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## Ninety-Nine and One-Half

Deborah R. Williamson  
*Old Dominion University*

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NINETY-NINE AND ONE-HALF

by

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B.S. June 1982, Longwood College

A Creative Project Submitted to the Faculty of  
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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HUMANITIES

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY  
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Approved by:

Wayne Uge (Director)

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## ABSTRACT

### NINETY-NINE AND ONE-HALF

Deborah R. Williamson  
Old Dominion University, 1991  
Director: Professor Wayne Ude

Ninety-nine and One-half is a novella about a young man's journey from self-doubt to self-revelation which parallels his physical journey from a coma to an awakening. In twenty spare chapters the memories of his life before the coma are intertwined with the actions of his family and friends after he becomes comatose. Through the young man's memories and the reflections about him by the other characters, the reader sees what has led the young man to an almost fatal indecision. The resolution of the novella comes when the young man adequately distances himself from the guilt, fear, and unhappiness that restrained him in life before the coma and then chooses to master his fate.

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## Creative-Project Statement

I believe most writers get their start when they read what other authors have written about the world, their dreams, or imaginings. My studies in humanities greatly increased my knowledge of the contributions artists and writers made over the centuries and gave me confidence in my own creative powers. Without my humanities courses I would have never been able to complete this project.

I have been an avid reader since elementary school, when I would spend a lot of time in the library reading books about foreign myths and folktales. In high school I continued to read quite a bit and became interested in American writers. As a college undergraduate, I began as a liberal arts student, but somewhere along the way I got caught up in the late 1970's rush to get a business degree. I ended up spending two valuable years utterly bored by useless business coursework, sneaking in a few liberal arts courses wherever possible.

I had always had a penchant for history, art history and of course reading so I started taking graduate courses in these areas. I learned much about modern art which I think directly relates to modern writing. Modern art is often very personal and gives the viewer insight into the artist's heart and mind and consequently allows the viewer a fuller understanding of what it means to be human.

My humanities courses gave me a sense of how art and

literature fit into society, past and present. A history course on the 1950's, taught by Dorothy Johnson, was valuable to me because I learned that you can understand the world, you can fathom its movements and the actions of people. I discovered that individuals can make a difference. Then in an English course taught by Carolyn Rhodes I studied women writers. I had been subconsciously choosing books by women authors for years, but here was a professor of English publicly ranking these books by women with the greatest of male writers. This gave me role models and strengthened my confidence in my own abilities. Another course on the moderns also reinforced the value of the individual. We studied Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner. These were individuals who changed everything. Their feelings came through so pure and unadulterated by strict rules of style. I felt that these writers personified the idea of modernity. These modern writers put everything they knew about the world and themselves on display for the reader. Through them and others who followed we are able to more fully understand human nature and therefore ourselves.

Through my study of the humanities I have come to understand the power of individual experience. And by taking a creative writing course along with my other coursework I realized I could write down my thoughts and feelings in a way that might be useful to others.

A fellow student once called my style of writing "magical realism." I was at first shocked and second

flattered. The category appealed to me because I like to think I'm a realist but I can't help seeing so many magical aspects to everyday life. There is a quote by George Eliot that I think sums this up:

"Yes! Thank God; human feeling is like the mighty rivers that bless the earth: it does not wait for beauty--it flows with resistless force and brings beauty with it."

In my story, I have tried to convey my understanding of this resistless force. There are things in everyday life in America that are incredibly beautiful and all we have to do is take the time to see them. America look at yourself. We might not have the refined beauty of Europe, but oh we have beauty. And I'm not just talking about the Grand Canyon. It's the people, the wonderful people who live here. That's why I chose a convenience store as a part of the setting for my story. Everyone has been to one, but we just never think of it as being an important part of America.

Who or what has influenced me and my writing? Everything. Magazines, t.v., paintings, books, conversation. I can say whom I like and why. I like the way Edith Wharton and F. Scott Fitzgerald speak of relationships between men and women. These authors are particularly honest and also very touching in their description of both sexes. I'm fond of Kurt Vonnegut's ability to see what's funny, his praise of the common and his disdain of rote convention. Of late, Ellen Gilchrist, Louise Erdrich,

Raymond Carver, Jayne Anne Phillips, Richard Ford and Carolyn Chute have seemed wonderfully right and horribly true in their descriptions of everyday American life. Albert Camus, Jack Kerouac have always appealed to my dark side. I also like the way Willa Cather and Zora Neale Hurston speak of man and woman's relationship to nature.

So one of the settings is a convenience store and the main character, Winston, is a student whose perceptions are influenced by his studies, which happen to coincide with mine somewhat. He comes to realize that although the work of an artist might be flawless, the artist is human and therefore flawed. This perception finally gives him confidence in himself as an artist. Winston is trying to make the journey I have begun to make. He is trying to believe in himself enough to do, to create, to help others to grow. At the same time he is faced with a crushing inertia. Is a coma his blight or his release from having to do? Doing, art, writing, music, creating. These are the hardest most gut-wrenching things you can do. Introspection is painful and showing others what you have found is terrifying.

The irony in my writing this story is that I have been faced with the same self-defeating attitude that Winston has. But by writing a story about his life and his troubles, I am overcoming my inability to create. And when I'm finished I will know I did one of the hardest things in my life. I created--and that feels good.



## Chapter One

Remember. I've always liked that word, but now it's more than a word. Remembering is the way I live. As I lie here, memories flash around and I have to grab each one and remember it properly. The bed beneath grips me, it's part of me. If I got up now the indentation left behind would remain and the next person to lie down in the groove would know everything about me.

Sometimes I stop remembering and know that I am comatose, but there is nothing sinister about the word. To me, coma means a resting place. It's a spot to catch my breath before I go on. So I let myself drift down below the surface; life is easy now. No one expects anything from me; there are no clocks or calendars. Here I live in the past, endlessly falling into my history. Lately I have been thinking about my life not as a series of separate events, but as a puzzle with interlocking pieces. Until now, I didn't see how all the pieces connected, I didn't see a picture of the whole. It's been a test to keep my memory puzzle working, to reach a fuller understanding of myself.

Some of the pieces in my puzzle come from a convenience store, The Little Hen, where I was a clerk. That's what The Little Hen was, a place that made people's lives easier,

more convenient. My store was on the edge of a suburban neighborhood called Springfield Lakes, which was ironic because the lake was filled with dirt so the developer could build thirty extra houses. We had some regular customers from the Lake homes, but most of our customers came from Highway 95. The Little Hen was near an off ramp and travelers funneled off 95 randomly choosing our exit to search for gas or food.

It was hard to explain to people who asked why I wanted to work at The Little Hen. I guess strangers thought being a convenience store clerk was a degrading job and the people who knew me thought it was beneath me. I had been a graduate student for many years and people couldn't understand why an educated person would work at a menial job. My parents were disgusted. They called me a professional student and stopped paying for my graduate education after four years of my indecision. They assumed that after college, their only son would go on to some brilliant career, not a decade of graduate courses and part-time work at a convenience store.

I had trouble choosing one direction in school because there were always so many interesting courses to take. I was working on degrees in literature, history, philosophy, sociology, art history and psychology, never finishing one before starting another. Working at The Little Hen provided me with a steady income, and I worked nights so my days were free for classes. There was more than one reason, but when

people asked me why I just said that I enjoyed working there. It was an honest answer.

When I remember working at The Little Hen I don't think about the actual work. Not about the restocking of shelves, not about ringing sales on the register and counting money, not about cleaning the bathrooms or changing the signs in the window. It's not that these things were unpleasant; in fact I prefer work you don't have to think about while you're doing it. It leaves your mind free to roam. But it's not the work I remember, it's the people. I think about my customers--the hundreds and thousands of customers.

As I lie here, I remember those people who came into The Little Hen. There aren't many places left in America that all kinds of people come to. We've separated ourselves into groups so thoroughly that our paths rarely cross. I saw this at The Little Hen. I saw how people looked at each other and felt strange and uneasy being in one place together. But that's what fascinated me; all the people in the world walked through our doors.

## Chapter Two

A nurse sat at a desk reading a magazine. She looked up at the large wall clock. Noon. It was time to bathe the patient in room 117. She got up from her chair and went into the storeroom to collect some soap, a sponge, a towel and a plastic basin. Her white shoes squeaked on the smooth floor as she walked down the hall.

The sun streamed through the plate glass window into the room she entered from the dark hall. She walked over to the window and stared out for a moment. Visitors were coming and going on their lunch hour. The parking lot was full. A woman in a long red coat walked through the parking lot to a grey car. When the red-coated woman got into her car and drove off, the nurse turned to look at the tall young man lying in the afternoon sun.

What a shame. Here he is lying in bed when he could be outside in the winter sun breathing the brisk cold air. She cracked open the window because she had always believed in the medicinal powers of fresh air. Maybe the smell of fresh air will remind him that he is alive.

"O.K. Winston," she said aloud, "are you ready for your bath?" It was good to talk to comatose patients, to pretend they were partially conscious. She thought of them

as fetuses in a womb. They were closed off from the outside world but an occasional sound or touch could enter their dark space and comfort them. They were like babies. Sometimes they curled up, pulling their legs and arms into a tight ball. It seemed to her that they weren't fully human yet, that they were waiting to be born, that they were waiting for something to push them out into the light.

The nurse walked over and closed the door to the room and then went into the bathroom and filled the plastic basin with warm water, keeping one hand under the water spigot, making sure it didn't get too hot. It was like testing milk on her wrists before she gave a bottle to a baby. She wanted the same temperature for Winston's bathwater. When the water was ready she went out to his bed.

She pulled back the sheet that covered Winston. He still lay straight, his body hadn't begun to wither and curl yet. He was lucky his lungs and heart worked on their own--he still had a chance. She looked at the length of his body on the hospital bed. His feet sometimes dangled over the bottom edge when she moved him. He must be six feet tall when he's standing. She called him the human cigarette, partly because of his name and partly because he was so long and slender. She washed his arms and chest and then his legs. She quickly washed his groin, trying not to notice what she was doing. It still embarrassed her when a comatose man got an erection and whenever it happened she told herself that it was none of her doing, it was just

something that couldn't be helped with men. After the front was done, she took some nail clippers from her pocket and sheared off Winston's long fingernails and toenails. She put the clippings and the clipper back in her pocket. It was a habit of hers even when she clipped her own nails. Later, when she was doing her laundry and checking pockets, nail moons would tumble out on the lid of the washing machine and she would try to figure out whose they were.

