woman has finally gotten up to leave, "is that they think it's perfectly okay to exhibit all their neuroses in public as long as they apologize for them first."

Leo grew up like I did on the East Coast, eating Birdseye frozen vegetables and Swanson's deep-dish meat pies on TV trays next to our parents and their third martinis, watching *What's My Line?* and *To Tell the Truth* on television, and talking about anything on earth except what was wrong.

"Is there anyone you could fall in love with besides Guinevere?" I ask Leo, after he's read a poem about tarantulas and digger wasps.

"There's a pretty woman at work," he says. "She calls herself the Diva."

"Leo," I say, "write this down. I think it's a good policy to avoid any woman who uses an article in her name."

There are policemen at the palace grounds today handing out information about how we can protect ourselves from an epidemic of carjackings that has been taking place in the city for the last five months. The crime begins, the flyer tells us, with the criminal bumping the victim's car from behind. When the victim gets out of the car to exchange information, the criminal hits her — and it's generally a woman — over the head with a heavy object, leaves her on the sidewalk, steals her car, and drives away.

The flyer says we are supposed to keep our windows rolled up when the other driver approaches, keep the doors locked, and say through the glass, *"I'm afraid. I'm not getting out. Please follow me to the nearest convenience store."* It says under no circumstances should we ever let the criminal drive us to crime scene number two.

"You couldn't do it, could you?" Leo asks, and slaps my arm like a wise guy.

"What do you think they mean," I say, "by crime scene number two?"

"You're evading the question because you know the answer too well,"

he says. "You're the only person I know who'd get your throat slit sooner than admit you're afraid."

"You know," I say to Leo, to change the subject, "you don't act much like a person who wants kids more than anything."

"Yeah, and you don't act like a person who wants to be married with swans."

"I'd do it," I say. "Right now. Step into that wedding dress, no questions asked."

"Lucy," Leo says, "seriously, do you have any idea how many steps there are between you and that wedding dress?"

"No," I say. "Tell me."

"Fifty-five," he says. "At least fifty-five."

Before Gordon I had always dated the strong silent types, I think, so I could invent anything I wanted to go on in their heads. Gordon and I talked about words and the kind of pictures you could make so that you didn't need them, and I thought what I always thought in the first ten minutes: that after years and years of wild pitches, I'd for once in my life thrown a strike.

It took me less than half a baseball season to discover my oversight: Gordon had a jealous streak as vicious as a heat-seeking missile, and he could make a problem out of a paper bag. We were asked to leave two restaurants in one week alone, and it got to the point, fast, where if the waitperson wasn't female, I'd ask if we could go somewhere else or have another table.

Car mechanics, piano tuners, dry cleaners, toll takers — in Gordon's mind they were all out to bed me, and I was out to make them want to. A honey pot, he'd called me once, and he said he and all other men in the Bay Area were a love-crazed swarm of bees.

When I told Guinevere how I'd fallen for Gordon, she said, "You only get a few chances to feel your life all the way through. Before — you know — you become unwilling."

I told her the things I was afraid to tell Leo: how the look on Gordon's face turned from passion to anger, how he yelled at me in a store so loud one time that the manager slipped me a note that said he would pray for me, how each night I would stand in the street while he revved up his engine and scream *Please, Gordon, please, Gordon, don't drive away.*

"At one time in my life I had breast implants just to please a man," she said. "Now I won't even take off my bracelets before bed."

Guinevere keeps a bowl of cards on her breakfast table between the sugar and the coffee. They are called angel cards and she bought them at the New Age store. Each card has a word printed on it, *sisterhood* or *creativity* or *romance*, and there's a tiny angel with her body in a position that is supposed to illustrate the word.

That morning I picked *balance*, with a little angel perched in the center of a teeter-totter, and when Guinevere reached in for her own word she sighed in disgust. Without looking at the word again, without showing it to me, she put the card in the trash can and reached to pick another.

I went to the trash can and found it. The word was *surrender*, and the angel was looking upward, with her arms outstretched.

