Virgie's Order

March and still wintry in western Pennsylvania, the women ordering their weekend meat at the butcher's had separated themselves into two scrums: one, red-faced and knock-kneed; the other, silver-haired and tidy.

Virgie, who was from Hoytsburg forty miles over on the mountain's westward slope, looked more like the last: trim, leather shoes, slacks, no jeans. Her jacket quilted, not puffed, although none of the other tidy ones had a Liberty of London scarf bought in Heathrow. She felt their curiosity grinding her up.

"Anything else, Mam?" With every cut of meat, the cockiness of the kid behind the counter had grown. And Virgie'd played along, letting him think she didn't have his number . . . didn't know he was egging her on just to goose up her order. She'd taught hundreds like him, the mediocrities who think charm can camouflage ignorance.

"Well, let's see . . . we've got my chicken, right? And my pork chops, and leg of lamb. Oh dear, did I forget the meatloaf mix?"

"You most certainly did not." The kid waggled a white-wrapped package.

A suggestion of a wattle hung from his jaw.

"He's fat and scant of breath" . . . Hamlet tasted sweet behind her smile. The kid had the same flirty attitude as that long-legged Todd she'd taught her second year. She'd been living with her parents, trying to save so she and Albert

could get married. And every day, fourth period, there was Todd lounging in the back, handing in bad tests and late papers with sorry excuses and slippery smiles.

And then that June, Albert's letter had come from Vanderbilt: "Hoytsburg was a wonderful place to grow-up in, Virgie. But you're the poet; you know how they say you can't go home again. For me that's true, but I honestly can't imagine you being happy anywhere else. And I don't have the heart to take you from all that." A week later she'd slammed down an F as Todd's final grade. Whatever happened to him? Maybe living in San Diego like Albert. Maybe dead.

."We've got a great special on stew meat. Really good," the kid smiled. "Just didn't want you to miss out. That's all."

A wave of country music washed behind a ruddy man carrying a tray of pork chops from the shop's rear. Coiled black hair covered his head, arms, even the back of his hands. His mouth was simian-shaped.

Billy Tilson . . . he looked like Billy Tilson. Virgie calculated: she'd taught Billy her final year — "The Tilson kid's in Iraq, . . . enjoy your retirement, Virgie." Steve Keyser had whispered at her retirement dinner. But that was nearly five years ago. So now Billy Tilson would be what? Twenty-three . . . Four? And this man was older, not by much, but clearly older. She caught him looking at her as he put the chops in the case, and her sixty-six-year-old bladder began twitching.

"Mam? the stew meat . . . sure you don't want some?" By the register, the kid's smile was turning brittle.

"Just a pound." She had enough . . . two-thirds more than enough. She'd get her stew cubes and get home.

Down the counter, a pasty little girl held onto the trunk of her mother's leg with one chubby hand and with the other gripped a naked pink plastic doll like the ones who had lived in the little houses their father had made for Virgie and her sisters. She watched the child walk her dolly's legs up the meat case, then turn and lean her back against the glass and stick her dolly's pink plastic head into her mouth. Virgie fluffed her scarf.

One of the other women wanted a particular eye of round, and Virgie was forced down the case, until she was face to face with a crown rib roast.

The kid caught her looking at it. "I can take that in back for you . . .have them cut that down a bit," he said.

"No . . . no. I have more than enough already."

"Sure? How about three ribs . . . just three?"

"No thanks." Her bladder was really throbbing now —she needed to get back to Hoytsburg. Still, her father had loved a good rib roast. Sundays, after church, the two of them smelling that muscle and bone in the oven while he watched the Steelers and Virgie graded her papers. And, at the little table down

the hall, her mother would be making her Sunday calls — Beth in Boston, Linda in Raleigh.

"Okay, how about two, then?" The kid's square-toothed grin was You-Know-You-Want-It wide.

"Well, maybe two."

. When the kid pushed the swinging doors to get the roast cut, Virgie saw the black-eyed man sawing a lamb carcass.

. "Wait a minute," she said, — that coffee shop across the street had to have a Ladies Room. "Would it be possible for you to put my the roast with rest of my order while I get a cup of coffee across the street? . . . I've got a long drive."

The kid hadn't been prepared for a pop quiz. His eyes fished for an answer. "Sure. I'll have it all ready and waiting."

"Thank you so much."

Outside, the cold air dropped like ice into her bladder. She had to stand at the top of the concrete steps and work her lower muscles. For distraction, she studied the brown mountain rising against the gray, March sky. Earth and air gathering themselves for one last storm.

