In winter, I read much of the night and run my dogs. This is what I like best, teaming them up and running for a hundred miles sometimes without seeing another creature. Sometimes, the snow comes at me so thick that it looks like I'm moving through stars, the muffled hush of the sled and the wind in my ears the only sound. We run and run, these dogs and I, through the dark, under the northern lights. It is a place of such terrible beauty that no matter how much I want to, I cannot close my eyes.

The Object Lesson

The stains on her son's bed sheets are blood. That much Laurel Cassidy is certain of. She thinks she knows whose blood, too, but here she can't be sure. After all, the blood might be Will's, though the stains are dead center of the fitted double sheet, three blotches like a Rorschach ink blot. In her experience, young men very seldom bleed from their groins, and when they do, the consequences are such that a mother finds out soon enough. Will seems healthy. Laurel can hear him in the kitchen, opening cabinets and pouring his first helping of Frosted Cheerios. These days he consumes at least three bowls full, rising earlier in the morning, simply to have the time to fill his stomach. "I get so hungry," he complains, shaking his head and frowning. His appetite, it seems, is a mystery to him.

The blood has been there a while, long enough for the stain to turn rust-colored and ugly. For a minute or two, Laurel stands befuddled, her bare toes clutching at the grimy carpet. Don't go ballistic, she tells herself. Stay calm. Try to make sense of things. In this case, the blood is all she has to go on. It was smudged before it dried, undoubtedly by Will's body and/or his girlfriend's, and the splotches against the white background call up a succession of images: butterflies coupling, a squadron of jet fighters, and when Laurel twists her head, storm clouds accompanied by one wavering bolt of lightning. Even before she can fix on one image and relinquish the others, tears begin sliding down her cheeks. Laurel is crying, though she isn't sure why. Maybe it's her son's lost boyhood she is weeping over, or the indignity of discovering it. Or it could be the stain itself, a blotch on the sheets her mother gave her for her wedding. The marriage is over, her mother is dead, but here are the sheets, stained now with the blood of a girl Laurel despises.
No wonder Will’s been making his bed, Laurel thinks. Here she’s been congratulating herself on her sense of responsibility when all he’s been doing is hiding the evidence. What a dope she is. It’s been a long time since Laurel changed his sheets, a month, maybe longer. Lately, it’s all she can do to keep milk in the refrigerator, toilet paper next to the commode, and a clear path through the front door to the kitchen. She wants to be a good mother, she really does, but on a day-to-day basis, the choices are tough to make. She told herself it was more important to buy groceries, more important to respond to the summons of a teacher, more important to take Will to get a new pair of shoes. The sheets and the dusting and the vacuuming can wait, she told herself. Only in this case, it turns out they couldn’t.

She strips the bed hurriedly, revealing the discolored mattress—yes, the blood seeped through to the pad and then down into the mattress itself, creating mirror prints of the original stain. She hustles to the bathroom for a washcloth, grabs the last clean one, soaking it in cold water. The first remedy for blood is to blot it out with cold water, but it’s too late for that. She tries scrubbing. Too late for that, as well. Once or twice, she glances up at the bedside table cluttered with glasses of water, crumpled Kleenex, a small basket crammed with stubs from movie and concert tickets.

Will is sentimental. In his closet he keeps a box of school papers going back to elementary school, every A he’s ever made. And since he and Sophie became an “item”—his term, as though a relationship makes of two people one inanimate object—he has been collecting mementos of their dates: a leaf from a cottonwood tree, a receipt from Target for $40.37, a plastic armband from the local water park. Laurel came upon him one evening, studying his collection at the kitchen table. When she asked what they were, he gazed up into her face, his dark brown eyes going darker as he explained they were souvenirs, things to help him remember. He intended to recall it, all of it, every moment of it, he said. The way he confessed this wish tore at Laurel’s heart. It’s as though he’s already mourning the loss, she thought, even before it’s been snatched away. Worse yet, he assumes the snatching. She knew, of course, why that might be.

Bundling the sheets in her arms, Laurel is careful to wad the spots inward. She doesn’t want them touching her skin, though she realizes as she hurries down the hall that the blood is only what she can see. What she can’t see may be much more dangerous. She’s at the top of the stairs when she hesitates, then bends her head, brushing her nose to the cotton. Yes, she can smell it there, the faintest trace of patchouli, Sophie’s signature scent. It’s Sophie’s blood that stained the sheets; Laurel would bet her life on that now.

She remembers remarking on the perfume. Such a strange and complicated scent, she said. They were sitting around the kitchen table—the three of them—eating pizza. Laurel was trying to be sociable, to ferret out Sophie’s good points, since the girl was determined to invade every corner of her life. In truth, the scent was like everything else about Sophie: obnoxious, an imposition on the rest of the world. Like the rap music that leaks out of low rider cars, it was proof of a personality turned inward, interested only in pleasing itself. Why should we have to smell it (or hear it), Laurel wanted to ask. But instead of speaking her mind, she took a bite of pizza. This is one of her maxims: if in doubt, eat. Meanwhile, Sophie, who seemed never to eat, explained that her mother had turned her on to patchouli. “They all wore it in Haight-Ashbury,” Sophie said, waving her arm grandly, so that the silver bracelets on her thin wrists tinkled and twirled.