The nurse noticed Winston felt lighter when she turned him over to wash his back. The skin pulled tightly across his spine and ribs. As she washed his back she lightly touched the scar on the back of his neck. The wound had healed well and would barely be noticable if he grew his hair long. They kept his auburn hair short in the hospital because it was easier to wash. She finished bathing him, shaved his face and then washed his hair. She took her time combing it out, thinking of how nice it felt when someone combed her hair. She was comfortable working with comatose patients because they needed her so much. They were easy to give to and they depended on her for everything just like her children when they were young. When her children grew older their problems and needs were too complex for her to solve. Her regular patients, like her grown children, didn't seem to need her help and they were always complaining. She could never satisfy them.

The nurse finished combing Winston's hair and rubbed his body dry with a towel. She rubbed hard till his skin

was pink, it was good to get the blood moving. It fed the skin. After covering Winston with his sheet she sat down on the side of the bed and took his hand in hers. She reviewed the events of her morning with him, she told him what she had for breakfast and confessed that she had strayed from her diet once again. She sighed and was quiet for a few moments thinking of what else had happened that day. "Oh, you know my eldest daughter called me this morning to tell me she is pregnant again. You think she would have been more careful before she got the divorce. Now she's stuck." Although she didn't mention it to Winston, she imagined that he and her daughter might get along well. They were about the same age, and Winston looked like an old high school boyfriend her daughter had left behind when she went off to college. Of all her daughter's boyfriends and husbands, she had liked this boyfriend the best, and Winston's parents were such nice people. "Winston, you know your parents are coming tonight for their weekly visit." She wanted him to have something to look forward to.

After a few moments of silence she told Winston she had to move on to other patients. Looking at her wristwatch confirmed her feeling that she was behind schedule. Mrs. Ruckle, a cranky patient down the hall, would be upset if a nurse didn't check on her at exactly 12:30 to make sure she took her medicine. The nurse picked up the basin and the used towel and rushed out, leaving Winston alone in the afternoon sun, breathing the fresh air coming through the

open window.



### Chapter Three

Some days I can feel the sun. It's shining on me now, warming my face and hands. I feel stronger in the sun, almost strong enough to rise to the surface, sit up in bed and walk outside. Just now, I was thinking about Nathan, about the first day he came into the store. Actually it was night when a middle-aged man with a boyish gait walked through the glass door marked "In." A few dead leaves blew in with him and I thought, great, something else to pick up. Two teen-age boys had been in the store for an hour looking at magazines and the subscription cards from the magazines they were flipping through kept dropping out. The floor was littered with the cards from every skin magazine we had. On top of the mess they were making, I was worried about a big paper, which I had procrastinated working on. It was due in three days and the research wasn't even finished. Turning the paper in late wouldn't impress my art history professor and I wanted to impress her. So I was in a bad mood as I watched this exuberant man stroll back to the bakery aisle.

He marched up and down the aisle three or four times before he called out, "Hey bud, are you out of pink snowballs?"

I rolled my eyes. What a nut. "What did you say?" I

asked although I heard him the first time.

"You know, those cupcakes . . . chocolate inside and pink marshmallow and coconut outside," he said as he walked up to the counter. The two boys, their eyes still glued to the October Playboy, snickered. The guy looked mildly embarrassed.

"Oh, we're out of those," I told him without looking him in the face.

"Damn, I've been all around town looking for those." The boys laughed again.

"Sorry," I said with a shrug. He walked to the front of the counter and started fingering the cigarettes. It seemed as though he wanted to start a conversation, but I wasn't in the mood. So many lonely people came in to The Little Hen looking for someone to talk to. I didn't always feel like helping them out. After a few moments of silence the man said, "The pink snowballs are for my wife. Yeah, we had a fight this morning and I thought if I brought her some it might make things a little easier."

"Oh," I answered while I sized him up. His jeans and shoes were speckled with multi-colored paint. He stood in front of the counter, and seemed to be waiting for a response. I didn't want to discuss his marital problems, so I asked him politely, "Do you paint?"

He looked down at his pants like he had forgotten he was wearing them. "Un huh, I paint after work. See, I do construction during the day and then I try to paint at

night. That's why we got into a fight. My wife and me. She likes me to spend time with her instead of painting. I guess it's my fault. I've been painting a lot more than usual. It's been real hard for me to get these paintings right."

"Oh, really?" I asked, a little too sure that his paintings were of ducks and geese against a stormy sky.

"My name's Nathan Fisher," he said, extending his hand to shake mine vigorously.

"Winston. . .Winston Ford," I stammered and then reached out to meet his hand. I had caught myself being a snob again. First I had judged this man on his looks and secondly I was ready to put him down for doing wildlife paintings. I felt guilty because I recognized his name and because I hated wildlife paintings. He didn't paint ducks. I had seen and admired his work. The past summer I had been walking around one of those outdoor art shows. It was the kind of show that has painting, ceramics, jewelry, quilts, drawings, prints and woodworking all together. Most of the time I didn't find much that really interested me. I just went to these shows to buy presents for my mother. Anyway I was ready to leave the show that day when I saw a group of large portrait paintings back under a tree. There was no one around when I walked over to look at them.

The closer I got to the paintings, the more interested I became. These weren't ordinary portraits in which only the attractive physical features of each sitter had been

accentuated. These portraits didn't glamorize, they were the most honest I had ever seen. Just looking at them made you understand so much about each of the subjects. The portraits were of all kinds of people. There was a black construction worker, a young housewife, an old man on a street corner. The colors the artist used were jarring and un-lifelike, but somehow they made perfect sense. The people in the paintings dug a hole into my chest and climbed right in. They filled me up and I stood there for a long time. Why? Why is it that some artists have this power? Why not me? Why couldn't I have thought of these paintings first? The envy I was feeling couldn't stop my exhilaration.

Nathan Fisher had painted those works. I remembered the name from the bottom of the canvases. "I think I've seen your paintings before," I said, trying to sound nonchalant.

He was pleased by this and asked me where and when. I told him quickly.

"How did you learn to paint?" I asked, hoping to unlock some of the mystery this man now had. I was eager to know more about him so I could figure out the secret to his work.

"Well, most of the technical stuff I learned in high school. Since then I've just been working on my own. Except I do go see stuff in those big museums in Washington D.C.

"Yeah, I was going to say that your stuff reminded me

of Matisse's paintings."

"Thanks, I appreciate that. Which one was he?"

"You know, Henri Matisse." He shook his head so I passed over his blank look and said, "I'd really like to see some of your new paintings. Are you going to be in another show anytime soon?"

"No, but if you'd like you can come by the house sometime and see them."

"O.K., yeah, that'd be great. Here, give me your address and phone number." I handed him a piece of paper and a pencil and he wrote it down. Then there was kind of an awkward moment between us. It's the moment in which you realize that a person you just met might become a good friend. I cleared my throat and put the piece of paper in my pocket.

"I guess I better be going," he said hesitantly.

"Well, good luck on your quest for the elusive pink snowballs."

"What? Oh yeah," he laughed, "can't go home empty handed." He went over to the candy counter and picked up some caramel creams. "These are her second favorite." He paid for them and left me alone with the teen-age boys trying to stuff magazines down their pants.

## Chapter Four

What was I thinking of? Oh yeah, Nathan. I felt bad for assuming he was a nobody. Usually I'm a pretty good judge of character. I'm always surprised when I've decided a person is one thing and they turn out to be something else. Then you have to change the way you look at them. That is what happened with Dickie. I worked with Dickie for about a year before I ever realized he was my age.

Dickie was the store manager and part owner of The Little Hen. He was short and round and he had very small dark eyes. Dickie was a hard person to work for because he was very demanding, especially when he was in a bad mood. We never really talked much the first year I worked at the store. I guess that was because of the high employee turnover rate. Clerks came and went every few months. Dickie said he never liked to waste energy getting to know people who weren't going to stick around. After I stayed a year, he probably figured it was worth his time to get to know me. That's when I found out he was my age.

Late one night Dickie came into the store. It was unusual for him to be out so late and I was nervous when I saw his car pull up because it had been a slow night and I had put off restocking and cleaning because I wanted to

read. When he came into the store though, I saw he was drunk.

"Winston," he called, wavering right and then left. "What are you doing?" He squinted at me with his small eyes and then said, "How about a beer?"

"No thanks." I slowly pushed the book I had been reading under the counter. Was this a trick? Dickie was usually so strict and he never broke the rules for anyone.

"Well, I'm going to have one." He stumbled back to the refrigerated section and pulled out a six-pack. I was really shocked. I mean, I'm used to drunks. I know the way they fall around the store. They're like puppets directed by a voice sober people can't hear. But I had never seen Dickie so sloppy, so unbalanced.

He came up to the counter and handed me a beer. "Open it," he commanded. Now that was more like Dickie. I opened it but I left it sitting on the counter. He opened a beer and tilted his head back to drink it. I watched as his Adam's apple bobbed up and down while he gulped it. When he finished, he set the bottle down and belched. "Excuse me," he said wiping his mouth.

Dickie looked up at me for a moment. "You know, Winston, you are a good worker. I think it's great that you go to school too. I admire that."

"What?" I didn't think I'd heard him right.

"I said that I admire you. Here you are, my age, and you have almost finished three or four different graduate

degrees. What do I have? This." He lifted his arms up and swung them around. He lost his balance, but he caught himself before he fell. It was hard not to laugh.

I looked at him. Suddenly he seemed so much younger than before. It surprised me that he thought that my inability to stick to one graduate degree was commendable. No one had ever been impressed by that before.

"Well thanks, Dickie. But I wouldn't say that The Little Hen was nothing."

"I didn't say it was nothing," said Dickie. I hoped he wasn't offended. "A person just needs more than a good job. They need more than one outlet." He opened another beer. "I mean, I come to work every day and then I go home, have dinner, and watch t.v. with my wife and kids. Now don't get me wrong, I love my family but I need something more." He drank half of the second beer and waited for me to say something. I didn't know what to say so I didn't say anything.

"It seems like you're always going to some class or lecture or film. You know all the professors and students over at the university. I see you talking to them about things when they come in here. And you're always carrying around stacks of books that I've never even heard of before."

I eyed the book under the counter and wondered if he had seen me reading it. Probably not. He obviously didn't care tonight. I was starting to understand what he was



saying. There had been times when I tried to imagine my life without school and the people there. Who would I talk to? What would I talk about? I would probably lose my mind if I could only talk to people about the weather or sports or television. What would be the point of living if you couldn't keep learning and growing?

"Well, why don't you enroll in some courses at the University?" This answer seemed the most logical to me.

"Nah, I couldn't do that." Dickie finished his second beer and burped again. "I mean, I don't know about that stuff. All the students and teachers there know so much already."

"It's not that bad. Everyone has to start somewhere." I said this but I really couldn't imagine Dickie in any of my courses. He would be torn to shreds by the other students always hungry to prove themselves.