"I hate that," she said, her mouth slightly twisted. "Last week I had to throw away *submit*."

Guinevere brought me a cookie and a big box of Kleenex. She said that choices can't be good or bad. There is only the event and the lessons learned from it. She corrected my pronunciation gently and constantly: the *Bu* in *Buddha*, she said, is like the *pu* in *pudding* and not like the *boo* in *ghost*.

When I was twenty-five years old, I took home to my parents a boy named Jeffrey I thought I wanted to marry. He was everything I believed my father wanted. He had an MBA from Harvard. He had patches on the elbows of his sportcoats. He played golf on a course that only allowed men.

We spent the weekend drinking the wine and eating the pâté Jeffrey's mother had sent him from her *fermette* in the southwest of France. Jeffrey let my father show him decades' worth of tennis trophies. He played the piano while my mother sang her old torch songs.

I waited until I had a minute alone with my father. "Papa," I said — it was what I always called him — "how do you like Jeffrey?"

"Lucille," he said, "I haven't ever liked any of your boyfriends, and I don't expect I ever will. So why don't you save us both the embarrassment and not ask again?"

After that I went back to dating mechanics and river guides. My mother kept Jeffrey's picture on the mantel till she died.

The first time I was mugged in the city, I'd been to the late show all alone at the Castro Theatre. It's one of those magnificent old moviehouses with a huge marquee that lights up the sky like a carnival, a

ceiling that looks like it belongs in a Spanish cathedral, heavy red velvet curtains laced with threads that sparkle gold, and a real live organist who disappears into the floor when the previews begin.

I liked to linger there after the movie finished, watch the credits and the artificial stars in the ceiling. That Tuesday I was the last person to step out of the theater into a chilly and deserted night.

I had one foot off the curb when the man approached me, a little too close for comfort even then.

"Do you have any change you can spare?" he said.

The truth was, I didn't. I had scraped the bottom of my purse to put together enough quarters, nickels, and dimes to get into the movie, and the guy behind the glass had let me in thirty-three cents short.

I said I was sorry and headed for the parking lot. I knew he was behind me, but I didn't turn around. I should have gotten my keys out before I left the theater, I thought. Shouldn't have stayed to see every credit roll.

About ten steps from my car I felt a firm jab in the middle of my rib cage.

"I bet you'd feel differently," the man said, "if I had a gun in my hand."

"I might feel differently," I said, whirling around with more force than I intended, "but I still wouldn't have any money."

He flinched, changed the angle of his body, just slightly back and away. And when he did, when his eyes dropped from mine to his hand holding whatever it was in his jacket pocket, I was reminded of a time I almost walked into a female grizzly with a nearly grown cub. How we had stood there posturing, how she had glanced down at her cub just that way, giving me the opportunity to let her know she didn't need to kill me. We could both go on our way.

"Look," I said. "I've had a really emotional day, okay?" As I talked, I dug into my purse and grabbed my set of keys, a kind of weapon in their own right. "And I think you ought to just let me get in the car and go home."

While he considered this, I took the last steps to my car and got in. I didn't look in the rearview mirror until I was on the freeway.

By mid-afternoon Leo and I have seen one too many happy couples get married, and we drive over the Golden Gate to Tiburon to a restaurant called Guymos where we drink margaritas made with Patrón tequila and eat ceviche appetizers and look out on Angel Island and the city —

whitest of all from this perspective, rising like a mirage out of the blue-green bay.

We watch the ferry dock, unload the suburbanites, then load them up again for the twice-hourly trip to the city. We are jealous of their starched shirts and brown loafers, how their clothes seem a testament to the balance in their lives.

The fog rolls over and down the lanyard side of Mount Tamalpais, and the city moves in and out of it, glistening like Galilee one moment, then gray and dreamy like a ghost of itself the next, and then gone, like a thought bubble, like somebody's good idea.

"Last night," I say, "I was walking alone down Telegraph Avenue. I was in a mood, you know. Gordon and I had a fight about John Lennon."

"Was he for or against?" Leo says.

