I.

In deconstructing her twenty-six year life, Margaret acknowledged that whatever problems she had stemmed from her inability to accept change gracefully, and more importantly, to initiate change when the time called. Her youth bred a certain metaphysical laziness, so she reluctantly avoided any sort of internal confrontation that would lead to a better, stronger Margaret. This was the deal she made with herself, and it worked for quite a while.

Carrying these thoughts with her, she entered a Mexican sit-down restaurant one August afternoon just as the weather was beginning to turn. Her enthusiastic entrance overshadowed her tardiness, as she hoped it would; Liz had been waiting for her in the corner booth for some time. Liz, a flighty but resourceful woman in her mid twenties, was Margaret’s best friend, at least until recently. Margaret liked the way Liz took charge of people and situations, made important decisions, acted. She started new businesses more often than people celebrated Christmas, and, unlike Margaret, she didn’t even have a college degree. Her secret was that the businesses were small, manageable, and catered to basic needs. A small amount of Liz’s entrepreneurship and drive had inspired Margaret in terms of suggesting a potential future in her mind that she hadn’t considered before, one in which work was fun and life an adventure. For this Margaret was grateful to Liz.

Liz had been in a relationship with Margaret’s brother Joseph for almost four years. Sometimes Joe complained that Liz spent more time with Margaret than she did with him. The truth was, Liz was one of the few people who tolerated Joe’s distance and Margaret’s hardness.

After settling in, both women extended their polite banter to avoid talking about their increasingly strained friendship. Everything that rises must converge, Margaret said to herself, echoing the words of one of the many Southern writers she’d been reading. Yes, with Liz it had been a steady upward ascent of good times and female bonding,
but now, they appeared at a crossroads of some sort. She couldn’t pinpoint when exactly, but lately, Margaret had noticed subtle changes in the way she and Liz interacted, the way they talked, what was said and what was left unspoken. She wondered if her brother was to blame for Liz’s behavior; after all, when he and Liz fought, it had a ripple effect on their friendship. Feeling an urgency that often accompanies the prospect of relieving frustration, she decided it was time to stop joking with Liz about burnt nachos and snooty waitresses.

After a few, exploratory bites of her lunch, Margaret spoke. “Joe’s put up his little wall of silence,” she began. “I phoned him twice last week and each time I talked to him, it was like calling for the weather report. Do you know why he’s behaving so strangely?”

Liz set her fork down and said, “You’d find out eventually, anyway. Joe filed for bankruptcy last week, and I helped him. For the last two months I’ve been managing his finances, which are a disaster by the way. It hasn’t been easy. We went to court last week. The lawyer said he didn’t have to be present but he insisted.” The tone of Liz’s voice betrayed a smug familiarity, of inside information, that the two women usually reserved for juicy gossip about acquaintances.

Margaret pictured in her mind a wildly fluctuating compass, signifying that no discernible direction could be drawn from the available information, that confusion was the order of the day. “You should know we aren’t together anymore. Joe talks a good game about responsibility, but he refuses to live in the here and now,” Liz said, her fingers tapping the sweating glass of water next to her plate. “He hasn’t paid any of his bills in the last year or so; he doesn’t even open his mail, unless it’s coupons. The damn stuff just keeps piling up! Makes me wonder how he was able to help raise you and Carrie....”

Margaret didn’t have an answer, at least not one she cared to relate to Liz. If she revealed the exhaustion she sometimes noted in Joe’s eyes when she was a teenager, after he had worked a twelve hour day, it would have only reminded her that he sacrificed some of his best early years for their family. But it was unfair to characterize Joe as some irresponsible deadbeat; Margaret wasn’t ready to even consider why Joe’s problems had ended in a legal decision or why certain events occurred that reflected poorly on him. After all, Joe was no ordinary brother. He had taught her to spit. He had taught her what boys really thought. He had given her all the inside information about
life that she needed in order to survive. How could he not know how to survive himself?