"You think so?"

"Yeah and if you want, I'll give you a list of books you should read before you start." It would help if he didn't go in there cold. At least he'd have a fighting chance.

"That would be great, Winston." He reached over and shook my shoulder back and forth. "I'd appreciate that." Dickie looked behind me at the clock on the wall. "Got to go, it's late."

"O.K. I'll bring in the list this week."

Dickie grabbed the rest of the six-pack off the counter

and started to leave. When he got to the door, he turned around and slurred out, "Clean up this place will ya, it's a mess." That was the Dickie I knew.

## Chapter Five

"He was such an attentive baby."

"Yeah."

"He learned to talk so early and he went to kindergarten when he was only four and a half."

"Yeah."

"How can he stay this way for so long? He was always so full of life."

Winston's mother stood at his bedside carefully brushing the reddish brown hair from his face. Winston's father sat in a chair across the room with his head propped on one hand. He was turning the dial of a small radio trying to find the football game he was missing by coming to the hospital on Sunday. After he tried to tune into the game for five minutes, the static finally became too annoying and he switched the radio off.

"Ha!" he said with disgust.

"What do you mean by 'ha!'" Winston's mother turned her stare to her husband.

"Well, if you ask me, it seems like he spent his whole life in a coma."

"George, that's a terrible, horrible thing to say."

"Well, Eleanor, all he ever did was lock himself up in

his room and read books. And when he wasn't doing that he was sleeping. He never played any sports or dated girls, or even went out with the guys."

"It so happens that reading improves the mind; and my side of the family has always needed a lot of sleep. And sports aren't for everyone, George."

"Right." George switched the radio back on in an effort to tune himself out of the hospital room, where his comatose son had been dormant for six months.

Eleanor turned back to her son, trying to block out the static from the radio. She continued playing with his hair and remembered Winston as a child. He was a quiet boy who rarely had to be punished, the youngest of the three children she and George had. The two older, both girls, moved away from home after they married. The girls had children of their own to worry about now. But she still had Winston. He had never left home. She didn't really mind though; it made the house less lonely. And when Winston was home, he would tell her about his courses and teachers. She admired Winston's knowledge of so many different subjects. Sometimes he gave her books to read and she plowed through them slowly and carefully, hoping to get all the points he wanted her to get.

It didn't bother her that Winston preferred to read in his spare time and that he didn't care for sports. But she knew that Winston had been a disappointment to George. When she met George her freshman year in college, he was a senior

and had lettered in football and baseball all four years. After they decided to be married, they would discuss what sort of family they wanted. She remembered George saying, "Girls are all right, but if I had a son, I could really teach him something." Things didn't work out as George had planned. His daughters were the ones who were interested in sports; they inherited his competitive drive. Winston was more like his mother. He was clumsy and he didn't care if he won or lost when he did play. After he turned seven, he couldn't be persuaded to play Little League baseball in the summer or to play football on the school team in the fall.

Winston had not followed George into the insurance business as planned. Instead, he worked part time jobs and continued his education after his father quit paying for it. Eleanor knew that Winston was putting off graduation by switching majors so often, but she hoped one day he would finish one major and become a teacher. She always thought he would be a good teacher.

But now he was here, immobile. There was still hope, but as each month passed the chances of his coming back to her grew slimmer. She wondered what it was like to be in a coma. Maybe it was like being lost in the dark in a strange place. With that thought she picked up Winston's hand and squeezed it. Poor baby. My poor baby.

George Ford looked at his wristwatch. 4 p.m. The game was probably over by now. He turned off the radio which had been playing German drinking music. Playing cheerful music

in the quiet hospital was like whistling at a funeral. He watched his wife bending over their son and he suddenly felt sorry that he had been sarcastic. Winston had never been a bad kid--he was just lazy. His son's lethargic manner drove George crazy. He wanted a strong, robust son, not the wilted, sleepy one he ended up with. Maybe he wasn't the best father in the world, but most fathers want their sons to follow in their footsteps.

George once invited his friends and their sons over to watch The Superbowl. He thought that seeing how normal fathers and sons behave might influence Winston. During the game, Winston stared at the television screen as if it were blank. In the final minutes of the game, George's team came back with a winning touchdown and everyone was jumping up and down with anger or joy, except Winston, who was sound asleep on the couch.

It frustrated him that Winston had remained in this condition so long. He felt that if he were in a coma, he could pull himself out of it in no time. George shook his head, rubbed his eyes and looked over at the hospital bed where Winston was sleeping now. "Let's go," he said, standing up. Eleanor jumped a little as if she had been awakened and then she nodded.

"Bye sweetheart," she whispered in Winston's ear. Then she reached for her purse and coat. George walked over to help her put her coat on but she shrugged him away. She walked out the door and he followed.

## Chapter Six

I'll never forget the smell of "White Shoulders." It's always been my mother's favorite perfume. I buy her a bottle every Mother's Day. If this bed would release me, I would float out of this place, pulled along by the scent of my mother's perfume until I was home. We would sit at the kitchen table and drink tea and talk. I could always talk to Mom, but Dad was a different story.

I always knew my father was disappointed with me. It was clear in the way he looked at me and shook his head. I tried to make him proud of me, but it never worked out. When I played sports, I was usually so bad that Dad got embarrassed and yelled at me. I'll never forget a miserable softball game the summer I was seven. It was a really hot, humid day. I was in the outfield and it was hard to concentrate on the game because gnats kept buzzing around my head. I hadn't eaten anything that day because I had gotten up late and Dad was rushing me. Anyway this kid on the other team hit a fly ball my way. As I held my mitt up in the air, I imagined catching the ball and how proud Dad would be of me. It seemed like the ball was barely moving. When it passed the sun, I tried to find it but everything was dark. The next thing I knew, Dad was carrying me off

the field. He said I fainted and asked me if I was okay. After that question, he didn't speak to me for a week. All that week, I sat in Dad's den and looked at his trophies on the bookshelves. I knew that I could never compete with all those trophies. There were a hundred and nine, I counted them.

Dad spent most of his time in the den. The walls were brown and the windows were covered with plaid curtains. He kept his trophies on bookshelves he had built across one wall. There was an old recliner that was covered with rust corduroy and a small t.v. The big t.v. was kept in the family room and was for the rest of the family. Dad used the small t.v. for watching sports. On the wall above the t.v. was Dad's college diploma. I would look at that diploma and know that I would go to college too. I wanted to go to the same college Mom and Dad went to, but it was too expensive by the time I was old enough.

When Dad was at work I would go sit in the den and read because it was the quietest room in the house. Mom and my sisters hardly ever went in there except to clean it. Dad didn't like anyone going in his room, so I was careful to leave things as I'd found them. The magazines had to be stacked in the right order and the pillow on his chair had to be in the same place he'd left it. Dad noticed things like that.

Mom didn't have her own room. If she wanted to be alone or if she was mad at someone, she would go sit in the



bathroom and lock the door. The bathroom was the only room in the house that could be locked. Sometimes when she was really mad she would stay in there for hours. If we wanted to use the bathroom, we would have to go over to the neighbor's or go outside behind a bush. Everytime this happened, Dad swore he was going to add on another bathroom. My sisters loved that idea, but Dad never got around to it. They wanted him to add on another bedroom too. They said it was unfair that I got a room to myself since I was the youngest and since girls needed more room. My room was half the size of theirs, so it didn't seem that unfair to me. After they went away to college it didn't matter anymore.

My sisters were only a year apart in age, so they didn't get along very well. It seemed like they were always fighting over the same clothes or the same boy. They drove me crazy while they were home, but I missed them after they went away. The younger sister left home when I was a freshman in high school. It was nice having someone to tell you what you could expect when you went to elementary, junior high school or high school. My sisters would help me pick out the right clothes and would tell me how to act with girls. They knew a lot more than anyone my age did. But I was never as popular as they were. They played tennis and softball and were in all the important clubs. Their grades were okay, good enough to get them into college, but not high enough to make them seem like bookworms. They said to be popular you had to act like you didn't care about school.

I did care about school. I liked going to classes, I liked my teachers, and I even liked doing my homework. In a lot of my classes I was the teacher's favorite. It's hard to be popular with the other kids when you're the teacher's pet. I wanted the other kids to like me but I couldn't give up the only thing I was really good at. When I brought my report cards home to show Dad, I felt like it was one of the few times he was proud of me. Mom was happy with my grades too, but I didn't have to prove anything to her.

It didn't matter to Mom if I wasn't as popular as the girls were. When Dad got mad at me for not trying out for the baseball or football team, she defended me. She said that not everyone was cut out for sports and that schoolwork was just as important. I feel guilty thinking I might have disappointed her. She always thought that I should teach. The thing I need to do first is to break out. Maybe then I can figure out a way to make everybody happy. It's time to really try and decide. I want to learn to be as good at something as Nathan is at painting, as Dad was at sports, as my sisters were at being popular. I'm tired of being fair at a lot of different things; I want to be great at one thing, but I can't decide what that should be. I've been thinking about trying to write a story but I can't think of anything really good. I have some ideas but they seem so jumbled up and flawed. How do some people just know how to do everything right? Why is it so easy for them?

## Chapter Seven

I always admired people who were very sure of themselves and who had an opinion on everything. My friend Mercedes was like that. I knew the first time I met her.

Winter was boring and everyone was pale and quiet. My skin was dry and my hair crackled with static electricity when I pulled the red Santa hat off my head. Thanksgiving was just over and I was already working on Christmas decorations for the store. Cardboard wreaths were to be hung all over the ceiling. I hated the stupid Santa hat with the glitter hen stenciled on it, so I only wore it when Dickie was in the store. He had just left the store to go to his poetry class. Dickie seemed much happier since he had started the class and sometimes we would discuss the poetry his class was reading. I was thinking about writing a poem when a girl walked in the door.

Her movements were stiff and quick. She was a small girl, not very tall and she probably weighed about 100 pounds. There wasn't much softness about this girl; her edges were hard and precise. She marched up to the counter, dropped a heavy backpack and asked for a hot dog. I asked her what she wanted on her hot dog.

"Everything," she said a little too loudly. I got the

hot dog out of the rotating grill and put it on a bun.

"You know, these aren't very good for you."

"Why don't you let me worry about what's good for me."

She leaned over the counter and watched closely as I added onions, chili, cheese and relish to the hot dog.

"More relish please," she called out. I put three spoonfuls of relish on the hot dog and walked over to her.

"That will be seventy-five cents, plus tax."

"Hold on." She took the hot dog and started eating it in huge bites. She had a big mouth. It seemed out of place on her small head.

"Haven't I seen you in here before?" She did look familiar. She popped the last bite of hot dog in her mouth and just stared at me while she chewed. It was a long time before she swallowed and said, "No."