Evidently, Sophie’s mother was a hippie once upon a time, which meant everyone else was supposed to bow down and confess to the sin of conformity. Laurel was too young to have been a hippie, but even if she’d come of age in the sixties, she was sure she’d have seen through the whole ridiculous charade. She distrusted all of it, but particularly the notion of free love. She was willing to bet her life that nothing, absolutely nothing, was free, and certainly not love.

At the mention of Haight-Ashbury, Will nodded, as though he understood it all now, but Laurel knew he hadn’t the slightest idea what his girlfriend was talking about. And Sophie knew it, too. That’s why she tossed her head, all that dark curly hair rising and falling, the one lock of bleached blonde settling over her shoulder. The gesture was to keep from laughing. Just then, Laurel saw the two of them from Sophie’s eyes—one dark and handsome, and therefore worth the trouble, the other his old hang-around mother. To be sixteen and so sure of yourself, it was surely both a gift and a curse.

Laurel drops the wad of sheets on the top of the washing machine. The least he can do is to wash them himself, and she will tell him so. As she rushes down the hall to the kitchen, she decides that an object lesson is in order. Washing the sheets will be part of the lesson; the rest of it she will figure out as she goes along.
Will is in the kitchen, hunched over a bowl of Frosted Cheerios, his back to her. He always takes the same seat at the table, the one facing the window. If a visitor plops down there, he sits elsewhere, but he sulks, saying very little, until the rest of them lapse into silence as well. Laurel is the only one who understands the problem. “Just give him his chair back,” Laurel wants to shout, but she can’t. He’d be embarrassed. He’d deny it, refuse the seat from that day forward. Furthermore, he’d dislike her for knowing so much about him. No one likes to be an open book.

The blue box stands next to his bowl, for easy pouring. He’s shoveling the cereal into his mouth, slurping, crunching, then fishing in the bowl for another spoonful. How many times has she told him not to slurp? But her badgering makes no impression. If I can’t change his table manners, she thinks, what good can I possibly do when it comes to his sexual appetite? But the whole notion of Will having a sexual appetite makes her ill. She reaches for the door sill and holds on. It had to happen, she tells herself. Babies grow up. Back when she was pregnant, Laurel imagined his childhood stretching into her old age. To raise a child seemed an ordeal, something she might not survive. Eighteen years. At the time, she was only seventeen herself, and getting there had been a lifelong endeavor. Yet here she was, sixteen years later, still struggling to fit into size ten jeans, still parting her hair in the middle, still in love with Will’s father, Carlos, who has never been in love with her. Nothing has changed except Will, who is now this man-child she hardly recognizes.

Sometimes, when he’s not looking, Laurel compares him to his father. Her memory is foggy. She isn’t sure, for instance, whether Carlos’s ears are like Will’s, whether they flare at the base the way Will’s do, not big ears, not flappy, but alert. Her son has something of the warrior in him. His body seems built for the hunt: strong legs, long arms, and big hands, a pair of keen eyes peering into the distance. She doesn’t remember Carlos this way, but her memory is lousy. Carlos moved to Lubbock not long after the divorce — Will was barely four years old — and they haven’t seen hide nor hair of him since. Laurel spent years pining for him, a useless gesture that dulled her to what she did have: her mother, her son, even her father from time to time. Consequently, much of Will’s early childhood is lost to her; she simply doesn’t remember it. To relinquish so much so needlessly, it makes her ache. If she doesn’t watch out, she will moan, right here in the doorway.

Perhaps she does moan, or at least make some sort of sound, because Will shifts in his chair and calls out to her: “So what is it?”

A good question, she thinks, but not one she’s prepared to answer. She slips into the kitchen — a rectangular space separated from the dining room by a low bar. Caked dinner dishes and smudged glasses fill the sink. A quick look tells her that Will had guests for dinner, that he fixed fried eggs, bacon, and toast. If he has his way, and generally he does, Will eats breakfast all day long. This morning, the runny egg has turned to yellow glue. If she were to pitch one of these plates to the floor, the stubborn remains of yolk would hold the pieces together. She studies the depressing mess in the sink, then turns on the tap, running water over all of it and hoping for a miracle.

Doing the dinner dishes is one of Will’s chores. Laurel is the assistant manager of Movies West, which means she works nights. Back when Will was young, it was a good job because it gave her flexibility. Now, all it gives her is grief. The duties haven’t changed in five years and neither has the salary. Only her expenses have gone up. Two mornings a week she cleans houses to bring in a little extra cash. The other three mornings, she takes classes at the University. Next year she’ll have a B.S. in psychology. What she’ll do after she graduates is still unclear, but she expects to make a new life for herself. She has to. She wants Will to go to college too, and she has to prove to him that it’s worth it.