Gradually, the import of Liz’s revelation settled like a moth on a windowsill. After a while, Margaret said to Liz softly, “Why didn’t he tell me?”

“What do you think? He didn’t want you to worry. It’s been on me. It’s been all on me. And I can’t be bothered with this anymore. Most of the time his apartment’s a pig sty; he sleeps until four in the afternoon. He had to switch shifts at work so he can get there on time. He doesn’t finish what he starts...”

“He told me the late shift paid more and that he just needed to get used to his new schedule,” Margaret stated somewhat defensively. “And he’s always been a little slobby.” She wanted to rationalize Joe’s excuses into something agreeable; the fact that he no longer confided in her left her with a faint sense of betrayal, numbing her appetite.

“The bankruptcy will give Joe a new start, even if he doesn’t believe that it will,” Liz continued. “But he’s let things go, like it’s the end of the world. And it’s not the end of the world. I did as much as I could... I even cleaned his apartment for him so things wouldn’t seem so bleak. Pathetic. I did four loads of his laundry last week and cleaned out his refrigerator. I threw out those strawberries that we picked, almost an entire flat. All that effort, and for what?”

II.

A month earlier Margaret, Liz, and Joe drove forty miles to the U-Pick Strawberry Farm. It was nearing the end of the season, but Joe decided that he wanted at least one flat of strawberries. Margaret believed he was trying to recreate the day trips he and his sisters had taken when they were younger. Still, she felt a need to burrow into his psyche, maybe even annoy him a little, and so she asked him, “Why the sudden desire?”

Joe looked at her strangely, as if he was debating whether or not he could trust her with such information. “I thought it would be nice to cook dinner and make a homemade dessert, and invite you and Liz over. So are you coming or not?”

Margaret agreed to go because Joe had been driving her around while she waited for the right new used car to buy; it was only fair that she humor his latest obsession. She also remembered those utilitarian day trips her mother had insisted they take when she was a kid: to museums, artists’ retreats, fruit and vegetable farms. Some of
her fondest memories involved cutting Christmas trees and picking pumpkins, along with the comfort of having Joe, Carrie, and her mother nearby, performing the same repetitive tasks that symbolically meant that they were a happy, unified family.

So it was that a month earlier, Margaret was on her knees, with Joe and Liz five rows behind her, picking berries. The recent summer rains and the lateness of the season made their endeavor a bit more challenging. Many rows near the front of the farm were barren; some patches contained rotting fruit, small things resembling raspberries, though further away, prospects were good.

Margaret started with the first basket. She lowered herself to the ground, leaning into the earth and heat, mocking gravity with the strength of her will. To her left she could hear squealing children pelting rotten fruit at one another and a mother at the end of her rope. She felt a little out of place, as though such amusement was the exclusive domain of dogs and children, but quickly dismissed such thoughts.

The infectious, narcotic heat made her feel drowsy after a while, and by the time Margaret filled her second container, the heat’s dizzying effect had taken hold of her senses. She braced herself to regain her equilibrium, shifting her body this way and that, until the feeling subsided. She was vaguely aware of Joe and Liz, who were now six or seven rows over. Quite possibly they were miles away. Filtering out all extraneous noises, she could hear them in the distance though their actual words were formless. She had the uneasy feeling that they were arguing. Joe was crouching on his knees, one hand rubbing the temple of his forehead, as Liz stood beside him. She spoke in parabolic sentences that flitted into incoherence by the time they reached Margaret’s ears. Liz made one final pronouncement and moved away from him. Margaret wondered what stupid thing Joe had done to piss Liz off and thought to herself, Whatever it is, he’s getting what he deserves. Then Joe turned his head in Margaret’s direction, picked himself up, and walked over to her.

“I don’t want to hear it,” Margaret said to him. Joe put his hands in his pockets, ignoring her remark. “I probably shouldn’t have asked you to come. I know how sick you can get from the heat.”

Margaret nodded, patting his ankle as he stood over her. “I’m okay. How about you?”