"I've seen you around school," she offered.

"Oh yeah, that's it. What are you studying there?"

"Women's Studies."

"Oh."

"Why did you say, 'Oh' like that?" She shifted from one foot to the other.

"Huh?"

"Well you said 'Oh,' as if it wasn't very interesting."

"No I didn't." I was lying. I didn't know much about Women's Studies, but it had always sounded a little silly to me. I mean, there is no Men's Studies, is there? I was beginning to wonder how militant she was about this whole

Women's Studies thing.

"What's your major?" she asked, changing the subject. I hated that question. It was so hard to explain.

"Well, I've changed my major a few times. Right now it's Art History." I hoped she wouldn't ask what the other majors were.

"What were your other majors?"

"History and English." I was lying again. Well, not really lying, I just left out three or four.

"You must have been in school forever." She flipped her pretty blonde hair on the right side of her head over the top of her head and it rested there in an improbable arc for a few seconds until she moved and it slid back into place again. I decided she was pretty young.

"I'm an English major too, but I'm taking Women's Studies courses to sort of even things out."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, so I can study women writers along with Hemingway, Faulkner and Fitzgerald."

"Well that's good," I said feeling a little unsure about what I meant.

"Oh is Hemingway your favorite author?" she asked with a sneer.

"No, Fitzgerald is."

"Oh, I should have guessed."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing."

I wondered if bashing Hemingway was an integral part of Women's Studies. In school I had read a lot of Hemingway. The Sun Also Rises was good and there were a few short stories I liked, but I didn't care for the rest. I wasn't about to admit this to her though. I'm as liberal as the next guy, but when I'm talking to a feminist I feel like I should be apologizing for something. But I'm never sure of what. The girl was starting to be less attractive to me.

"Actually, I like Fitzgerald too but I just feel that so much emphasis has been placed on male authors that the female authors get left behind. I didn't mean to sound sarcastic. I've been in the library all day and I have a headache from not eating. Can I have another hot dog?"

"Yeah, sure." She was beginning to seem very attractive. "Here, let me pay you first." When she reached into the side of her backpack, some notebooks slid across the counter and onto my feet.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said and her face flushed.

"That's all right." I picked up the notebooks and saw her name neatly written in the top right corner of each one. Mercedes.

"You know, Winston. . ." she had looked at my name tag, "you should sit in on my American Lit. class. I think you'd be surprised at the things we are reading."

"Maybe you're right." I was happy that she might want to see me again, even if her interest in me was academic.

"Here, let me get your other hot dog and you write down the

room number and time of your class."

After Mercedes left the store, I daydreamed about the two of us being a couple. We would spend a lot of time together. It felt good to be interested in someone and it made me happy to think that she liked me too.

## Chapter Eight

One fall day I found myself surrounded by freshman in the American Lit. class Mercedes had suggested I should attend. I scanned the room looking for her but she didn't seem to be there. All I could see were freshmen. Every year they looked younger and younger until I was closer to the age of the teacher than to the students. Except this year. The teacher was very young, younger than me. She was tall with curly light brown hair, a sturdy figure and a pleasant face. She wore a big sweater, a long skirt and boots. I imagined that many of the boys in the class had a crush on her. I glanced around the room again looking for any blonde heads that might be Mercedes.

The classroom had just become quiet and the teacher started talking about a reading assignment. It was a short story by Joyce Carol Oates.

"How did you like the story?" the teacher asked.

A few people in the class took turns responding after she called on their raised hands. She pointed to a young man sitting in the back of the room.

He asked, "I would like to know when we are going to start reading more of the classics."

I turned around to get a look at the boy. Some of the



other students turned around and a boy sitting next to me said, "Yeah."

"I mean this is a freshman English class and we're supposed to be reading the basics like Hemingway and Faulkner." I was thinking that I had read the authors he named as a freshman.

The teacher answered, "I'm introducing you to all types of American literature."

"You mean women writers, that's all we've been reading and I'm getting tired of it. My roommate doesn't have to read this stuff in his English class."

"I made a specific point to divide the reading assignments equally among men and women writers as well as black and white writers. This is not in conflict with the course objectives. It's all American literature."

I found myself speaking up, "Yes, but the greater proportion of good American writers were men so shouldn't that mean you should study a greater proportion of men writers? I mean it's hard to even think of that many women writers."

The teacher directed her stare to me and said, "There have been many women writers throughout American history, but they were not given the credit their work deserved because they were women. Let's just say I'm trying to right that wrong."

I felt stupid. She was right, I really didn't know what I was talking about. Then from the back of the room, I

heard Mercedes say, "I don't see anything wrong with our assignments. I mean we've all read and studied all those men writers in high school. It's refreshing to have a change."

"Well it's not refreshing to me. I think we're getting behind on the important stuff," said the boy in the back with disgust.

"I think we've discussed this enough. If anyone has a problem with my assignments, feel free to drop the class."

"Oh sure, halfway through the semester," muttered the boy. "We're stuck here now."

The class went on with the discussion. I sat there thinking and wondering what I'd been missing. When the class was over, I stayed in my seat while the rest of the students funneled out the door. Mercedes came up and sat down in the desk behind me.

"I feel a little ignorant," I said while I stared at the floor.

"Oh, you're all right. You just have a little catching up to do and I can help you," she answered with a big smile.

"Thanks." I looked over at her and was warmed by her smile. She was younger than I was but she was mature for her age. I wanted to get to know her better, to go out with her. I hoped she was thinking the same. Maybe that was what she meant by offering to help me. Maybe she liked me too. "Listen, would you like to go out sometime?"

"Sure, that would be fun. And I could give you a

reading list then. Here's my number." She tore off a piece of notebook paper and wrote down her number and handed it to me as she got up from her desk. "I have another class. See ya later." After she left I sat in that desk awhile thinking about when the best time to call her would be.

## Chapter Nine

In my mind I saw Nathan's wife overweight because I associated her with pink snowballs. I was suprised the first time I met her.

Nathan had invited me over to his house to see his paintings. I drove over at eight. The neighborhood he lived in was full of starter homes, doll houses built after the war for newlyweds. Now most of them were a bit shabby. The trees in the neighborhood were huge, five times as big as the houses. When I found Nathan's street, I slowed the car down to a crawl, trying to find the house numbers in the fading light. I finally found the right number on a mailbox and saw his truck in the driveway. Nathan's two-story house was pale yellow with green shutters. It was nice. Someone had done a lot of gardening work in the yard. Starting up the cement walkway I found a ladder lying across the sidewalk and almost tripped over it.

I rang the doorbell and no one came so I knocked. A slender woman opened the door. It took me a minute to realize she was Nathan's wife. She kept her hand on the door, holding it for me to come in.

"Hi," she said quickly, "Nathan's upstairs."

I was going to say hello and introduce myself but after

she shut the door behind me she turned and walked away into a bright room that was a kitchen. While I was walking up the stairs, I heard a sink faucet turn on and the clinking sounds of dishwashing. Nathan met me at the top of the stairs.

"Hey, come this way. Did ya meet Jane?" he asked walking away from me down a hall.

"Yeah, sort of."

He looked back at me. "Oh she's just pissed off at me because I promised to put the Christmas lights on the house tonight. I got home from work late and had other things to do."

I remembered the ladder on the lawn and figured he must have gotten a start before he quit.

"Jane's very nice looking." I quickly realized there was too much of a surprised sound to what I had said.

Nathan didn't seem to notice, though. He turned into a room. Inside the room were three or four large paintings in process. The room was a mess. There were cans full of turpentine with brushes standing in them, paint splattered on the walls and floor, sketches, crumpled up paper, and rags everywhere. We waded through the debris and he started telling me things about the work. While he was talking I looked around for the paintings I had seen earlier at the art show.

"Where are your older paintings?" I asked when he stopped talking.

"Jane sold them."

"That's great, how did she do that?"

"Well it wasn't so great. She sold them at a yard sale for about ten dollars each."

"What?"

"Yeah, she said we needed the money. It was one weekend I was out of town fishing with my friends. She was having a yard sale and some old lady drove up and bought all of them. She said she didn't know who the woman was, that she wasn't from around here."

"Weren't you mad at her?"

"Yeah, but what could I do? They were gone already. She said we needed money to make up for what I spent on paint and canvasses. I think she did it to spite me for leaving her at home. Never know with her."

We started talking about the new painting again and I told him he should try to get a show at a gallery so he could make some real money off his work. He said he didn't know anyone. I told him if he took some slides of his work I would take them to one of my teachers that knew some gallery owners in town.

"Hey you want to see some old paintings?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure."

He turned off the light in the room and we went downstairs. The t.v. was on and Jane was sitting on the couch.

"I'm going out for a little while hon, I won't be

long," he called.

Jane didn't turn or acknowledge us in any way so he looked at me and shrugged and then we left the house.

"Do you want to ask her if she wants to go?" I said when we were outside. I was feeling guilty about taking Nathan away from his wife.

"Nah, she's seen them before. Oh hell, I left the ladder out. I'll have to put the lights up tomorrow night."

We got into Nathan's truck and decided to get a six pack. On the way out of town we stopped at a convenience store and I went in. It was a different chain from The Little Hen and I looked around the store for a minute before I walked to the back of the store for beer. I was glad I wasn't working.

We left the convenience store and took the main road out of town. For some time, we didn't speak, we just drank beer and watched the lines on the road. I wondered where we were going but I didn't feel like asking. I didn't know the roads he turned on and I lost track of where we were, but eventually we ended up in the country somewhere. Nathan pulled over onto the side of an empty road and pointed to an abandoned house.

"My parents used to live there. I lived there until I was a teenager. Let's go."

I was comfortable in the warm truck, but I got out and we walked through the yard of high grass and went around to the back door. The house had obviously been deserted for

years. The window in the back door had been broken out. Nathan tried the doorknob and found it unlocked. We entered into the kitchen, which still had a stove and a refrigerator with its door hanging open. Nathan shut the refrigerator door when we walked by. "My room's upstairs." He spoke more softly inside the house. We climbed up a rickety staircase and then went down a hallway and into a small room. Although it was dark, I could make out some unusual wallpaper. As my eyes grew accustomed to the dark, I saw that it wasn't wallpaper at all. Paintings covered all four walls of the room.

"My first paintings," he explained as he walked once around the room. He sat down slowly as if he were very tired and then he leaned back against the wall and took a long sip of the beer he had brought with him.

I looked around the room at the paintings. These weren't like his recent paintings which were abstract and had sophisticated color schemes. On these walls were figures of people, animals and cars. One wall was almost entirely filled with a huge naked woman with long blonde hair that wound around her breasts and strategically covered her pubic hair. I was pleased that Nathan had brought me to see these rather embarrassing teenage paintings. It made me feel more confident in our friendship. I also realized that Nathan hadn't always been as talented as he was now.