She should just drive away. . . leave everything, the meat, even the house in Hoytsburg . . . she didn't owe anyone anything. Not at sixty-six.

She'd paid her dues. Been the good daughter. The one who'd stayed behind — her sisters, Beth and Linda, had families, juggled careers and hardly ever came home. While she'd been the one who'd been forced to act as cheerful as could be, Saturday afternoons wandering up and down the aisles in the craft store behind their mother, hearing church bells chiming for some one else's wedding.

The shop's steps were steep with a single iron pipe for a railing. She went down and crossed the street.

The coffeeshop's pastries were doughy dikes holding back red and yellow jelly floods. A scattering of folk craft items — children's knitted caps, birdhouses, miniature furniture — were on the counter and tables. After the Ladies Room, Virgie sat at a table with a tiny wardrobe and a little card reading "Crafted by Peter Hauser in the Bavarian style."

Stylized, painted hearts decorated the wardrobe's wee doors, and inside were smooth shelves. A poem about a servant girl came to her . . . how did it go? The girl, almost an old maid, sees the morning sun shining on green grapes in a crystal bowl, making them glimmer like succulent worlds, and the girl suddenly realizes that her life will never hold anything more than the woolens and soft cottons she rotated through her master's wardrobe season after season.

"Our little Virgie," her father had said when she told him she wanted him to make dollhouse a castle. "Where else can she live with her Prince Charming but a castle?" She still had it back in the attic in Hoytsburg.

The little blonde waitress came over. "Isn't that chest or whatever you call it, the cutest thing? It sort of makes you wish you were little again, you know."

Virgie closed the doors. "It's very sweet."

"And know what the best part is?"

"What?"

"Everything he makes? . . . you know? . . . he gives to the volunteer fire department. They're trying to get a new ambulance, so everything he makes goes to that."

Out the window, the sky had grown darker.

"That's nice. I'll just have a piece of cherry pie. Make it to go."

Alone again, Virgie opened the wardrobe. She'd once dated a volunteer EMT. His day job had been at his father's dry cleaners, but his heart was at the fire station. The pancake breakfasts and spaghetti dinners she'd gone to, trying to fit in with his buddies . . . their wives' conversations looping from couponing to children's soccer games. After six months he told her what she already knew: it wasn't working. "Admit it. You don't get my hose couplings, and I don't get your poetry."

Two weeks later, a tearful junior followed her out to the parking lot,. "Please, Miss Thomas. You got to pass me. I got to graduate. My brother's in Afghanistan. And I need to get a job . . . my mother, she's on dialysis. Even Mr. Keyser is giving me a make-up project. Please, Miss Thomas."

Girls always had been worse than boys. Their parents' divorce, a brother's suicide, a grandmother's stroke — girls wore the details of their messy lives like badges.

When the little waitress brought her pie, Virgie put her handbag on the table and knocked the wardrobe to the floor. The little waitress picked it up and let out a long "Awwww." One of the tiny hinges had been bent and now a tiny door flopped open.

"I'll pay for it," Virgie said.

The little waitress kept trying to shut it. ""Awwww. I guess it's broke."

"Here." Virgie handed her a fifty dollar bill. "Whatever change, give it to the firemen." She hung he handbag over her shoulder and carried the plastic bags with her pie and the wardrobe back to the butcher's. The kid who had waited on her flashed a discount smile from the register and turned away. "Hey, we could use some help out here," he called through the door to the rear.

The dark-eyed man came out, looked at Virgie, then read her order slip by the register. "Ninety-seven dollars and sixty-seven cents." His uninflected voice fell like a blunt force and made her feel reduced.

He slid her credit card slip across the case . . . "Sign here, Miss Thomas. I'll carry these to your car." He picked up her meat bags.

"No . . . no . . . you don't need to do that. It will be fine. I'm fine."

"I better . . . they're heavy."

"It will be fine, really."

"The steps are tricky." He was obdurate, impenetrable. She had no choice but to loop her handbag over her shoulder and follow.

"Don't forget those." He nodded toward the bags with her pie and wardrobe. By the time she'd slipped them over her wrist, he was already down the steps.

"It's that Civic," she called, but he was already heading toward her gray sedan, as if he'd read her as the type of woman whose extravagance extended to scarves, but not cars. The bags dangling from her wrist made digging out her keys impossible. Her fingers were still groping when she reached her car. A high-pitched stream began babbling out of her mouth . . . "The coming storm. . . . March snows . . . a long drive home."