“I’m going to get us some pop at the store. What do you want?”
“A grape Nesbitt’s. Hey, Joe—” she called as he started to walk away, “what’s going on?”

“Nothing. I’ll tell you later, I promise.”

She watched Joe get into his car. Margaret had always admired the way her brother drove, with the palms of his hands resting on the steering wheel. Pressing, not gripping, slowly advancing the car without any apparent effort. Joe drove five to ten miles under the speed limit, defying the actuarial tables and demographic predictions on age, sex, and speed. Somehow it didn’t matter that everyone else was passing him by.

He had taught Margaret how to drive when she was fifteen. It seemed only natural that he give her lessons, considering the amount of time they spent in his car, between school and after school activities. There were a lot of things about driving that scared Margaret. One day she asked him how to get onto the freeway. “The freeway is like a deck of cards that’s being shuffled. Just pretend you’re another card and work your way in.” That answer had never satisfied or comforted Margaret, but it did amuse her. “What about left hand turns,” she once asked, “when there are people honking their horns behind you?” Joe had replied: “Just sit there until it’s safe to go, no matter how much they scream. Ignore the bastards, all right? Don’t let them pressure you into turning or moving before you are ready. Be nonchalant, like me. Have the courage not to give a shit and you’ll be fine.”

Margaret jammed a stick into the ground. Why was it important for Joe to keep her close by? Maybe his habit of attaching himself to someone or something in order not to be alone was part of the reason. Over the years, Margaret had come to realize that he was no longer the older brother who used to confide in her, whose presence signified security. She mistook his authority, his role as a father figure, as something akin to power, even freedom. When she was younger he could make and break household rules. He enforced a particular ethic, one improvised out of their father’s sudden departure from the family. But Joe’s authority was based on his sense of duty, not strength, and ever since Margaret and Carrie had grown up and moved out, he had not adjusted well to living by himself in a one bedroom apartment. At one point he even rented a two bedroom apartment hoping to find a roommate. Margaret was hopeful when Liz came along, for she was his ideal companion, engaging him on
levels other than caretaking, encouraging him to attend community college, helping direct a future that he could envision.

Spinning her wheels wondering what was going on angered Margaret somewhat. Thinking for its own sake could be counterproductive, and so she decided that strawberries should be her only focus. She craned her hand past a clump of dying vines. As her arm brushed the damp soil, she noticed a tiny green spider working its way over a strawberry that was exquisitely red. The spider was almost invisible, the equivalent of a large period with legs. She coaxed it onto her fingertip and transferred it to a small rock. It cautiously resumed its course as though nothing had happened. The idea of this held Margaret's attention for a number of seconds, until her thoughts were intersected by another sensation, wet and sticky and cool.

A trickle of blood had slowly menstruated from Margaret's thumb down the side of her wrist. When did this happen? she asked herself somewhat dispassionately. Why didn't I feel anything? But it was too hot to become overly agitated. She carefully examined her hands, tacky and red from the juice, and wondered how she could have been so oblivious to herself and her surroundings. She quickly and discreetly anointed her tongue with the blood, strawberry juice, and dirt from her hand and went about her business. The day was only half over.

III.

A year can be an eternity if the conditions are right. Within that time, Margaret's sister Carrie had moved in with her and Margaret was promoted to general manager of a small restaurant chain. Though Margaret found it difficult to work the long hours required for such a position, the alternative was worse. Standing still meant stagnation, and she did not want her time unaccounted for.

Gradually, too, Margaret let Liz slip away. It had started with the Mexican restaurant. Margaret processed what Liz told her about Joe's financial problems and concluded that Liz was partly to blame, as many of Joe's larger expenditures were for Liz, though she never voiced those suspicions out loud. Perhaps because there was some truth to Margaret's suspicions, their friendship degenerated into a polite acquaintance. Gone were the three hour phone conversations they once had, replaced with ten minute informational sessions that
summarized what the other was doing. Most of the time it was Margaret who initiated contact; she found it difficult to let go, difficult to admit that their friendship was tied to the success or failure of Liz’s relationship with Joe. So Margaret continued to call, out of habit, and every so often Liz would call back and they would make small talk. The last time she and Liz visited at any length was the day of the funeral, and even then it consisted mostly of reminiscing and mutual puzzlement.