"I'm surprised no one has painted over these in the last fifteen years. I guess they liked old Eve over there." He



gestured toward the blonde and smiled.

"I really admire your ability to create." I wanted a better compliment, but I couldn't think of one. "I get good ideas for stories but they never make it to paper. It takes so much effort to get them out."

"I know what you mean."

"You do?" I had assumed that, to him, painting was easy.

"Sure. Life would be a lot easier if I didn't have to fight with Jane about painting. Or if somebody paid me to paint."

"Yeah, that would be nice." He didn't really get what I was saying. I wasn't talking about outside obstacles that kept me from working, I meant the inside ones. I tried again.

"So what makes you keep going?"

"Well it's just something I like to do. If I don't paint I feel lazy. And when I'm painting I don't have to worry about anyone or anything."

"Oh God," I thought "He doesn't even understand what his paintings mean, how perfect they are. He doesn't sit around and ponder the world, he just acts. Is that the key? Should I stop thinking and start moving?"

Later that night, I thought about what Nathan had said, and I promised myself that first thing in the morning I would start a story about Nathan's room in the abandoned house.

## Chapter Ten

I never did start that story. Oh, I was wasting so much time. All the reasons for not working were only weak excuses. I was weak, not strong like Nathan, not determined like Mercedes.

When I got up the next morning after going to Nathan's house, I sat down at my desk, pulled out a notebook and stared at a blank page. After about ten minutes, I noticed that there were dirty clothes and shoes spilling through the open door of my closet. I spent the rest of the morning straightening my closet and in the afternoon I went to see Mercedes.

We had gone out a few times to plays, readings and lectures. The more I learned about her the more I wanted her to be my girlfriend, but she didn't seem to want that. I never mentioned it or even tried to kiss her. I didn't want to make a fool of myself. When I went over to her apartment that day she answered the door wearing a sweater I had loaned her. It warmed me to see her wearing something of mine.

"What's up," she said.

"Oh, nothing. I just came by to see what you were doing."

"I was working on something."

"Oh, I'll go then."

"No, come on in. I needed a break anyway. You want some coffee?"

"Sure." We walked into the kitchen. I sat down at the table and watched her while she started the coffee maker, got some mugs from the cabinet and the milk out of the fridge. She looked so soft and huggable in my big sweater. She was padding around the kitchen in big fluffy slippers. I felt like telling her that I loved her, but I stopped myself.

"I went over to that painter's house last night. You remember, the one I met at the store. He showed me his new paintings. They are really good. I told him I would try to help him get a show."

"That's nice of you." Mercedes seemed a little distracted. I wasn't sure if she was really listening to me.

"So, what are you working on?"

"Oh nothing. I was just trying to write a poem. It's not really that good."

"Why don't you read it to me."

"Oh, no." She blushed a little. "I'm too embarrassed."

"Come on. Go get it. I'm not leaving until you do."

"Well I'll give you a copy before you leave, but you can't read it in front of me."

"Deal."

We sat at the table and drank coffee and talked for a few hours. We talked about books on the reading list she had given me. I was really enjoying the books she had suggested and it was fun to have someone to discuss them with. Before I left she went into her room and came out with a piece of folded paper which she stuck into my shirt pocket. Later at home I read the poem. I was hoping it would be some sort of love poem for me. It wasn't. The poem was about friendship and how she had finally found someone she could really trust. I figured that person was me. I was glad she wanted to be my friend. Maybe it would turn in to more later.

It soon became hard for us to find time to spend together. Mercedes was always so busy with her causes and I worked nights so we only saw each other occasionally. I admired and resented the fact that she was always helping someone. At first it was the homeless, then it was unwed mothers, then it was teaching reading and writing to adults who had missed learning those skills in school. Now I suspect that I might have been one of her causes.

I was an introvert, a student with an incomplete education, someone who needed a friend. Eventually I got tired of sharing Mercedes with all the underprivileged people in the state. But she was so dedicated that I couldn't help admiring her. I was glad she wasn't the kind of person who just preached about injustices without taking

action to change them. She even succeeded in getting me involved.

Mercedes talked me into joining the literacy group she was involved in. When I finished the "how to teach" classes, they assigned a student to me, an elderly man who had worked in a factory on an assembly line all his life. When his wife was alive she had taken care of everything that required reading skills, but she had recently died. At age seventy, the old man was left to fend for himself and had to learn to read. I had to drive all the way across town to get to his house. Teaching him to read wasn't as easy as I expected. His house smelled terrible and he had a dog that kept nipping at my ankles. The old man was very obstinate and he never did any of the work I assigned him. Finally I gave up on him and never took on another student. Mercedes never said anything about it, but I could tell she was disappointed with me.

Perhaps she is still disappointed. I'm stuck in this dream world and I'm not sure I have the strength to leave. I've got to try harder and concentrate on the real world because I want to get back to where she lives.

## Chapter Eleven

Mercedes sat watching steam rise from her coffee cup towards the shaft of light from her desk lamp. She had rearranged her desk three times and everything was in perfect order. The only thing that was out of place was the coffee cup that held coffee that was still too hot to drink.

She picked up the cup and took a sip which burned her tongue.

"Damn it!" she said out loud as tears flew into her eyes. The pain made her feel sorry for herself. She had been lonely since Winston's accident. Winston was on her mind as she wiped her tears away and drank her cooling coffee.

I miss having Winston around to talk to. He always made me feel so good about myself. Sometimes I feel bad that I didn't like him as much as he liked me but I couldn't help it. It's not my fault. It's just one of those things. I do miss having him around though. I wish I could just talk to him for an hour, for even five minutes. If he would just knock on my door I would go answer it. Then he would come in and flop down on my bed and I could tell him everything I needed to.

I know he always wanted more than just being friends.

But how could I tell him I felt like he was my brother, not my boyfriend, without hurting his feelings? I remember the time he came to my class. I was interested in getting to know him, he seemed so different from the average college boys I had met. He was open minded and he wasn't macho. I wish I could have loved him romantically. It would have been great to have it all, but it just wasn't that way for me. He loved me I know, but he never pressured me. He told me once he hardly ever asked any girls out, he waited until they came to him because that was easier. I guess I knew he would hang around and keep waiting for me.

He was always around if I needed help with some of my classes. One night he sat up all night quizzing me for a history test I had the following morning. Winston taught me his secret study method and I got an A on that test. That was the first time I ever got an A on a history test.

I wanted to help him too. He was so smart. He could have done anything he wanted to if he believed in himself more. Winston always believed in everyone but himself. I used to tell him he should write because he had a neat way of describing things. He would tell me stories about The Little Hen and the crazy people who came in there. He made up names for them. I wasn't always sure these people actually existed because I never saw them in there.

There was an older man he called Salvador Dali because he had a spit-curved mustache and beady brown eyes. Winston said he came in every Sunday and got the newspaper, a carton

of cream and some powdered donuts. He walked quickly and in a jerky way that Winston thought the real Dali would walk. He never heard the man's voice though, Dali would only nod yes or no to questions Winston asked him.

Mona Lisa was a middle-aged woman who had something in common with da Vinci's painting. She was short and stout with long dark hair and a thin smile. Winston thought she had a crush on him. He said she would only come inside when the store was empty. She usually bought cigarettes when she came in. He said she laughed at a joke he told her once and he noticed her teeth were all brown. He guessed that was why she smiled with her mouth shut.

He told me about a painter he met in the store one night. The painter was named Nathan and Winston said he was one of the best painters he had ever met in person. He admired Nathan and talked about him, saying how one day he might be famous. For awhile I didn't see much of Winston because he was hanging out with Nathan all the time. Eventually he started coming around to see me again. I asked him what happened to his friend but all he said was Nathan was too busy for him. I teased him and said that I was leftovers. Then I got so busy with school that I didn't have much time for Winston. Sometimes when I was studying he would come over and lie on my bed and read. Most of the time he fell asleep while I stayed up studying late. I could tell he was lonely so I never asked him to leave. I just slept on the couch those nights.



Now when I go to the hospital to see him I think of those nights he lay sleeping in my bed. I feel guilty that I didn't have time for him. I hope he's not lonely now. I hope he comes back so I can tell him what a good friend he was. Sometimes I drive by The Little Hen late at night and pretend that he's working just like always.

## Chapter Twelve

It always amazes me how getting to know another person can completely change the way you see things. Mercedes did this to me. It's not something you notice right away though. It sneaks up on you.

Late in the spring, I had just left Mercedes in the library and I was at work restocking the beer cooler. I was hoping no one would come in while I was in the back behind the drink cooler, but of course someone did. He was wearing a tweed jacket with a matching cap and his hair and his beard were going grey. The man was puttering around by the health care section when I came out from the back of the store. I went up to the counter and waited for him.

He finally chose some antacid and brought it up to me. "Nice day, isn't it," he mumbled.

"What?" I wasn't sure I heard him right.

"Nice day, I said," he was louder this time and the whiskey on his breath almost knocked me over.

"Yes, it is." I sucked in a quick breath in case he spoke again.

"Reminds me of Key West. Nice and breezy, you know."

"I've never been to Key West."

"Well, why not?" he spit out gruffly as if I had

insulted him.

"I don't know, I guess it has never been high on my list of vacation spots."

"Well, if it was good enough for Hemingway, it's good enough for anyone. I've been there over a hundred times."

"And you're a big Hemingway fan?" The man even looked like Hemingway; I figured this was carefully planned.

"The biggest." He said this with a great deal of pride. "He was the greatest American writer there ever was. There isn't anyone like him around these days."

"That's for sure." I wasn't agreeing with the man, but I was hoping he would stop his speech because his breath was choking me.

Unfortunately he took me for a compatriot and reached out to shake my hand. "What's your name, young man?"

"Winston Ford."

"Well Winston, I'm damned glad to meet you. My name is Hemingway, John Hemingway."

"Oh, are you related?"

"Well no, not actually. You see I legally changed my name a few years back from Miller to Hemingway."

"Oh," I said, a little embarrassed for him. He didn't seem to notice and he went on with his story as if I had asked him to explain.

"You see, I've been reading up on Hemingway for about ten years now. I know everything about him. I've been studying him so hard that people even tell me that I've

started to look like him. A few years back I won this big 'Write Like Hemingway' contest and that's when I decided to change my name."

At one time it would have impressed me that this man won a "Write Like Hemingway" contest, but now it seemed sort of dumb. And that was when I made a big mistake. "Why don't you just write in your own style? Besides, Hemingway wasn't perfect. People act like he was some sort of god or something." While I was speaking this I was thinking that I sounded just like Mercedes. It was as though she was speaking through my mouth. John Hemingway exploded.