"Hoytsburg. . . right?"

"What?" Her fist closed around her keys. "How do you know I live in Hoytsburg?"

"Your name was on your credit card . . . Virginia Thomas. You 're a teacher in Hoytsburg. I remembered the name . . . Virginia Thomas . . . you taught my cousin Billy."

"Billy Tilson?

"Yeah, Billy."

She popped open her trunk and composed the teacher's mask she wore every morning no matter what she had done the night before. "I thought I saw a resemblance between you and Billy. I saw it right away."

He off-loaded her meat, then thudded her trunk shut. "Yeah, Billy and me, we always looked alike. People always thought we were brothers. But we're just cousins." He took a step and blocked the space between her Civic and an orange pick-up. "He told me about his English teacher over in Hoytsburg."

Her voice went chirpy. "Well, I remember Billy very well . . . very well. I had that heard he had joined the Army."

"Iraq. Billy was in Iraq."

Nothing would shock this man . . . he was beyond surprise. If she told him how she had driven forty miles over the mountain because she couldn't risk buying her meat in Hoytsburg. Or that she needed so much meat because she couldn't stop cooking for three, even though her father had been dead for a year, and her mother for two. Or that she still heaped food on her parents' empty plates

and chattered to their empty chairs, he'd only see a confirmation of what he already knew: the world was full of craziness.

"IED got him."

"What?"

"IED got Billy. Two years ago." He loomed like a mass that had existed long before time had been neatly sliced into civilized segments. "He's in Walter Reed."

She squeezed past and slid behind her wheel. "Down in Washington?"

He stayed in her open door. "Yeah."

"Well, when you go down there, will you please tell him I'm very sorry that he was wounded. Please let him know I think he's a real hero. Will you do that?"

"I'll try. But my wife and me don't get down there much. We try. But we got his little girl and it's hard to get all the way down there."

Her fingers fished blindly for her wallet in her big handbag next to her pie and tiny wardrobe — she had to give him something — "So Billy has a little girl?" her fingers found the money, extracted two bills — she didn't know how much.

He took them and under the money his fingertips touched hers. "Yeah, my wife and me, we got her. When Billy got hit, his girlfriend couldn't handle it. So my wife and me took his little girl."

Virgie turned her key. "Well, in my book, that makes all three of you heroes. Tell your wife and Billy when you see him that for me, will you?"

The pupils of his eyes were lagoons of contempt.

'I'll make sure to tell him you said that, Miss Thomas."

She backed away.

By the mountain's first switchback, her bladder had begun twitching again. She tried distracting herself with a CD, but her disks had gotten mixed up and instead of Yoni, Patsy Cline began spilling out — *"Crazy, I'm crazy for feeling so lonely. I'm crazy for feeling so blue . . ."*

The disk had been a gift from Steve Keyser.

"Try it," he'd said, leaning against her blackboard in that way he had. "You might be surprised. You might find you like it, Virgie." Tall, Steve'd been taller than any man she'd been with, his height and easy way making her classroom his without him even trying. The sun almost down behind the mountain, the students all gone, and Steve Keyser, his elbow on her board smudging her Emily Dickinson . . . "I dwell in Possibility — a fairer House than Prose" . . . and Steve coaxing, coaxing. "Try it, Virgie. You didn't think you'd like that thing we did the last time, but then you found that you did. You found that you really did, didn't you? So try Patsy. It's just music."

"*Crazy for thinking that my love could hold you. I'm crazy for trying and crazy for crying. And I'm crazy for loving you"* . . . she hit the eject button and threw the disk next to her tiny wardrobe and pie.

A light, silky snow had started, so fine it could make her tires as bad as bald. She wanted another disk — the leaden silence felt like a rebuke — but she couldn't risk taking a hand off the wheel. Her chest began heaving up tearless sobs.

It wasn't her fault, what had happened to Billy Tilson. Over and over she had told her seniors they would loose points if their research papers were late. And Billy's had come in three days past due, and two pages short. What was she supposed to have done? If his test grades had been better she might have passed him, but he had never gotten better than a C or C-minus. She doubted that he had even read "MacBeth" or *The Old Man and the Sea* — all his answers sounded as if they'd come out of a "Dummies" book. There was no way she could have passed him.

And Steve Keyser coming into her room, as if he still had the right, just, weeks after he had told her he had decided to stay with Joanne — he had their kids to consider — and saying "Virgie, for God's sake . . . can't you give the Tilson kid a break? You know he's been shunted from relative to relative since his mother died. This football scholarship to Shippenberg State is his only chance. For God's sake . . ."