"Against," I say, "but it doesn't matter. Anyway, I was scowling, maybe crying a little, moving along pretty fast, and I step over this homeless guy with his crutches and his little can and he says, 'I don't even *want* any money from you, I'd just like *you* to smile.'"

"So did you?" Leo says.

"I did," I say. "I not only smiled, but I laughed too, and then I went back and gave him all the money in my wallet, which was only eighteen dollars, but still. I told him to be sure and use that line again."

"I love you," Leo says, and takes both of my hands in his. "I mean, in the good way."

When I was four years old and with my parents in Palm Beach, Florida, I pulled a seven-hundred-pound cement urn off its pedestal and onto my legs, crushing both femurs. All the other urns on Worth Avenue had shrubs in them trimmed into the shapes of animals, and this one, from my three-foot point of view, appeared to be empty.

When they asked me why I had tried to pull myself up and into the urn, I said I thought it had fish inside it and I wanted to see them, though whether I had imagined actual fish or just tiny shrubs carved into the shape of fish, I can't any longer say.

The urn was empty, of course, and waiting to be repaired, which is why it toppled over onto me. My father rolled it off with some of that superhuman strength you always hear about and picked me up — I was screaming bloody murder — and held me until the ambulance came.

The next six weeks were the best of my childhood. I was hospitalized

the entire time, surrounded by doctors who brought me presents, nurses who read me stories, candy stripers who came to my room and played games.

My parents, when they came to visit, were always happy to see me and usually sober.

I spent the remaining years of my childhood fantasizing about illnesses and accidents that I hoped would send me to the hospital again.

One day last month Gordon asked me to go backpacking at Point Reyes National Seashore, to prove to me, he said, that he could take an interest in my life. I hadn't slept outside one single night since I came to the city, he said, and I must miss the feel of hard ground underneath me, must miss the smell of my tent in the rain.

Gordon borrowed a backpack, got the permit, freed the weekend, studied the maps. I was teaching a darkroom workshop in Corte Madera on Saturday. Gordon would pick me up at four when the workshop ended; we'd have just enough time to drive up the coast to Point Reyes Station and walk for an hour into the first camp. A long second day would take us to the beach, the point with the lighthouse, and back to the car with no time again to spare before dark.

I had learned by then how to spot trouble coming, and that morning I waited in the car with Gordon while first one man, way too young for me, and then another, way too old, entered the warehouse where my workshop was going to be held.

I got out of the car without seeing the surfer, tall and blond and a little breathtaking, portfolio under the arm that usually held the board. I kept my eyes away from his, but his handshake found me anyway. When he held the big door open, I went on through. I could hear the screech of tires behind me through what felt like a ton of metal.

That Gordon was there when the workshop ended at 4:02 surprised me a little. Then I got in the Pathfinder and saw only one backpack. He drove up the coast to Point Reyes without speaking. Stinson, Bolinas, Dogtown, and Olema. The white herons in Tomales Bay had their heads tucked under their arms.

He stopped at the trailhead, got out, threw my pack into the dune grass, opened my door, and tried with his eyes to pry me from my seat.

"I guess this means you're not coming with me," I said, imagining how we could do it with one pack, tenacious in my hope that the day could be saved.

What you're thinking right now is why didn't I do it, get out of that car without making eye contact, swing my pack on my back, and head off down the trail? And when I tell you what I did do, which was to crawl all the way to the back of the Pathfinder, holding on to the cargo net as if a tornado were coming, and let go with one ear-splitting, head-pounding scream after another till Gordon got back in the car, till we got back down the coast, back on the 580, back over the bridge, and back to Gordon's apartment, till he told me if I was quiet, he'd let me stay, you would wonder how a person, even if she had done it, could ever in a million years admit to such a thing.