"What are you talking about?" His face was growing redder and redder. "Hemingway was the greatest writer who ever lived, ask anyone. Anyone who knows anything, that is. I've heard what college professors are saying about him now and I've read the lies that most of his biographers tell. They're all just wimps. They're trying to tear him down because they will never be as great as he was." His voice was starting to crack. He threw the box of antacid tablets at me and walked away. He turned at the door and pointed to me. "It's hearing young people like you that makes me think this country has gone to hell. I'm not long for this world, believe me. I just can't stand it anymore."

After he had gone, I picked up the box he had thrown at me. I opened it and chewed up two of the tablets. I really believed what I had told him, but maybe I should have just kept quiet.

No matter how I tried, nothing I said came out as strong sounding as Mercedes put things. Even if I said exactly the same words. She was always so certain and convincing that you couldn't argue with her. You just found yourself nodding your head in agreement. I guess that's one of the reasons I loved her. She used to try to get me to write down the things I told her about working at The Little Hen. She was positive I would be a good writer. At times she almost convinced me, but I was always afraid of failing. Or worse. What if I did write something good? Then I would have to work hard to compete with myself, to keep moving forward, to succeed over and over. I thought, maybe it's better not to ever try because then I wouldn't have these worries. So I didn't try. And this is what gets to me. I don't have the right to be condescending to a man who won a "Write Like Hemingway" contest.

### Chapter Thirteen

Eleanor was ironing that day. She was working on her husband's work shirts, carefully creasing the arms the way he liked them. Ironing made her happy. Getting out all the wrinkles and starching clean shirts made them look new. The start and finish of ironing was so clear. You could look and see what you had accomplished.

She was standing at the ironing board working on a blue oxford when the phone rang. She set the iron down and turned it off before going to the kitchen to answer the phone. She couldn't recall her conversation with the policeman on the phone. There was just a memory of being dizzy sick and waking up on the kitchen floor with a knot on the back of her head. When she called George at work he told her to calm down and that he would be there to pick her up right away. When he came in the house she was finishing the ironing. He looked at her with a stange expression, went and got her coat and led her to the car.

At the hospital everything was rushed. There were so many people asking questions and no one to answer hers. The doctors operated right away and six hours later when it was over all they said was they were hopeful. Hopeful. Full of hope. Everyone was full of hope that Winston would regain

consciousness, but Eleanor had a sinking feeling that hope wasn't enough.

During the operation she sat in the waiting room and tried to recall all the lost moments with Winston conscious. She remembered the day when he was five and he picked flowers out of the next-door yard to give to her. Then there was the awkward way he held his fork when he ate. She could even recall the way his hair smelled as a child. It's funny the things you can't forget.

She really cherished Winston because he reminded her of her mother. Sweet tempered and kind. Oh she had worried about him too. How he would be able to get along in the world by himself. He was always so wrapped up in reading or his classwork that he had trouble remembering the everyday things. She had to remind him constantly about the time. He had no concept of how to be on time for anything. He just never thought about it and refused to wear a watch because he said he felt they had too much power over him. The funny things he thought and said, just out of the blue like her mother. Her mother had been a school teacher and maybe that's what made her think Winston should teach. Winston had never known his grandmother, but Eleanor imagined they would have loved each other in a special way.

What would their lives be like without him? It was hard to imagine. When he was a child he was always the center of attention in the house. He was the youngest and they had all spoiled him. His sisters dragged him around

like a baby doll, dressing him up and showing him off. The girls came soon after Winston was hospitalized, but after a week they reluctantly returned home to their families. They called every week to see how Winston was doing. Eleanor never had any good news for them. She longed for Winston to revive. She didn't think she could bear the constant weight of fear and pain much longer. How would things end? Would he be able to find his way out of this coma and come back to her? And if he did would he be damaged? She just had to have faith that Winston could do it.



## Chapter Fourteen

The nurse down the hall had directed him to Winston's room. It was the first time he had come to visit. He had put off coming. He hated hospitals and didn't think he could handle seeing Winston in a coma. In the back of his mind he had expected Winston to die and make his visit to the hospital unnecessary. But Winston didn't die and so he finally decided to visit.

So here he was in the hospital, standing in front of Winston's bed looking at Winston. What was he supposed to do, what should he say?

"Hey bud," he tried. He felt stupid and his voice sounded so loud in the quiet room. Nathan went over and shut the door, came back and sat down beside the bed and started to cry. Tears fell off his chin until he leaned over and put his head on his arm and started sobbing. After five minutes he stopped, blew his nose and rubbed his eyes.

"I'm sorry, buddy. Everything's been so screwed up lately. Jane told me yesterday that she's divorcing me. I knew something was wrong but I didn't ask cause she quit bugging me about painting so much. I guess it's too late now. I still love her but I don't know what to do. Everything is so different between us all of a sudden. I

could really use your advice right now. But you're not around anymore. I mean, you're around but I can't talk to you about this.

Hey, you know that show you helped me get at the gallery? It went pretty good. I sold a lot of paintings and got my name in the paper. It never would have happened without you. Too bad you couldn't be there. I saw your girlfriend Mercedes there. She's the one who told me I should come and visit you, that it might help. She seemed like a real nice girl. Mercedes said that hearing a familiar voice can help someone in a coma. She says there's always a chance."

Nathan fell silent and got up to walk around the room. He couldn't help feeling guilty and that bothered him.

I should have visited him before now. He was a good friend to me and I just tried to forget about him. He's been here all this time and I couldn't take time to come. No, I didn't want to come. I didn't want to see him lying here, useless.

Nathan walked back to the bed and put his hand on Winston's shoulder and said, "I've been thinking about where I'm going to go when Jane kicks me out. What I thought was if you came out of your coma, maybe we could get a place somewhere. You've been living with your parents too long anyway, it's time for you to get out on your own. Hey, maybe then you would start writing like you said you wanted to. You always told me if you could have more time to

yourself you would get a lot more done. It would be great. We could do whatever we wanted."

Nathan stopped talking and looked out the window. It had started to rain and it was getting dark. Suddenly everything seemed so hopeless. He looked back to Winston for a few seconds before he stood up and walked out of the room.

## Chapter Fifteen

It was the night of Nathan Fisher's opening at the Field Gallery. Mercedes knew this because Winston had marked it on her calendar in red. He wanted her to go and meet Nathan and to see his paintings. She didn't feel like going but she thought it was something she should do. Maybe in some way it would make her feel better about Winston. And it would be nice to talk to a another friend of Winston's.

Mercedes pulled her dark green dress out of the closet. It was the only dressy thing she owned and she always saved it for special occasions. After dressing, she brushed her blonde hair into a knot on the top of her head and she fastened it with some bobby pins. Winston had once told her that he thought she was especially beautiful when she wore her hair that way. She stared at herself in the mirror and decided that she looked o.k.

The gallery was crowded when she arrived. She saw a few familiar faces from the university but she didn't know any names. She made her way past the hor d'oeuvres and the wine to the back of the gallery where the paintings were hung. They were very good, just as Winston had said. The paintings were all portraits of people. Mercedes walked

slowly along looking at each painting for a few moments. At some she laughed, in front of some she cocked her head to the side and was silent. Then she came to a portrait of Winston. She wasn't sure whether she wanted to smile or to cry. There was so much of the Winston she knew in his portrait. His soft brown eyes stared down at her so gently.

"Looks just like him, doesn't it?"

Mercedes jumped at the voice behind her and turned around to see a pretty woman looking up at Winston's portrait. The woman's gaze lowered to Mercedes.

"Oh, you knew him?" Mercedes asked while she was trying to figure out who the woman was.

"Um hum, he was a friend of my husband's. My husband is the man in blue over there surrounded by people he doesn't know."

"Oh that's Nathan and you're his wife," said Mercedes, putting everything together. She felt awkward and didn't know what to say next. "I was, am I mean, a good friend of Winston's too."

"Aren't you his girlfriend?"

"Yes, sort of." Mercedes didn't want to go into depth explaining her and Winston's friendship. But she wondered how this woman knew her.

"You were lucky to have someone like Winston. He was very devoted to you. I was so shocked when I heard what happened to him. We were getting to be friends. He was my husband's friend first of course, but sometimes when Nathan

was busy or away, Winston would come over just to see me. We would sit around and talk and he would tell me stories about where he worked. And he also told me about you. He said you were small and had bright blonde hair. I guessed who you were when you walked in the door." The woman stopped herself abruptly as if she had just realized she was talking too much.

"That's nice." Mercedes didn't know what to say. Winston had never mentioned this woman. She almost felt jealous. This woman knew Winston and he had never mentioned her.

"Yes, I was thinking of visiting him in the hospital. But I don't know if I should. I mean I'm not family or anything."

"Oh, well, you should and Nathan too of course."

"Yes, he's been meaning to get over there but he's been so busy with this show. Actually I think he's afraid to go."

"Well he seems to be free now, why don't you introduce me to him and maybe I can persuade him to go?" Mercedes wanted to get away from this woman and away from the painting of Winston. She felt trapped by them both.

They walked across the room and she was introduced to Nathan. When he reached out to shake her hand she found the feel of his hand pleasant. Somehow when Winston was talking about Nathan, she knew he would be handsome. It was like she had a crush on him before they ever met. And now that

he stood here in front of her, she realized she had been right. Of course nothing would ever come of it. He was married and he was Winston's friend. But it was okay to like him secretly. She told him she liked his paintings and inquired about the price of the portrait of Winston. Nathan said he wasn't ready to sell it, but when he was he would let her know. The three of them talked for awhile about Winston before they were interrupted by the gallery owner wanting Nathan's attention. Before she left, Mercedes told them about the visiting hours at the hospital.

## Chapter Sixteen

Winston lay motionless in a quiet hospital room at dusk. A few minutes before, the evening sun had blared through the window with a brilliant orange light that made the white sheets on his bed glow. The room was growing dark when the nurse came in and turned on the ceiling lights. She turned on the machine that fed him intravenously and checked to make sure the tube to his arm hadn't pulled loose.

"It's almost time for evening visiting hours, Winston." The nurse wondered if anyone would come that night. "Maybe Mercedes will come and visit you." It upset the nurse to think about Winston's girlfriend. At first Mercedes had visited the hospital a lot but then her visits had slacked off. That is until she met Winston's friend, Nathan, one night in the hospital room. Since then, Mercedes and Nathan visited Winston at the same time. She wanted to tell Winston that Mercedes was no good, but she held her tongue because she didn't want to hurt his feelings. What kind of friend was Nathan? He even wore a wedding ring.