“What is it?” Will repeats, and then a sigh. “Sorry, Mom, I’ll do those.”

“If you were going to do them, you should have done them last night.” Laurel hears her tone of voice; it’s that huffy, offended-mother tone. She remembers hating it as a child, and she doesn’t know why she has resurrected it at this moment. It’s bound to set Will against her, just as it set her against her own mother. A little pang of misery follows this realization.

Lately, Laurel sees herself as someone who loves most what she can’t have. Right now, that love is directed at a married man, at her dead mother, at her long-lost first love, Carlos. Sometime soon it will be directed toward her son, Will, who appears to be heading out of her life. Please, oh please, she begs herself. Figure it out before it’s too late. “It’s not the dishes,” Laurel says, twisting off the faucet and reaching for the first plate. Automatically, she begins filing the plates into the slots in the dishwasher. She’s done this chore so many times that she doesn’t have to look anymore.
“Sophie will be here in ten minutes, Mom,” Will reminds her. “Can you make it quick?” Sophie is a year older than Will, so she has her driver’s license and frequent access to Daddy’s car. He’s an entomology professor who seems to do most of his work at home. Sophie drives his car to work at the theater, to school most every day, and on Saturday night dates.

“Sex is a big subject,” Laurel responds quietly.

“Sex?” Will groans. “You’re off the hook, Mom. They do all that at school now.” He shovels in another spoonful, chewing slowly to give himself time to think of a joke that will get him off the hook. Laurel holds a wet plate and waits. “I bet I know more about fallopian tubes than you do,” he quips.

Predicting his tricks doesn’t guarantee not falling for them. She begrudges the smile, but there it is, aimed at the back of his head. These days, he wears his dark wavy hair so long that it brushes his collar. He parts it down the middle and with his dark skin and Roman nose, he looks positively Biblical, like one of Jesus’s apostles, a fisherman.

“What you know is dry facts. Terms, charts, graphs, multiple choice responses,” Laurel tells him. She is pretending, for the moment, not to know about the stained sheets, but the splotch rises before her eyes, and she has to shake her head to dismiss it.

Will scoots back his chair and springs to his feet, collecting his bowl and spoon and tucking the cereal box under one arm. After pitching the box into the cabinet, he moves to the sink, coming so close she gets a whiff of his deodorant, which smells of talcum with a dash of lime. She wants to reach out and grab him, pull him in close until he gives himself up to her embrace. She also wants to slap him across the jaw, so hard that the palm of her hand will sting. She’s done them both in the past, sometimes the first and then the second. Sometimes the second and then the first. She’s done the wrong thing so many times; above all, she wants to do the right thing now.

“Let’s talk about this later, Mom,” he suggests. He has a little milk mustache, and when he smiles, she reaches out to touch his upper lip. He’s my little boy, she tells herself. He’s still my little boy.

“Yes, we’ll talk later. But we should have talked sooner. I just didn’t realize. . . . It was stupid, but I didn’t realize. . . .” She sees it coming over his face, the shadow of something larger than either of them. “Why didn’t you wash the sheets?” she asks. She’s whispering now, her face so close she could kiss his lips. “Why didn’t you spare me this – filth?”

The smile disappears. His mouth goes hard, a straight slit across the bottom of his face. “I hate your guts,” he says, his milk breath washing over her. “I hate you. Really.”

“Hate me or not, those sheets better be washed by the time I get home tonight.”

When he’s gone, Laurel slumps across the counter until her cheek rests on the sticky Formica. She cleans it; she’s always cleaning it, but like everything else, it’s dirty to the touch.

All day, the stain comes back to haunt her. She’s sitting in her cognition class, diligently taking notes, when the professor begins talking about serotonin levels in the blood. “It turns out,” he says, “that people who are sensation seekers have love patterns different from people who aren’t. This fact, more than any other, may link subtle emotional processes to brain mechanisms active in the process of sexually driven love.” Laurel takes it down, all of it, but when the professor flips on the overhead projector, she closes her eyes and there it is: the stain in negative, white against a black background. Sexually driven love, she thinks. She has never heard that phrase before. She’s not even sure what it means. When does the love come into play, before or after? Is it love that leads to sex, or sex that leads to love? She wants to ask the professor to explain what he means, but by the time she thinks to raise her hand, he’s changing transparencies. Already, he’s moved on to something else.

At lunch, too, she sees the stain. She and her boss are having lunch at Wendy’s. It’s part of their weekly routine; on Monday or Wednesday they go out to lunch at one of the nearby fast-food restaurants. They talk work, of course. That’s the whole point. Her boss is discussing Saturday night no-shows, a perennial problem, but one that’s worse in the fall. High school help is notoriously unreliable. Laurel has squirited catsup on her white napkin, and she’s about to dunk a french fry, when she stops and stares at the mess she’s made. Almost immediately, the catsup begins to separate. A watery stain spreads out around the blob of red. “What is it?” her boss asks.