Then I could tell you about the sixteen totaled cars in my first fifteen winters. The Christmas Eve my father and I rolled a Plymouth Fury from median to guardrail and back four full times with nine complete revolutions, how they had to cut us out with chainsaws, how my father, limber from the Seagram's, got away unhurt. I could tell you about the neighbor girl who stole me away one time at the sound of my parents shouting, how she refused to give me back to them even when the police came with a warrant, how her ten-year-old hand must have looked holding my three-year-old one, how in the end it became a funny story that both sets of parents loved to tell. I could duplicate for you the hollow sound an empty bottle makes when it hits Formica and the stove is left on and the pan's started smoking and there's a button that says off but no way to reach.

I could tell you the lie I told myself with Gordon. That anybody is better than nobody. And you will know exactly why I stayed in the back of that Pathfinder, unless you are lucky, and then you will not.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I got mugged?" Leo asks me, and we both know he has but it's his favorite story.

"I'd like it," I say, "if you'd tell it again."

Before Leo built his house on the street with the peacocks, he lived in the city between North Beach and the piers. He got mugged one night, stepping out of his car fumbling for his house keys; the man had a gun and sneaked up from behind.

What Leo had in his wallet was thirteen dollars, and when he offered the money he thought the man would kill him on the spot.

"You got a cash card," the man said. "Let's find a machine."

"Hey," I say when he gets to this part, "that means you went to crime scene number two."

The part I hate most is how he took Leo's glasses. He said he would drive, but as it turned out he didn't know stick shifts, and the clutch burned and smoked all the way up Nob Hill.

"My name's Bill," the man said, and Leo thought since they were getting so friendly, he'd offer to work the clutch and the gearshift to save what was left of his car. It wasn't until Leo got close to him, straddling the gearbox and balanced against Bill's shoulder, that he smelled the blood under Bill's jacket and knew that he'd been shot.

They drove like that to the Marina Safeway, Bill's eyes on the road and his hands on the steering wheel, Leo working the clutch and the shifter according to feel.

At the cash machine Leo looked for help but couldn't get anyone's eyes to meet his, with Bill and his gun pressed so close to his side.

They all think we're a couple, he thought, and laughter bubbled up inside him. He told Bill a lie about a hundred-dollar ATM limit, pushed the buttons, handed over the money.

They drove back to Leo's that same Siamese way, and when they got there Bill thanked Leo, shook his hand, asked one more favor before he took off.

"I'm going to give you a phone number," Bill said. "My girlfriend in Sacramento. I want you to call her and tell her I made it all right."

"Sure," Leo said, folding the paper.

"I want you to swear to God."

"Sure," Leo said, "I'll call her."

Bill put the end of the gun around Leo's belly button. "Say it, mother-fucker, say, 'I swear to God.'"

"I swear to God," Leo said, and Bill walked away.

Back in his apartment, Leo turned on Letterman. When the shaking stopped, he called the police.

"Not much we can do about it," the woman at the end of the line told him. "We could come dust your car for fingerprints, but it would make a hell of a mess."

Two hours later Leo looked in a phone book and called a Catholic priest.

"No," the priest said, "you don't have to call her. You swore to God under extreme circumstances, brought down upon you by a godless man."

"I don't think that's the right answer," I had said when I first heard the story, and I say it again, on cue, today. The first time we had talked

about the nature of godlessness, and how if a situation requires swearing to God, it is by definition extreme.

But today I am thinking not of Bill or even of Leo's dilemma, but of the girlfriend in Sacramento, her lover shot, bleeding, and hijacking architects and still remembering to think of her.

And I wonder what it was about her that made her stay with a man who ran from the law for a living, and if he made it home to her that night, if she stood near him in the kitchen dressing his wounds. I wonder how she saw herself, as what part of the story, and how much she had invested in how it would end.

"I'm so deeply afraid," Gordon had said on the docks our first night together, "that I am nothing but weak and worthless. So I take the people close to me and try to break them, so they become as weak and worthless as me."

I want to know the reason I could hear and didn't hear what he was saying, the reason that I thought the story could end differently for me.

Things ended between Gordon and me in a bar in Jack London Square one night when we were watching the 49ers play the Broncos. It was Joe Montana's last year in San Francisco; rumors of the Kansas City acquisition had already begun.