That Joe was gone only confused matters for Margaret. In general, spirituality was a luxury Margaret had always believed she was better off without. When Joe died two days after being admitted to Swedish, Margaret desperately hoped he was in heaven. She invented its existence especially for him. Later she bitterly decided that such concepts were meant to comfort the living. They weren’t at all for the benefit of those who were already gone. Gone was one of the many euphemisms her family used, along with passed on, passed away, and Margaret’s personal favorite, not with us anymore.

Since Joe’s death, sleep was hard to come by. In bed, on nights when she couldn’t sleep, Margaret sometimes interviewed herself. Because she would never become famous, who else would interview her or have a reason to? No one was more qualified for the job. She asked herself questions about the meaning of life, what she thought of certain celebrities, and so forth, and thought of clever exchanges and rejoinders until sleep brought a temporary reprieve. Often she tried recreating the night Joe was hit, asking herself where she was when it happened. She was watching The Shop Around the Corner, alone. The call came at three in the morning, cutting through her sleepy limbo, that place between dreaming and nothingness, startling her. After her mother told her the news, she hung up the phone. Who in their right mind jogs at midnight when it’s dark out and no one can see?

Every morning Margaret reminded herself that Joe was gone. She still wasn’t used to it; the abstraction hadn’t quite given in to the reality. Those thoughts were enough to obliterate any residual drowsiness and the desire to fall back asleep.

IV.

A recent Saturday proved no different. Margaret woke up alert, senses heightened. It was eight o’clock. Carrie usually slept in until eleven. It bothered Margaret, tiptoeing around the apartment,
accommodating the silence, waiting for her sister to emerge from her room. She wondered if Carrie knew how much that three hour silence disturbed her.

In the kitchen Margaret sat down at the rectangular breakfast table and composed a list of things to do. She had already tried calling Liz, on a lark. She wrote it down on her list so that she could cross it out and feel that she had accomplished something.

After noting the seven or eight other tasks demanding her attention, Margaret placed her pen over the sheet of paper. Her day’s blueprint was official, but a vagabond thought entered her mind: What good were lists and orders in the final analysis? Contracts were meant to be broken, weren’t they? Yet it was necessary for Margaret to honor the small daily commitments that forced themselves upon her, if only to prove that she could.

As she scanned the Saturday paper, Margaret remembered another task that she had forgotten to write down: call the auto repair shop. Joe’s Mustang had been behaving like an ailing child, making funny noises, coughing, stalling. Someone suggested it might be the transmission, which was old. Margaret had been driving the car for almost nine months. It smelled like Joe, which in a way was soothing. It was cool, a tad musky and sweaty, but mostly clean. Margaret wanted to package and preserve that scent and hang it from the rear view mirror. How long would it be before she had to carry a photograph of Joe as a reminder of what he looked like? She considered putting his expired driver’s license in the glove compartment to appease her fears. After awhile, maybe five years, she just might imagine the photograph instead of Joe himself. And after ten years, what then?

Yet the last few months Margaret felt strangely born again, as if Joe’s death had created a demarcation in her life. Despite herself she began measuring every event, no matter how trivial, in terms of whether it had happened before or after Joe’s death. She was still debating whether the Italian restaurant down the street from her place had opened before or after Joe’s accident. Little things like that bothered her. Even worse, her old memories seemed remote and manufactured, as though they were someone else’s.

Margaret folded up the newspaper and called the mechanic. She made an appointment for Monday. She wrote the already completed
task on her master list and immediately crossed it out. She took a deep breath. A day’s worth of activities lay ahead.