The nurse's thoughts were interrupted by Nathan and Mercedes coming into the room. They took their coats off and put them down on a chair. "I'm almost finished here,"



she said. "Then I'll get out of your way."

"Oh, no hurry." Mercedes pulled a chair up next to the bed and sat down. Nathan walked over to the window and looked out at the skyline and the last bit of orange light hovering over the horizon. The nurse turned off the food machine and walked out of the room without saying anything else.

"She knows," whispered Nathan, still facing the window.

"So what. We haven't done anything wrong."

"Don't you feel guilty, though?" Nathan turned around and folded his arms across his chest.

"No, why should we?"

"Well look at him. He's been lying there for months while we've been coming here to see each other. Sometimes I get the feeling he knows what's going on. It's not fair to him."

Mercedes tried to organize her excuses for loving Nathan. She had gone over and over them, trying to work out a way to feel comfortable with herself. But the reasons for their relationship weren't logical or easy to explain. Winston had talked about Nathan so much that she liked him before she ever met him. When she met him at the gallery she was immediately attracted to him but she stifled her interest because he was married. It was later when she met him in Winston's hospital room that she found out he was to be divorced soon.

He was nothing like Winston. Nathan wasn't educated,

he didn't consider himself an intellectual, and he had the will and the drive to create. After a few hours together, Mercedes found herself emotionally attached to Nathan. This had never happened before. Her other relationships had been slow and planned out in great detail. And then there was Winston to feel guilty about. At least her relationship with Nathan wasn't sexual yet. They hadn't gone that far.

"Winston can't possibly know about us." Mercedes hoped this was true. Nathan walked over to Mercedes, pulled her up out of the chair and kissed her. The sounds of footsteps in the hall interrupted their first kiss.

"Excuse me, I was just stopping in to see Winston." Dickie was standing in the doorway, hesitating. He didn't want to break through the tension that seemed to be pushing him back out the door.

"Come on in, Dickie," said Mercedes. She stood up and went over to the bed. "How are your classes going?"

"Oh, fine. But I miss having Nathan around to help me out with the homework." Dickie walked over to the bed and stood beside Mercedes. He had met Mercedes and Nathan in The Little Hen when they came to visit Winston, but he had never seen them together. "Hey Winston, how's it going," Dickie said as he reached out slowly to touch Winston's hand. "I wonder if he can hear me?" he asked Mercedes. She just shrugged and looked down at the floor. Dickie felt he was making Mercedes uncomfortable so he decided to stop talking to her. He walked over to Nathan who had moved over

to the window. Dickie looked out, sighed and said, "You know I just can't stop thinking about him. I keep thinking, maybe there was something I could have done. If only I was there when it happened, things might be different."

"I know what you mean, but you can't keep thinking that way. You have to move on."

"I guess you're right," Dickie answered with another sigh. "How is your painting going?"

"Lately, not very well," Nathan answered with a disheartened tone. He hoped that it was just a block and that his interest in Mercedes wasn't an excuse for not working. She did fill his mind lately. They all stood silently and looked at Winston.

Out in the hall, the nurse was creeping up slowly to the door. When she heard no talking, she swiftly turned into the room hoping to catch Mercedes and Nathan embracing. She was surprised to find Dickie with them and she said, "Oh, ah, I forgot to take Winston's pulse." She regained her poise and walked over to the bed.

"Oh well, I was just leaving," said Mercedes as she picked up her coat from the bottom of Winston's bed. "How is Winston doing? He seems to be losing weight."

"He is not doing very well," answered the nurse curtly.

"We were wondering if comatose patients know what's going on around them," said Mercedes.

The nurse finished taking Winston's pulse thinking, I'll bet they are wondering about that. She thought the way

they have been carrying on in his room was disgraceful. She felt like telling them to leave and never come back, but instead she said, "No one knows for sure. There have been some cases where a patient comes out of a coma and can remember something someone said or did during the coma."

"I've got to be going too." Nathan grabbed his coat and walked out of the room. Mercedes waited a few moments and then followed him.

Dickie and the nurse glanced at each other and then looked at Winston. "Well, I've got to move on down the hall," sighed the nurse.

"I'm going to stay a while and talk to Winston about school. You know, he's the one that convinced me to go to college? I want to tell him about my classes."

"I'm sure he'd be happy to hear about that." The nurse went over to the window and pulled the curtain over the black night sky.

While Dickie rambled on about his life and the Little Hen, Winston lay silently in his dream bed and heard nothing Dickie said. Winston's mind was not still though, and he was not dreaming happy dreams. His brain was filled with angry jealous thoughts.

Why am I so miserable? I'm not comfortable here anymore. I keep thinking of Mercedes and Nathan. Not separately but together. I can't get the thought of them being together out of my head. I've always been afraid to introduce them, afraid they would like each other too much.

Especially since things weren't looking too good for Mercedes and me. Besides, what girl would want the name Mercedes Ford? Of course if we got married, she probably wouldn't take my name anyway. Maybe if I had written a great novel and dedicated it to her, she would have fallen in love with me. What really makes me jealous is that I know how attractive talent can be and Nathan's loaded with it. How can I ever compete with that? And Mercedes is so independent, she doesn't need someone to take care of her like Jane does.

I wonder how Jane is. When will she finally tell Nathan she wants a divorce? She used to talk about it all the time. About how she was tired of being lonely and how she was tired of trying to make her marriage work. By that time I realized Nathan wasn't the person I thought he was.

When Nathan and I first met we spent a lot of time together and we were good friends. Looking back I see that I was a better friend to him. He would always ask me for help when he needed a favor or Jane was bugging him to do some work on the house. I think I painted more of their house than he did. Then after a while he was always too busy to hang out with me. I started to understand why Jane had sold his paintings. At first I thought she was wrong to do that, but after Nathan dumped me I realized how she felt. I used to go over to his house and he'd be gone so I'd sit around and talk with Jane.

Actually she turned out to be a lot of fun. She was a

good listener and had a great sense of humor. We would sit around and watch soap operas in the afternoon and I would tell her about my failed lovelife. Sometimes we would both sit around and complain about Nathan. We were cohorts. Once when Nathan came home and found us eating popcorn on the couch and laughing at some t.v. show he acted a little jealous. He never said anything, he just looked at us sitting together on the couch like he saw us differently. Like we were different people than his Jane and his Winston.

Jane was afraid to tell Nathan she wanted a divorce. She was afraid because she had never been out on her own. I told her that she would be fine and that I would help her. Maybe that makes me a traitor but she was so unhappy and I felt sorry for her.

## Chapter Seventeen

I was in The Little Hen watching the sun go down behind the gas pumps out in front. It was a slow night. I leaned on the counter and stared at the second-hand on the clock ticking off one second at a time. As it darkened outside the store interior grew brighter. I felt lonely watching the sunset at The Little Hen. People should be together when the sun goes down. I missed Mercedes. She had gotten a day job for the summer and we hardly saw each other anymore.

I stepped out from behind the counter and walked outside into the chest-crushing heat of July. The hot air rising from the pavement made me want to lie down and warm my chilled body. For a moment I thought about it and I even started to crouch. But then I saw a black Cadillac pull into the parking lot. Thank God I wasn't sprawled out on the pavement when they drove in.

I held my hand above my eyes to block the glare of the low sun. A woman's legs covered with thick black hose dropped out of the passenger side quickly and softly like a spider climbing down a wall. The black legs moved disjointedly toward me, knees locking and unlocking. Above the black legs was a bright blue dress and above that,

blonde hair. I opened the store door and after she passed through, I followed.

She walked back to the refrigerators and pulled out an armful of cheap champagne. When she walked by the candy rack, she grabbed a handful of chocolate bars. One of the bottles of champagne slipped out of her arms and exploded on the floor. She looked around the store until she saw me.

"I'm sorry," she said. Her face stopped my voice. I couldn't help staring at her fragile, egg white skin and her gilt lashes and brow. She looked so fresh and pure, like a soft blonde madonna that had stepped out of a painting on a church altarpiece.

"That's o.k.," I said slowly.

She moved up to the counter, put down her purchases and looked into a small purse. I noticed that her body was moving. She was shaking a little.

"Are you all right?" I asked, leaning down to look into her face, which was bent over her purse.

"I don't know." She laughed, but tears came up in her eyes. They were glassy and the pale green color of an old coke bottle. "Do you have a bathroom?"

"Yes, it's over there," I pointed to the corner by the video machine. We weren't supposed to tell customers about the bathroom, but I wasn't about to say no to her. When she went in and closed the door, I looked out to the black Cadillac and tried to see through the dark windows. I wondered if I should go out and tell them their madonna was



sick; I speculated that the driver would be a dark Italian, a patron of medieval-looking women. After five minutes of thinking about the villa the two lived in just outside Florence, I remembered the madonna was still in the bathroom. She wasn't a real madonna. Real madonnas don't drink cheap champagne and eat chocolate bars. The two probably didn't live in a villa either. I went over to the bathroom and listened at the door.

"Are you o.k.?" A low murmur came from behind the door. "Are you all right?" I asked a little louder. There was no answer. I opened the door, slowly at first, and had to push it open because her body was slumped against it. When I picked her up, she felt very light. As I carried her out of the store she kept mumbling something I couldn't understand, almost as though she was dreaming.

When I neared the car the window on the passenger side slid down. A small old man wearing wire-rimmed glasses stuck his head out. So much for the dark Italian art patron. The old man got out of the car and opened the back door and I laid her carefully down onto the soft burgundy velvet of the back seat.

"What's the matter with her?" I asked, wishing I had never brought her out to the car. A brisk "thank you" was the only response I got as the man shut the back door. He walked around to the driver's side, got in and drove off. I watched the collection of red taillights on the Cadillac leave the parking lot and drift toward the on-ramp to

Highway 95. When the lights disappeared, I went back into The Little Hen to clean up the mess. While I was sweeping, I thought about how the girl looked like Mercedes. And yet they were so different. The madonna had no control of herself while Mercedes had complete control. I realized that I was somewhere in between and that I wanted to stay that way. Still sweeping, I found the weight of the broom in my hands reminded me of how light the madonna felt in my arms.

## Chapter Eighteen

Jane sat alone on the sofa with her feet curled up under her and a blanket over her knees. She was writing in her diary as she did everyday but this day was different. Her diary would no longer be a record of events and things that other people said or did. Now it would be about her true feelings. She had decided this earlier in the day when she had read over her diary and found that it made her life sound happy. Her life wasn't happy and she wanted to start being honest with herself. Her hand held a pen poised above a floral covered notebook while her mind was working on exactly what she would say. It was hard to be honest and harder to make it real by writing it down on paper. Finally her hand wrote the words that connected her heart and her head.

Today I called a divorce lawyer. When I tell Nathan this he will ask me why. What's left to tell him? I've already told him in a million ways but he still doesn't understand. Maybe he never will.