“Nothing,” Laurel replies. Carefully, she folds the napkin into thirds, keeping the catsup in the middle. Then she stuffs the little square into the middle of the ashtray. “Go on,” she tells him. “I’m listening.”

Sophie doesn’t work Monday nights. Her father teaches a night class, so she doesn’t have access to his car. On Monday nights,
she stays home and studies. Good grades are something her parents insist on; at least that’s the line Sophie gave Laurel when she interviewed for the job at Movies West. Will met Sophie at the theater, and then they ran into each other in the halls at school. One day, Sophie called Will at home and asked if he were doing anything on Saturday night. Sophie made the call from work; in fact, she was sitting at Laurel’s desk. It makes Laurel mad every time she thinks of it.

By the time Laurel finishes up at the theater, it’s after midnight. Driving home, she watches lightning lick the periphery of the city. The horizon is black, but occasionally the surrounding desert is lit by multiple bolts of lightning, jagged streaks like stick figures dancing in the sky. Usually, the lightning displays occur earlier in the evening, while Laurel is busy overseeing the running of the theater, but this is a late night storm. All over the city sleepers are tossing in their beds, vaguely disturbed by the rumble of thunder and the flash of light. Laurel feels lucky to be awake. The streaks of light are so beautiful she has trouble believing they are also deadly, that they spark forest fires and jolt golfers on the back nine, leaving them dead on the green.

When she gets into the house, she finds lights on in the living room and the kitchen, but the counter is clear, the dishwasher loaded and ready to turn on. Briefly, Laurel steps into the laundry room. The sheets have disappeared. They aren’t inside the dryer, nor are they in the washer, which is where Laurel expects they’ll be. Will is pretty good about putting detergent in the washer and turning it on, but he rarely remembers the clothes once the load is done. Sometimes she doesn’t think to check the machine for a few days; by then, the clothes are mildewed and have to be run again.

Laurel finds her son asleep in the middle of his bare mattress. He’s wearing boxer shorts but no shirt, and his feet dangle off the end of the bed. The narrow bedroom window is wide open. Outside, a shower is in progress. The pat-a-pat sound of raindrops on gravel is soothing. Sometimes, when she’s very tired, Laurel feels almost agitated. It becomes hard to lie down, harder still to get to sleep. Laurel moves to the window, though there’s nothing to see but the neighbor’s wooden fence. The rain will pass quickly, but tomorrow flowers will blossom along the roadsides and in the open spaces around Albuquerque—yellow brittlebrush, purple butterfly bush, and orange globe-mallow. Things happen so quickly in the desert; what appears dead and gone can be resurrected overnight. The blessing of a little rain is all it takes.

The breeze is cool and moist, and Laurel stands at the window for quite a while. When she turns away, she sees that Will is chilly. In his sleep, he’s curled in on himself, so that he looks smaller and more vulnerable. He is vulnerable, she thinks, every bit as vulnerable as he was when he was ten. Only he doesn’t believe it, and he won’t for some time to come. She takes a breath and holds it, leans down and kisses his cheek and the corner of his lips. She breathes in as he breathes out. She holds herself there until she trembles with the effort of it, until the phone rings and she has to run to catch it before Will wakes up.

She races for her room, managing to grab the receiver on the third ring. “Yes?” she whispers. Laurel knows who it is and what he wants. It’s her lover, a married man named Ralph Avery, who lives in a house Laurel cleans every other Thursday morning.

“Laurel?” he whispers. She even knows exactly where he is at this moment: in the kitchen, hunched over the counter. Probably, he’s staring at the bulldog cookie jar. Several times in cleaning the counter, Laurel has picked up this jar, thinking to move it, only to have the dog’s head come off in her hand. It’s a little ghoulish, she thinks: to get a cookie, you have to decapitate the bulldog. His head detaches neatly, just above his wide red collar. Whenever she thinks of Ralph and his marriage, the cookie jar comes to mind. Things may look intact when in reality they’re coming to pieces.

“Yes, Ralph?”

“Can I come over?” he asks. Why he should be awake at this hour is a mystery. He claims he doesn’t sleep well. When he was a child, he walked in his sleep. Now, once or twice a week, he drives in his sleep, making his way to Laurel’s house, where he slips in through the garage door. Will is a sound sleeper, and Ralph never stays long, a couple of hours at most.

“No, no, I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Silence on the other end. Lately, he has learned that silence is more convincing than any entreaty. Laurel hates silence; she gives in to silence. For some silly reason, she admitted this to him. Ever since, he’s been making good use of the knowledge.

The first time they made love was an accident. He was sick in bed, but Laurel didn’t know that. She breezed in and turned on the radio. While she cleans, Laurel listens to country; it makes the time pass faster. So there she was, straightening the kitchen and
rub it against whatever is nearest—waxed stair railings, overstuffed chair arms, the wide patient backs of horses. They’re looking for relief, and when they’re fifteen or so, they find it in the arms of boys who are only too happy to fill them up and up. These are the girls who get pregnant, not only because they’re the first to open their legs and hearts but also because they yearn to be filled. They love what fills them, the boy and then later the baby. She was such a girl, and so, she thinks, is Sophie.