It was a close game late in the season; the Broncos had done what they were famous for in those days, jumped out to a twenty-point lead and then lost it incrementally as the quarters went by.

The game came right down to the two-minute warning, Elway and Montana trading scoring drives so elegant it was as if they had shaken hands on it before the game. A minute twenty-seven left, ball on the Niners' twenty-two: Joe Montana had plenty of time and one last chance to shine.

"Don't tell me you're a Bronco fan," a guy on the other side of me, a late arrival, said.

"It's a tough job," I said, not taking my eyes off the TV set. For about the hundredth time that evening the camera was off the action and on a tearful, worried, or ecstatic Jennifer Montana, one lovely and protective hand around each of her two beautiful blond little girls.

"Geez," I said, when the camera came back to the action several seconds too late, "you'd think Joe Montana was the only football player in America who had a wife."

The guy next to me laughed a short choppy laugh. Joe took his team seventy-eight yards in seven plays for the win.

On the way to his Pathfinder, Gordon said, "That's what I hate about you sports fans. You create a hero like Joe Montana just so you have somebody to knock down."

"I don't have anything against Joe Montana," I said. "I think he throws the ball like an angel. I simply prefer watching him to watching his wife."

"I saw who you preferred watching," Gordon said as we arrived at the car and he slammed inside.

"Gordon," I said, "I don't even know what that man looked like."

The moon was fat and full over the parts of Oakland no one dares to go to late at night, and I knew as I looked for a face in it that it didn't matter a bit what I said.

Gordon liked to drive the meanest streets when he was feeling meanest, and he was ranting about my shaking my tail feathers and keeping my pants zipped, and all I could think to do was remind him I was wearing a skirt.

He squealed the brakes at the end of my driveway, and I got out and moved toward the dark entryway.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" he asked. And I thought about the months full of nights just like this one when I asked his forgiveness, when I begged him to stay.

"I want you to make your own decision," I said over my shoulder, and he threw the car in second, gunned the engine, and screeched away.

First came the messages taped to my door, the words cut out from ten different typefaces, held down with so many layers of tape they had the texture of decoupage. Then came the slit tires, the Karo Syrup in my gas tank, my box set of Dylan's *Biography* in a puddle at the foot of my drive. One day I opened an envelope from a magazine I'd shot for to find my paycheck ripped into a hundred pieces and then put back in the envelope, back in the box.

Leo and I trade margaritas for late-afternoon lattes, and still the fog won't lift all the way.

"What I imagine," I say, "is coming home one night and Gordon emerging from between the sidewalk and the shadows, a Magnum .357 in his hand, and my last thought being, 'Well, you should have figured that this was the next logical thing.'"

"I don't know why you need to be so tough about it," Leo says. "Can't you let the police or somebody know?"

I say, "This is not a good city to be dogless in."

Leo puts his arm around me; I can tell by the way he does it he thinks he has to.

"Do you wish sometimes," I say, "that you could just disappear like that city?"

"I can," Leo says. "I do. What I wish more is that when I wanted to, I could stay."

The ferry docks again in front of us, and we sit quietly until the whistles are finished and the boat has once again taken off.

"Are you ever afraid," I say to Leo, "that there are so many things you need swirling around inside you that they will just overtake you, smother you, suffocate you till you die?"

"I don't think so," Leo says.

"I don't mean sex," I say, "or even love exactly — just all that want that won't let go of you, that even if you changed everything right now it's too late already to ever be full."

Leo keeps his eyes fixed on the city, which is back out again, the Coit Tower reaching and leaning slightly like a stack of pepperoni pizza pies.

"Until only a few years ago, I used to break into a stranger's house every six months like clockwork," he says. "Is that something like what you mean?"

"Exactly," I say. A band of fog sweeps down, faster than the others, and takes away the city, even the site of Leo's mugging, even the apartment where Gordon now stays.

When I was eighteen years old, I met my parents in Phoenix, Arizona, to watch Penn State play USC in the Fiesta Bowl. I'd driven from Ohio, they'd flown from Pennsylvania, and the three of us — for the first time ever — shared my car.