She'd told him to get out. "If you don't, I swear I'll tell Joanne everything you did to me . . . every filthy thing you ever did."

The snow was falling faster, and she couldn't adjust her defroster. Cold air blasted on her feet instead of her dash and made her bladder worse. She had to crane her neck to see over the misty scrim at her windshield's base. When she took her hand off the wheel to slip into a lower gear, she swerved and the wardrobe and Patsy Cline disk tumbled off the seat. The wardrobe fell on the passenger side, but the disk landed near her gas petal.

She was afraid it would get lodged and she wouldn't be able to decelerate. The only thing to do was to keep her foot exactly where it was and hope the disk would roll away when she came to a curve. But when she crested the mountain, at the first downward switchback, she needed to brake, and felt blindly for the disk, but her foot pawed air.

She felt no traction at the tight curve where two Hoytsburg students had crashed, a freshman girl and senior boy, both killed. The turmoil she'd returned to from chaperoning her senior honors class to London . . . the grief counselors . . . the memorial services. No one should have to come home to that.

Earlier, when she was driving to get her meat, the plastic flowers marking the crude memorial had been so faded, she almost missed them, but now the snow had obliterated them completely. No loss stays fresh forever.

At a shoulder wide enough to pull over, she stepped out and was bend double by the accumulated carelessness of youth — their silly aspirations . . . their assumptive familiarity . . . spilling their cheap broken hearts all over her desk. She threw the Patsy Cline disk into the woods.

It was all that stupid Joann Keyser's fault. If that idiot Joann hadn't come up behind her in the Hoytsburg Safeway check-out line and brayed "My god, Virgie, who are you shopping for? . . . . a tribe of gypsies living in your attic?" she wouldn't have had to drive to over the mountains for her meat. She popped open her trunk, and began throwing the white-wrapped packages toward the disk. They landed silently, sinking into the snow like dead sailors buried at sea. Around her neck her Liberty scarf was a wet noose, and she couldn't feel her feet. But she didn't stop throwing until her trunk was bare.

She reached Hoytsburg still in lower gear, so she was forced to drive past all the familiar places slowly as if the town was revealing itself like an unspooling film of memory. The library where she'd fallen in love with Heathcliff. The beauty shop she'd had her hair done for the prom. The bank where she's saved so she and Albert could get married. The craft store whose aisles she had walked up and down with her mother — "I don't know what your father and I would do without you, Virgie." The church where she'd been her sisters' bridesmaid — "Your turn next, Virgie," And her father's pharmacy —"Little Virgie here was

our second-thought child. The second Joyce and I thought we were through having kids, along came our little Virgie."

The future she'd dreamed for herself and Albert had been laid out on a grid of Hoytsburg streets, and she navigated them blindly trusting the circuitry of her mind to follow the rectilinear pattern of the little streets. She felt she was driving through liquid time.

Two blocks from home, the high school loomed. Three stories, brick, solid in a swirl of snow — she remembered mirrored balls in the gym. No buses, now. Only a few cars. No lights in the upper floors. Only two on the first. One in the library. The other in the office. She'd heard that Martin Kelso was retiring as principal in June, but she wouldn't go to his farewell dinner, although Martin had arranged hers. He'd done that much for her, trying to cover up how she was being eased out. Her mother on one side of her, her father on the other, and Steve Keyser whispering in her ear, "The Tilson kid's in Iraq, Virgie. I hope you're happy." All the while, Martin Kelso toasting her — "To our beloved Miss Thomas," — as if he hadn't called her to his office all those times there'd been call from the School Board about how she'd failed some football star. Or from some parent who'd seen her drunk in a bar over the mountain. Or from some mother saying she'd flirted with her son . . . "If you ask me, that Virgie Thomas could find sex in Good Night Moon."

At her house, she took her little wardrobe to the attic. Her father had made her castle so its whole front swung open to a warren of stairways and little rooms. She set the wardrobe beside a little plastic king and queen sitting on red plush thrones, then took the little plastic figures and smashed them together, making their heads and their bodies against each other go click, click, click. But the dolls wouldn't break. So she set them back on their thrones and closed up her castle.