Laurel doesn’t mean to make a sound, but as soon as Ralph touches her, she fills the room with a moaning sound, a kind of keening. It comes out of her and out of her. Ralph hovers over her in the darkness. “Laurel?” he whispers. He almost always addresses her in a whisper. “Are you all right?”

The next morning, Laurel has to work up the courage to ask Will about the sheets. Dressed in a chenille robe, she yawns and tries to rouse herself. Four hours sleep is not enough to go a whole day on, she thinks. To give her a little jolt, Laurel drinks coffee doused with creamer and sweetened with chocolate chips, which she drops in two at a time while the coffee is still quite hot. The chips melt enough to flavor the coffee, and what’s left of the chocolate she scrapes from the bottom with her spoon. She knows if she went to Weight Watchers, they’d make her confess the coffee and then give it up, which is why she hasn’t gone. Right now, Laurel is only ten pounds overweight, fifteen at most, but she feels it creeping up on her, one more thing she can’t quite control.

“I threw ’em away,” Will replies. His voice carries a challenge, but she won’t rise to it. She watches him gather his cereal, his bowl, the milk from the refrigerator. He pretends absolute concentration on a task he could do in the dark.

“Why’d you throw them away?” She doesn’t believe it, but she can pretend, too.

He shrugs. “The stain wouldn’t come out.”

“Did you try to get it out?”

His temper flares. “No. No, I didn’t. Now, will you quit bugging me?”

“I can’t. Not yet. You’re having sex with Sophie and I’m worried. Is it safe sex at least? Are you using a condom?”

Will doesn’t answer. Instead, he opens the box of Frosted Cheerios and folds back the waxed paper. He pours the white O’s in a rush, filling the bowl and more. The cereal spills onto the plastic place mat, and the little Os roll across the wooden table and drop off the edge to the linoleum floor. Some continue to
It takes several minutes, but she summons up the energy to clean up the mess Will’s left behind: dozens of soggy circles glued to the table, to the legs of the chair, and to the floor. The task takes ten minutes, and when she finishes, she realizes she’d better hurry. Generally it takes four hours to clean her Tuesday house, the Murphy’s. The slobs they are—they don’t even bother to throw away their pizza boxes, just leave them stacked up on the stovetop for her to deal with. Still, Laurel can’t help herself. She stops in her son’s room on the way to the bathroom.

Morning light spills through the open window, and a cool breeze reaches her from across the room, touching her skin and raising the edge of her nightgown. Where are the sheets? she wonders. He’s hidden them—that much she’s certain of. The sheets are the ultimate souvenir, a reminder of his lover’s virginity.

Such a fool, she thinks, such a dear, sweet fool. Carlos would never have fallen for such a ruse. But then Carlos never even fell in love, at least not with Laurel. He couldn’t have cared less about her virginity or what happened once she lost it. He wouldn’t have married her except his mother made him. Not that the mother cared a whit about Laurel. After Will was born, Carlos’s mother refused to see Laurel, made her wait in a sweltering car while Carlos carried the baby up the walk and in the front door. Laurel cried the whole time he was gone. She’d ruined her life, just like her mother had said she would.

The sheets are easy to find. Will has stuffed them into his jeans drawer, folded them tightly with the stain inside. Laurel pulls them out and, for the second day in a row, carries them down the hall to the laundry room. Before she leaves for work, she tapes a note to the telephone receiver: WASH THE DAMN SHEETS, WILL.

Tuesdays, Sophie works concessions from five until ten, and though Laurel dreads having to face her, she is even more disturbed when Sophie doesn’t show up for her shift. It’s not like her. Sophie is nothing if not punctual. Typically she arrives a full twenty minutes early and spends most of the time in the bathroom, changing into her white blouse, clipping on the purple vinyl bow tie, plaiting her unruly hair into a messy French braid, and finally painting on a thick coat of purple lipstick. The color is approximately the same as the awful bow tie, the same as the carpeting in the theater. Until Sophie went out and found herself lipstick to match the decor, Laurel had almost learned to ignore
her garish surroundings. Now she's reminded anew each time Sophie works a shift.

At five fifteen Laurel leaves the popcorn machine and rushes back to her office to call Sophie's house. So far Sophie has never missed a day of work, has never come in late or left early. In most respects Sophie is the ideal employee. She's quick behind the counter, polite to the customers, and Laurel has never once caught her sneaking friends in the back door. Once or twice Sophie's red eyes and runaway giggle have raised suspicions, but for all Laurel knows, the girl has allergies. Until Sophie began dating Will, Laurel was more than willing to give her the benefit of the doubt.

The spiral notebook with employee phone numbers is locked away in her drawer. A few years back Laurel left it lying out, but then a lovesick boy slipped in one day and copied down an unlisted number. He wouldn't give calling the girl's house. Eventually it came out that he'd stolen the number from Laurel's spiral. The parents were furious. For a while they threatened to sue, and when Laurel laughed out loud, her boss shook his head. "You may think it's frivolous," he said sternly, "but that doesn't mean a jury will." Now she is more careful.