My father wanted me to drive them through the wealthy suburbs, places with names like Carefree and Cave Creek. He'd been drinking earlier in the day than usual, they both had, and he got it into his head that he wanted to see the world's highest fountain shoot three hundred gallons of water per minute into the parched and evaporative desert air.

We were halfway through Cave Creek, almost to the fountain, when the cop pulled me over.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said, "but I've been tailing you for four or five minutes, and I have to tell you, I really don't know where to start."

The cop's nameplate said Martin "Mad Dog" Jenkins. My father let out a sigh that hung in the car like a fog.

"Well, first," Officer Jenkins said, "I clocked you going 43 in a 25. Then you rolled through not one but two stop signs without coming to a safe and complete stop, and you made a right-hand turn into the center lane."

"Jesus Christ," my father said.

"You've got one taillight out," Officer Jenkins said, "and either your turn signals are burned out too, or you are electing not to use them."

"Are you hearing this?" my father said to the air.

"May I see your license and registration?"

"I left my license in Ohio," I said.

The car was silent.

"Give me a minute, then," Officer Jenkins said, "and I'll call it in."

"What I don't know," my father said, "is how a person with so little sense of responsibility gets a driver's license in this country to begin with." He flicked the air vent open and closed, open and closed. "I mean, you gotta wonder if she should even be let out of the house in the morning."

"Why don't you just say it, Robert," my mother said. "Say what you mean. Say *Daughter, I hate you.*" Her voice started shaking. "Everybody sees it. Everybody knows it. Why don't you say it out loud?"

"Ms. O'Rourke?" Officer Jenkins was back at the window.

"Let's hear it," my mother went on. "*Officer, I hate my daughter.*"

The cop's eyes flicked for a moment into the back seat.

"According to the information I received, Ms. O'Rourke," Officer Jenkins said, "you are required to wear corrective lenses."

"That's right," I said.

"And you are wearing contacts now?" There was something like hope in his voice.

"No, sir."

"She can't even lie?" my father asked. "About one little thing?"

"Okay now, on three," my mother said. "*Daughter, I wish you had never been born.*"

"Ms. O'Rourke," Officer Jenkins said, "I'm just going to give you a warning today." My father bit off the end of a laugh.

"Thank you very much," I said.

"I hate to say this, Ms. O'Rourke," the cop said, "but there's nothing I could do to you that's going to feel like punishment." He held out his hand for me to shake. "You drive safely now," he said, and he was gone.

When the Fiesta Bowl was over, my parents and I drove back up to Carefree to attend a New Year's Eve party given by a gay man my mother knew who belonged to the wine club called the Royal Order of the Grape. My father wasn't happy about it, but he was silent. I just wanted to watch the ball come down on TV like I had every year of my childhood with the babysitter, but the men at the party were showing home movie after home movie of the club's indoctrination ceremony, while every so often two or three partygoers would get taken to the cellar to look at the bottles and taste.

When my father tried to light a cigarette, he got whisked outside faster than I had ever seen him move. I was too young to be taken to the cellar, too old to be doted on, so after another half-hour of being ignored I went outside to join my father.

The lights of Phoenix sparkled every color below us in the dark.

"Lucille," he said, "when you get to be my age, don't ever spend New Year's Eve in a house where they won't let you smoke."

"Okay," I said.

"Your mother," he said, as he always did.

"I know," I said, even though I didn't.

"We just don't get love right, this family, but . . ." He paused, and the sky above Phoenix exploded into color, umbrellas of red and green and yellow. I'd never seen fireworks before, from the top.

"Come in, come in, for the New Year's toast!" Our host was calling us from the door. I wanted more than anything for my father to finish his sentence, but he stabbed out his cigarette, got up, and walked inside. I've finished it for him a hundred times, but never to my satisfaction.

We pay the bill and Leo informs me that he has the temporary use of a twenty-seven-foot sailboat in Sausalito that belongs to a man he hardly knows. The fog has lifted enough for us to see the place where the sun should be, and it's brighter yet out by the Golden Gate, and we take the little boat out and aim for the brightness, the way a real couple might on a Saturday afternoon.