After a shower, still dripping, she pressed the towel to her face and smelled her mother's meticulous housekeeping . . . "Virgie? One egg or two?" How many mornings, she'd step out of the shower and heardr her mother calling up the stairs? Trying to scrub away the memory of the night-before man, and she'd step out to "Virgie? One egg or two?" . . . her regret of the night mingling with her resentment of the stifling voice. And beneath the regret and resentment, the sweet bonds of familiarity, so deep and comforting, she couldn't breath without them. After Beth and Linda left, finally she'd been the only daughter her parents needed, the only one they'd talk to over the dinner table.

She put on her robe and was eating her slice of cherry pie in the kitchen, when, headlights suddenly strobed through the little window over the sink. The snow wasn't thick enough to completely muffle the car door slamming or the footsteps she heard climbing her back stairs. She licked her fork and slipped it into her robe. "Who's there?"

"Billy Tilson's cousin. I forgot your rib roast, Miss Thomas. I brought you your roast."

The man with the simian-shaped mouth stood on her back porch. Over his shoulder, two white faces peered from an SUV, a young woman's and another, vacuous and small like a white bobbling balloon.

Virgie fingered her fork — a man intent on no good doesn't bring a woman and a child, but still . . . she opened her door. "You didn't have to bring it all this way. Especially in this snow."

He stepped in and rooted himself on her little braided rug by the door. "I forgot to put the roast with the rest of your order, and a cut like this costs a lot." His tone wasn't defensive but not apologetic either — if he had been a student standing over her desk after the last bus had left, she'd be hoping some other teacher was down the hall.

"It was so good of you to bring it. But you really didn't have to. Mistakes happen. It was such a long way, and in this storm. "

He carried the meat cupped in his hand like a skull wrapped in white paper. "We had to come Hoytsburg anyway. My wife. . . well, her cousin takes Billy's little girl . . . I should say 'our little girl.' We need a break sometimes, my wife and me."

In her pocket, Virgie stopped strumming her fork's tynes long enough to take the meat from him. She held it with both hands, so it filled the space above

her waist and below her breasts. "Was that Billy's little girl, the one I saw with your wife in the car?"

"Like I said, We got her now."

She didn't know how much Billy had told him about that afternoon when Billy had begged her to let him pass, telling her how his girlfriend was pregnant, and how the girl's mother had said she'd watch the baby while he and the girl went to Shippenburg State. As if a baby they had been too dumb to protect themselves from was any excuse for not doing the research paper she required of all her seniors.

How could she possibly have given an extension when she hadn't given one to any of the others? What was fair for one had to be fair for everyone.

His cousin's eyes were black holes stripping everything away, sucking it down. He knew how Billy had cried; she could tell he did. . . how he looked at her.

She had to get rid of him. She put the roast on the table and whirled toward her handbag on the counter. "At least let me pay you. For your gas . . . you came all the way over the mountain, I just need to get my wallet, and I've got something for your little girl . . . a doll, two dolls, actually A king and a queen. I need to clean out the attic, anyway." She started pawing through her wallet.

"That's okay, Miss Thomas. My little girl . . . she don't play much. She got dropped."

"Dropped? Dropped how?"

"On her head."

She had bills in one hand, her wallet in the other. "What?"

"She got dropped on her head. Billy's girlfriend when she got the call 'bout him getting hit so bad, she had baby at the top of the stairs, and she fell . . . I don't know . . . fainted or something . . . I don't know. Anyway, Cassie, she was only three months, she went down, too. They keep working on her, and we keep hopin', but I don't know how she'll do. I don't think anyone does."

"But they're just dolls . . . all little girls like dolls."

"Cassie, she just likes an old dishtowel. It's the only thing gets her quiet. Go figure. She loves that dishtowel. "

"But . . . "

In two steps he was to her. So close she could smell the melt off his jacket. And beneath that, how they all smell: musky, fierce.

"I will, however, Miss Thomas, take these." He took the bills from her hand. "And this." His black eyes laughing now . . . enough intelligence to laugh. He took the bill from her wallet, too, and handed the empty thing back to her. At the door, he turned. "Enjoy your meat, Miss Thomas."

Yes, he had known about Billie, and probably about all the others she'd failed. As if their names had been tattooed on her forehead, he had known.

All Hoytsburg probably knew what she'd done. What she was.

She stood alone near the table. Where, once her sisters were gone, she'd shone, her parents' sole moon. Pulling all their love to herself so fiercely that any time a man had gotten close enough to suck her into a different orbit, she'd . . . well, what was any man compared to the sweetness of the three of them at the table . . . "Our little Virgie. Our little Virgie."

And now the silence was so dense and deep . . . deeper than any snow. She could just lie down in it forever. She turned on the oven. The roast would be done by midnight. She'd have to set out three places.