The desk is supposedly all Laurel's, but other people sit there, eat their lunches and call home to ask for rides, and Laurel doesn't complain. Nothing about the desk suggests ownership. She doesn't display photographs, or yellowing ivy, or perky little figurines. The movie posters on the wall advertise Tom Cruise films: "Born on the Fourth of July," "The Firm," and "Risky Business." Someone else did the decorating. Laurel could care less about Tom Cruise. Her favorite actor is Jimmy Smits.

The phone rings five times. Laurel is waiting for the machine to pick up when a man's voice comes on the line. "Who is it?" he says. No hello, no nothing.

"It's Laurel Cassidy, Mr. Hallstrom." She wonders whether she should have called him "Doctor." He's a professor, after all, and she's taken enough college classes to know about the egos of professors. Too late to stroke this one. She and Dr. Hallstrom have only spoken once or twice, and always on the phone. He is curt, even a little rude. Laurel assumes that her calls interrupt him in the bathroom or the bedroom. Otherwise, she can't imagine taking such a tone with strangers.

"Yes?" he demands.

"Sophie's late to work, so I wondered whether she's coming in. Is she ill?"

"No," he says, his tone softening. "No, she's not ill. She came in from school, chatted a few minutes and left again."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"She didn't say. No." He seems distracted, as though he's looking out the window, watching the birds or a neighbor coming home from work. Laurel imagines him gazing through the glass, a tall, stooped man with messy hair. He might have his daughter's eyes, dark and brooding. Whatever he's watching, he can't take his eyes off it. He's trained as an observer, and once learned, certain things can't be unlearned. Laurel knows this for herself.

"Well, she's always on time," Laurel continues, "so I'm a little concerned." She draws this last word out, holds it between them. Maybe now he will give her the time of day.

"Don't be," he says, shoving her concern aside. "Sophie's a big girl. She can take care of herself."

Stung, Laurel replies, "evidently." She is thinking of the blood on the sheets. Maybe she'll tell the indifferent father about the stain she found yesterday morning. Maybe that will wake him up. "Sophie is dating my son, you know," Laurel begins. She's not sure how far she's willing to go, but before she can say more, Sophie bursts in the door, out of breath and flushed from a run across the parking lot. "Here she is," Laurel announces to the father.

"See there?" he says at the same time Sophie blurs out, "Sorry, Laurel!" Before Laurel can say anything in response, the receiver clicks. He's hung up on her, the bastard.

"I was just talking to your father," Laurel tells Sophie, who is in the midst of clipping on the awful bow tie.

"Jack? You were talking to Jack?" Sophie asks. The girl has a wild look in those brooding eyes. Laurel wonders if she's been smoking pot.

"Is Jack your father?" Laurel asks, but she knows he is. Naturally, Sophie calls her parents by their first names. In fact, now that Laurel thinks of it, she's heard Sophie mention Jack. Only it didn't sink in that Sophie was referring to her father. That must mean that Peggy is her mother. Laurel's heard that name as well. Jack and Peggy, the professor and his aging flower child. For Peggy, Laurel imagines Shirley MacLaine without the red hair, wearing jeans with an elastic waistband, love beads draped around a weathered neck. She reasons this way: if she dislikes the daughter, is it possible she'll like the parents?
“Jack claims to be my father,” Sophie quips. And then, as if this isn’t bad enough, the cheeky girl hesitates in the doorway, waiting until she has Laurel’s complete attention. “Sorry about the sheets,” she says, tossing her head so that the white blonde locks bounces in the air. Laurel knows that gesture, knows Sophie does it to keep from laughing.

All night they spill things. First Laurel drops a cup of popcorn kernels. Just as she lifts the cup to feed the machine, the cup tilts and tips. Seeds scatter across the tile floor like hundreds of BBs, and before Laurel can sweep them up, one of the ticket people, a pudgy girl named Stephanie, steps behind the counter and falls flat on her back. Stephanie swears she’s okay, but Laurel hears the thud of her body when it hits the tile, a dull, definitive noise. “Are you sure you didn’t hit your head?” Laurel asks. Stephanie’s face is red, but maybe it’s from embarrassment, all those people staring down at her, customers leaning across the counter to get a good look. Laurel doesn’t take chances. She sends Stephanie home to rest, which means someone else has to man the ticket booth, leaving Laurel to fill in at concessions.

Near the end of the seven o’clock rush Sophie spills a large Coke, bumping the cup with her elbow so that it spins across the counter and sprays its contents over the three people standing at the head of the line. Anyone could do it—so many of them behind the counter rushing to fill orders—but Sophie does. The man in the middle gets the brunt of it, but after gasping, he breaks into abrupt and noisy laughter, his large mouth opening like a cavern to reveal long rows of silver fillings. “Whew,” he cries, “was that ever refreshing!”