It's a squirrelly boat, designed to make fast moves in a light wind, and Leo gives me the tiller two hundred yards before we pass under the dark shadow of the bridge. I am just getting the feel of it when Leo looks over his shoulder and says, "It appears we are in a race," and I look too, and there is a boat bearing down on us, twice our size, ten times, Leo tells me, our boat's value.

"Maybe you should take it then," I say.

"You're doing fine," he says. "Just set your mind on what's out there and run for it."

At first all I can think about is Leo sitting up on top of the bridge running numbers in his head, and a story Gordon told me where two guys meet up there on the walkway and find out they are both survivors of a previous jump.

Then I let my mind roll out past the cliffs and the breakers, past the Marin headlands and all the navigation buoys, out to some place where the swells swallow up the coastline and Hawaii is the only thing between me and forever, and what are the odds of hitting it if I just head for the horizon and never change my course?

I can hear the big boat's bow breaking right behind us, and I set my mind even harder on a universe with nothing in it except deep blue water.

"You scared him," Leo says. "He's coming about."

The big boat turns away from us, back toward the harbor, just as the giant shadow of the bridge crosses our bow. Leo jumps up and gives me an America's Cup hug. Above us the great orange span of the thing is trembling, just slightly, in the wind.

We sail on out to the edge of the headlands, where the swells get big enough to make us both a little sick and it's finally Leo who takes the tiller from my hand and turns the boat around. It's sunny as Bermuda out here, and I'm still so high from the boat race that I can tell myself there's really nothing to be afraid of. Like sometimes when you go to a movie and you get so lost in the story that when you're walking out of the theater you can't remember anything at all about your own life.

You might forget, for example, that you live in a city where people have so many choices they throw words away, or so few they will bleed in your car for a hundred dollars. You might forget eleven or maybe twelve of the sixteen-in-a-row totaled cars. You might forget that you never expected to be alone at thirty-two or that a crazy man might be waiting for you with a gun when you get home tonight or that all the people you know — without exception — have their hearts all wrapped around someone who won't ever love them back.

"I'm scared," I say to Leo, and this time his eyes come to meet mine. The fog is sitting in the center of the bay as if it's over a big pot of soup and we're about to enter it.

"I can't help you," Leo says, and squints his eyes against the mist in the air.

When I was two years old my father took me down to the beach in New Jersey, carried me into the surf until the waves were crashing onto his chest, and then threw me in like a dog, to see, I suppose, whether I would sink or float.

My mother, who was from high in the Rocky Mountains, where all the water was too cold for swimming, and who had been told since birth never to get her face wet (she took only baths, never showers), got so hysterical by the water's edge that lifeguards from two different stands leapt to my rescue.

There was no need, however. By the time they arrived at my father's side I had passed the flotation test, had swum as hard and fast as my untried limbs would carry me, and my father had me up on his shoulders, smiling and smug and a little surprised.

I make Leo drive back by the Palace of the Fine Arts on the way home, though the Richmond Bridge is faster. The fog has moved in there too, and the last of the brides are worrying their hairdos while the grooms help them into big dark cars that will whisk them away to the honeymoon suite at the Four Seasons, or to the airport to board planes bound for Tokyo or Rio.

Leo stays in the car while I walk back to the pond. The sidewalk is littered with rose petals and that artificial rice that dissolves in the rain. Even the swans have paired off and are swimming that way, the feathers of their inside wings barely touching, their long necks bent slightly toward each other, the tips of their beaks almost closing the M.

I take the swans' picture, and a picture of the rose petals bleeding onto the sidewalk. I step up under the tallest of the arches and bow to my imaginary husband. He takes my hand and we turn to the minister, who bows to us, and we bow again.

"I'm scared," I say again, but this time it comes out stronger, almost like singing, as though it might be the first step — in fifty-five or a thousand — toward something like a real life, the very first step toward something that will last.