When we were first married it was okay. We had so much fun and I was crazy about him. Back then, I admired his paintings. I knew they were good too. When he was away I used to go and stare at them for hours and think that Nathan

was so smart to see into people's hearts. But after awhile I realized that it was all he wanted. He wanted to know those people he painted. He wanted to break inside them and understand their part in the universe. But once he held that knowlege in his hands he was done with their bodies. Finished with them just like he was finished with me. That's why I started to hate his paintings and that's why I sold them at my yardsale.

When I finally stopped loving Nathan, I'm not sure he noticed. Everything I said and did showed how I felt. I could have stood on the roof and screamed it out to the neighborhood and it probably wouldn't have bothered him. Maybe it didn't matter to him because he was always finding new people to love him. New people to fill up his time and his heart. He'd find them everywhere. They'd come over to the house to have their portraits painted and to spend time with Nathan. There were men and women. I never really worried about the women because I knew Nathan had little interest in sex. Painting was his sex. Then when he was done with them, they would look at me so strangely. As if to say, "What did I do?" It made me feel mean to see that lost look in their eyes. I wanted to laugh at them. Everyone except Winston. I never wanted to laugh at him. I guess that's because it didn't matter so much to him and because he liked me.

Most of the people who came to Nathan had no interest in me. I was just someone who opened the door, cooked

Nathan's food and did his laundry. Some of them probably thought I was lucky. Winston was different. He noticed that I was a living, breathing person right from the start. After Nathan ditched him, he started hanging around me. Winston used to tell me that Nathan was a very good artist and might be famous some day. It didn't mean anything to me though. I told Winston that just because someone is a good artist doesn't mean they're a good person. I told him that Nathan could give himself to the people in his paintings but he couldn't give anything to them in real life. What good is being a great artist if you can't give or receive real love? What good is knowing so much or being so smart if you can't understand yourself?

It used to bother Nathan that Winston was spending time with me. He used to make comments about it. But by that time I didn't care anymore. I started having a crush on Winston. He made me feel so young and alive inside. I began wondering what it would be like to kiss Winston. Of course I never got a chance.

Lately I've been going to the hospital to see Winston a lot. I've got so many things to tell him when he wakes up. He will wake up. I know he will. I have a good feeling.

## Chapter Nineteen

Days in August are the slowest days of the year. I was always glad when September came and I could go back to school, but that year September seemed far away. One day in August, I looked out the plate glass windows of The Little Hen and saw the air swirling up from the hot pavement. The houses on the other side of the road were in motion, waving in the heat. I imagined standing in a house that was moving and swaying. We do live in buildings that are moving. Everything is moving. The atoms in every table, lamp, floor, and ceiling don't ever stop moving. When I was young, I would close my eyes tightly and rub them to see stars. I thought these stars were atoms and that I had some special power to see them when my eyes were closed. While thinking about this, my eyes started getting too dry so I closed them for a moment.

Bells were ringing so I opened my eyes and tried to focus on the door, but the sunlight was too bright. I squinted and tried to see who had come in. I made out three large silhouettes in the doorway that became three tall black men when my eyes cleared. They were huge. The three of them could easily overpower me if they wanted to.

They sauntered around the store, picking up things,

looking at them for a moment, putting them back. I had a premonition that something was going to happen so I leaned back against the counter, put my finger on the alarm button and looked out the window to see if there was anyone else in the parking lot. It was empty except for a car pulling in. I watched the driver park, turn off the keys and take something out of the glove compartment. When the driver got out of the car, I saw it was John Hemingway. I couldn't believe it, I was saved.

He came in the door and I waved to him and said, "Hello, how are you?" He didn't say anything though; he just stood there looking down at the floor. I searched the back of the store to check on the black guys and I saw they were walking up to the counter with some cookies.

"I was sitting at home thinking about everything," mumbled Hemingway.

"What? I can't hear you." He walked closer to the counter and looked up at the ceiling.

"I was sitting at home thinking about killing myself."

The three men were almost up to the counter.

"What?" I asked, still watching their approach. Then I saw the gun. Hemingway was waving a pistol back and forth in front of me. The black men stopped and stared at the gun.

"Then I thought, no, why not get to the root of the problem. And people like you are the reason. . ."  
Hemingway didn't finish because one of the men lunged out to

push the gun out of his hands. I heard the gun go off and there was a long roaring sound in my ears. I remember thinking that if I could move as fast as an atom, everything would be o.k. I tried to duck my head but the air around it was so heavy that my head couldn't push through it. Everything was moving slowly then. Outside the cars on the road weren't moving and the voices of people around me dragged on so long that I couldn't understand the words.

For a while I felt like an atom myself, bouncing all around the walls and the ceiling of The Little Hen. I could see everything going on below me in the store until I fell back down to the floor. And then I was in this bed. For a long time, I thought there was a way out of here, a way to get back to The Little Hen, but lately I'm not sure.

Here in this bed, time just swirls around and I get dizzy when I try to get things straight. I start heading down a familiar track in my memory and I come to a dead end. At times it's comforting to lose myself, but then I feel guilty that I'm not out in the world producing something tangible like Nathan's paintings or not helping other people like Mercedes. Being here reminds me of a feeling I once had as a teenager.

One beautiful spring day I was lying in bed and thinking that I should get up and go outside but I just didn't want to. The fact that it was such a beautiful day made my bed seem more desirable. I had my whole life ahead of me, the outside world was waiting. But there is an



inside world too. And it's safe and comfortable and no one ever expects anything of you. So I started counting and I told myself that when I got to a hundred, I would get up out of bed. But as I got close to the end of counting, I remembered ninety-nine and one half.

## Chapter Twenty

How did I get back? I got past ninety-nine and one half. I remember the feeling that I was floating, that my bed had stopped gripping me. My right hand was warm and there was someone talking to me. At first everything was blurry but after a while I realized it was Jane. She was holding my hand tightly and she kept saying "Winston, are you there?" I couldn't talk but I squeezed her hand. After that she pressed the nurse's buzzer and soon the room was filled with people. I kept trying to look past the nurses and doctors hovering around me. Jane was standing by the window and the strong sun behind her made a halo of her hair. For a moment I thought I might be dead, but then a nurse stuck a needle in my arm and I felt pain so I knew I was alive.

When I first woke up I had so many questions. What had happened while I was gone? Where were Nathan and Mercedes? Did they catch Hemingway? Were my parents o.k.? I wanted to ask Jane these things but I felt so weak and tired I could barely speak. The following morning I was finally able to talk to Jane. She spent the night at the hospital and when she came into my room in the morning, she looked worn and tired. She sat down on the side of my bed. Her

skin was pale and she had dark circles under her eyes but she seemed more beautiful than I ever remembered.

"Hi Winston. The nurse said I could talk to you for a few minutes."

"What's happened?" I forced out.

Jane seemed a little nervous and she turned and stared at the blank wall a moment before she spoke. "Well, there's so many things. Let's see. Well, I finally left Nathan. I mean he moved out of the house. Actually he moved to New York. He's going to try and make it as a painter there. And a few weeks ago Mercedes moved up there to join him." She looked back to me and I nodded. "I hope that doesn't upset you," she said, trying to determine if it did by scanning my face.

"No," I answered. Strangely enough it didn't upset me at all. The moment I passed ninety-nine and one half I began to have faith in myself. It wasn't important for me to be a great writer or to keep trying to make Mercedes love me or to fulfill my parents dreams of who I should be. What was important was that I wasn't afraid of failing anymore. This new life seemed ridiculously simple. All I had to do was to keep taking small steps toward myself.

"And your parents came last night when you were sleeping. They'll be here soon. They were so relieved to hear the news. Your mother kept peeping through the door while you were sleeping. She kept asking if she could wake you up, just to make sure that you weren't still in a coma."

"The Little Hen?" I asked.

"Well it's still the same. In fact I work there now. I went by there a while back and your manager, Dickie, was telling me about what happened. He said he was having a hard time hiring clerks because of what happened to you. I needed a job then so he hired me. They caught the guy who shot you so I figured it was safe enough. You were on the t.v. news for weeks. When that Hemingway man went to trial they decided he was crazy so they didn't put him in jail. Instead they locked him up in an asylum. People still come in The Little Hen and ask where you were shot. When I tell them, they look behind the counter to see if there are any bloodstains. Of course there aren't. Dickie cleaned that up a long time ago."

Jane stopped to catch her breath and I nodded that I understood. It was strange hearing my shooting described as a news event. While I had been lying dormant, the world found out about me, my shooting, where I was shot, a trial about my shooting and had now probably forgotten I ever existed. It made me feel giddy thinking about it and I started laughing.

"What's funny?" Jane asked. After a moment though, a smile broke her serious face and she laughed too.

Over the next few weeks I had to stay in the hospital for therapy. Jane was there almost everyday, coaxing me to work harder. We decided that when I left the hospital I would move into the house with her. I didn't want to go

back to my parents home.

My parents hadn't changed while I was away. At first they were just happy to have me back and were glad of every breath I took. But slowly their complete contentment with me dissolved. Mom was unhappy that I was going to live with a divorced woman and my father still wanted me to have a career in business. Maybe they thought that being in a coma had changed me into something different. It had, but it wasn't in the way they thought.

I remember the last day they visited me in the hospital before I moved in with Jane. When they came in, I was sitting on my hospital bed making a list of things I needed to do when I got out.

"Winston, your father and I want you to know that we are very proud of you," Mom said. "But," she continued, "we really wish you would reconsider and come home with us."

Dad was milling around the room trying to pretend he wasn't listening. "Mom, thanks, but I really don't want to do that. Things are different now and I can't go back to my old life."

Mom seemed hurt by this and said, "What do you mean, your old life? It's all the same life. I just can't understand why you have to move away?"

"I'm not moving away, I'll still be living in the same town."

"Well, it just won't be the same," she sighed.

Dad came over and stood beside her. "Come on, Evelyn,

he's made up his mind."

Before they left I wanted to grab them and explain why things were different but I couldn't.

How could I explain to them or anyone what I had been through? There came a moment when the puzzle of my life appeared to me as whole and I saw my choices clearly. My decision is part of me now and I can't isolate it and say to someone "Look, this is how I'm changed." If I could explain or give this knowledge as a gift, I gladly would. But there isn't a way to tell someone how to know themselves, how to have faith in themselves, how to use the power they contain.

After they were gone I tore up my long list of the miscellaneous things I needed to do and made a list of the things I wanted to do with the rest of my life. It was fairly small.

Start writing  
Finish school  
Marry Jane

When Jane came to pick me up from the hospital, I showed her the list.

"I see you saved the hardest one for last," she said.