Hearing this, Sophie begins to giggle, and pretty soon she’s laughing so hard she’s helpless to do anything else. Tears run down her face and she clutches at her stomach. Mopping up the mess, Laurel looks over at the girl. Her abundant hair hides her face, but her shoulders are shaking, and intermittently, a gasping sound comes from behind the curtain of hair.

“Sophie, pull it together,” Laurel says sharply, but Sophie will do no such thing. She goes right on laughing. Laurel considers shaking her, but the customers need her attention. The line is getting longer, more restless. The women who received Coke baths are awaiting apologies and assistance.

One is wearing a crisp white blouse splotched now with brown. A large stain outlines her left breast, and beads of brown syrup slide down her cheek. As Laurel begins to speak, the woman reaches up to wipe at the Coke running down her face. She does this gingerly, so as not to disturb her makeup. Unlike the man, she doesn’t look the least bit refreshed. She looks furious. The other woman is calmer. She’s dabbing at the front of her green T-shirt with a wad of napkins, and when Laurel catches her eye, the woman shrugs and purses her lips.

“I’m so sorry,” Laurel offers. “Why don’t you step over to the rest room, where you can wash up? If you tell us what you’d like to eat and drink, I’ll have it ready when you get back. Free, of course.”

Immediately the woman in the green T-shirt orders a large popcorn and a small Sprite; then she slips out of line and disappears into the hallway. But the woman in white stays put. She glares at Sophie, who, though still laughing, has returned to work at the register.

“I’d like to see the manager,” the woman says between tightly pressed lips. If she were to open her mouth, she might spit at them. Laurel is expecting it to happen, but the happy man edges over and drapes an arm over the woman’s shoulders. Evidently they’re together, two sides of a coin. The calmer he is, the angrier she gets. The angrier she is, the calmer he gets. For a split second, Laurel feels a little sorry for her. It must be a real bind. “Why don’t we put this behind us?” the man suggests.

“You put it behind you,” the woman says. “I want to see the manager.”

“I’m the manager,” Laurel says brightly. “Perhaps you’d like to talk in my office.” She sets the large bucket of popcorn on the counter. “This is for the woman in the green T-shirt,” she tells Sophie, Sophie manages to nod, but she’s still not under control. A small snort escapes from her nose, and she has to clap a hand over her mouth. She’s stoned, Laurel thinks. She’s got to be.

“You’re the assistant manager,” the woman continues. She’s read Laurel’s name tag. Those behind her are beginning to grumble, but the woman holds her ground. “I want to talk to the manager.”

Laurel explains that the manager isn’t there right now, that she’s in charge of running the theater on Tuesday evenings.

“You may think you’re in charge, but you’re not,” the woman replies. “If you were, that little bitch wouldn’t be snickering right now.” The woman’s eyebrows are pale blonde. Viewed from a distance, she looks hairless and permanently startled.

Laurel turns to Sophie, who still has a hand clapped over her mouth. All the laughter the girl has ever tried to hold back is erupting to the surface. Suddenly Laurel is certain they’re the
butt of some ugly joke: the prim, coke-stained woman, her jovial husband, Laurel, even lovesick Will. “Sophie, this isn’t funny!” Laurel says sharply.

These words bring Sophie to her knees, literally. She sinks slowly behind the register, her face red and distorted. It looks painful, this hilarity. Sophie is bent over double, her shoulders heaving. To a stranger it would look like grief, terrible unmintiated grief. And maybe in some strange way, that’s what it is. The woman in white leans over the counter to get a better look. “She’s out of control,” the woman says. “Completely out of control.” And to Laurel, “Aren’t you going to do something?”

Laurel gazes blankly into the pale face. The woman’s eyes are green, unnaturally so. She must be wearing colored contacts, Laurel thinks. And then Laurel does the only thing she can think to do. She grabs a large drink from the counter and heaves it at Sophie. The girl gasps and then goes still, so still Laurel is frightened. Is it possible to die laughing? she wonders.

But eventually Sophie turns her head and gazes up at Laurel. “I quit,” she says. Then she gets calmly to her feet and shoulders her way out from behind the counter.

“Well, that’s not what I would have done,” the woman remarks loudly, but Laurel ignores her. Automatically, she begins to take the orders of those nearest in line. Mrs. Angry and Mr. Calm accept buckets of popcorn, large Mr. Pibb’s, and two packages of Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups. They are talking amiably as they walk away. Laurel wills herself to work quickly and not to think. She fills in for Sophie, and in this way she passes the entire shift.

The night sky is brilliant with stars. Crossing the parking lot, Laurel turns her face to the sky and takes solace in the black bowl above her. Albuquerque is known for its enormous sky. Somehow, being higher and closer only increases the size and depth of the heavens. Vast is the word that comes to mind. The wind picks up as Laurel reaches her car. A paper cup scuds across her foot and a plastic bag from Target takes flight over her head. She reaches out an arm to catch it, but the bag is caught in an updraft. It drifts above her head. She can’t reach it.

As she drives home, Laurel tries to think of somewhere else to go. She wishes she had a friend to visit, someone to share a cup of decaf with, another single mother of a teenager maybe, but no one comes to mind. Working two jobs, going to school, Laurel has no time for friends; the ones she used to see have gone by the wayside. Come to think of it, Ralph is her only friend. For a moment, Laurel contemplates driving to Ralph’s house, using the key she has for cleaning to open the front door. She pictures herself crossing the tile floors in her bare feet, climbing into bed between Ralph and his wife, Cynthia. It’s huge, that bed. They wouldn’t even notice her there until morning.

Instead, she follows the usual path, driving down Paseo del Norte, taking the Fourth Street exit to her little house, a bungalow, the real estate agent called it. Actually the house is a stucco box, made livable by a small covered patio in back and a large cottonwood growing in the side yard. They get shade in the summer. Laurel’s bedroom is always cool, an oasis, Ralph calls it.

Just as she knew it would be, Sophie’s father’s car is parked in the gravel driveway, a white Toyota Camry, gleaming in the light of the moon. Laurel wonders what would happen if she swung into the driveway and plowed right into it, whether she could push the car through her rotting garage door and into the open space beyond it, the place where she parks her own car. Of course she wouldn’t do such a thing, but it would feel good, rather like screaming in front of a total stranger. Sometimes she needs to do these things, the things no reasonable person would do. And Sophie is the same, she thinks. Laughing like a lunatic tonight, that was her way of staying sane. It’s just a shame the girl has to drive the rest of them crazy in the process.

Laurel parks her car at the curb, something she hates to do because of break-ins; the neighborhood is notorious for break-ins. Then she trudges across the small, gravel-covered front yard. This is my house, she thinks, this is my house and I can damn well come home if I want to.

The front door is unlocked, and as Laurel steps inside she calls out, “hello!” in a small, cheerful voice. The living room is dark, and so is the kitchen. Laurel flips on the kitchen light and is surprised to find the sink empty, the stainless steel shining. The counters, too, are clean, so polished they glow. She douses the light and stands in the darkness, trying to decide what to do next. They’re here somewhere. Probably in Will’s bedroom. Should she go bang on the door or what? And then she hears the chug of the washing machine.

The light is on in the laundry room, and Laurel hurries down the hall, noting only that Will’s door is closed, and beyond it, the room is quiet. She hesitates and moves on to the tiny laundry
room, just big enough for the washer and dryer. The cycle has just begun. Evidently Will turned it on when Laurel pulled up in front of the house. Laurel opens the lid and is relieved to see sheets swirling in soapy water. She wants to cry; she really does. For one long moment she stands staring down at the whirling swirling mass.

Then, just as she’s about to be hypnotized by the motion, she notices the faded pink flowers on the white background. Her sheets, she realizes. They’re washing her sheets, not Will’s. Dropping the lid, Laurel rushes back down the hallway to her bedroom.

Her bed has been hastily stripped. The blanket and bedspread are heaped on the floor. The mattress cover has been removed too, laying bare all the stains she has never been able to get out. When Will was a baby he used to sleep with her, and in the early mornings he’d sometimes let loose with a flood of urine, wetting the bedclothes, her nightgown, and staining the mattress in the bargain. She washed it, of course, scrubbed it with soap and water and Lysol. But what she didn’t realize was that water leaves its own stain. Uneven, wavering rings mark the spots where she cleaned. And if that isn’t bad enough, there’s her blood, too, several small splatters in the middle of the mattress and a small circular one in the far right corner. She knows how that one got there, but she doesn’t like to think about it.

Only Sophie won’t let her forget. Even now, as Laurel bends to pick up the blanket and pull it across her mattress, she hears a peal of laughter echoing down the hall. Part of her wants to order the girl out of her house, out of her life once and for all. But Laurel can’t do that because she knows there are some things you can’t get rid of and other things you can’t get back.

The small stain in the corner is Will’s blood. It’s hardly more than a spot, the size and shape of medicine spilled from a dropper. And no matter how long Laurel looks at it, the stain will remain exactly what it is, the spilled blood of a three-year-old boy. Twelve years ago Will was sitting on the corner of her bed, a little boy who was supposed to be potty trained but wasn’t, at least not in the middle of the night. And she was a mother who was supposed to know better than to slap her own child, to make his nose bleed, to lock herself in the bathroom while he cried his heart out.

Laurel bundles the blanket into her arms and carries it down the hall. Will’s door is closed, but she knows it’s not locked. She knocks once before turning the knob and letting the door swing open. Sophie and Will sit cross-legged in the middle of the bed playing cards. Between them is a growing discard pile. Laurel doesn’t have to look at Sophie’s hand to know that she’s winning.

The bed is neatly made, covered by an Indian spread of purple and blue. Laurel doesn’t recognize the spread, but she guesses it belongs to Sophie’s mother, Peggy, who probably saved it as a souvenir from her years in Haight-Ashbury. Laurel wonders whether it helps to believe in free love. Does the belief itself make love easier to find and keep? She takes a deep breath and finds her voice.

“Thanks for doing the laundry,” she says.