Later that afternoon Margaret returned home with the week’s groceries. She struck item number six from her list and asked Carrie for her phone messages.

“Liz called. That’s it,” her sister replied.

Margaret hadn’t expected Liz to return her call so quickly. She dialed the number; Liz answered on the fifth ring. Instead of engaging in harmless chitchat, Liz was abrupt.

“I don’t want you calling me anymore.”

“Why not?” Margaret asked, somewhat surprised at Liz’s directness.

“There’s no point. Joe is a part of my past, and you’re just a reminder of him.”

“A reminder? He was your boyfriend for three and a half years,” Margaret heard herself say.

Liz sighed into the phone. “I’ve moved on. Have you? Like I said, please don’t call me again.”

After Margaret hung up the phone, she stood in the doorway near the kitchen table for a few moments, watching her sister butter toast and listening to her softly humming songs of unknown origin to herself.

“Want a bagel? I just brewed some Ethiopian Mocha Harrar.”

“I’m not hungry,” said Margaret. Against the wall she spotted some filled garbage bags, bottles of ammonia, sponges. “What are you doing?”

“Straightening the apartment. It hasn’t really been cleaned since I moved in. One of us has to get our ass in gear.”

They walked into the Rubik’s Cube-sized living room. Margaret stretched the length of their shopworn couch. Rotating her eyes in a slow arch of laziness, she spied a pile of newspapers and magazines by the door. She forced herself off of the couch to take a closer look. The magazine on top was familiar. It was the ten pound French Vogue that Liz had given her a year earlier, along with some other reading material.

“You weren’t going to throw these away, were you?” Margaret suddenly asked.
Carrie looked puzzled. "Well, yeah."
"I was saving these," Margaret said, her weeping willow arms wrapped tightly around the foot high stack.
"I don’t know what for," her sister said incredulously. "They’re old! What good are old magazines?"
"Liz gave them to me. I meant to read them, but I haven’t had the chance," she replied, throwing the magazines in a corner of her bedroom.
Carrie followed closely behind. "Why not recycle them?"
"Don’t be an ecobitch, Carrie. I said I want them."
"Fine," her sister replied curtly.
Carrie bit her lower lip. Margaret could tell Carrie wasn’t finished haranguing her.
"By the way, Mom and I are going to the cemetery next week. She thinks it’s about time you went too. It’s been almost a year."
"Nine months," Margaret corrected. "You and Mom buy flowers and say prayers every month. Fine. But you weren’t that close to him when he was alive." She paused, clearly annoyed. "I grieve for Joe in my own way. At least I’m not being a hypocrite."
"Whatever you say," Carrie replied, shaking her head. "You know, you can be upset that Joe is dead without completely alienating everyone around you. Finish cleaning the apartment yourself, for all I care. I’m going out for a while. I can’t stand the company."
"I miss him," Margaret said quietly, when Carrie was out of earshot.

The next morning, Margaret awakened to discover that Carrie had not returned to the apartment; she left a telephone message saying she was with a friend and would be home in the afternoon. With Carrie gone, no longer humming or cooking, the apartment fell silent. Margaret suddenly realized that emptiness had an acoustic all its own. It resonated with finality, like Liz’s phone call. After surveying the apartment she sat on Carrie’s bed, which was unmade, and fixated on the items on Carrie’s dresser. Jelly jars filled with color pens and brushes. Sketch pads. An ashtray Joe had made in elementary school. Red licorice. Perfume.

As Margaret tried to estimate the exact time Carrie left the apartment the day before, something in the way the sun filtered through the window reminded her of the previous summer and the car ride to the strawberry farm with Joe and Liz. The sun had been in her eyes the entire trip, which constituted almost an hour of Margaret
closing her eyelids shut, peeking every so often to confirm their position on the road. The brightness of the sun crept into her eyes regardless, but Joe was at the wheel, and that cancelled out any unpleasantness she felt.

Margaret decided to leave the confines of the apartment and walk into town instead of drive. After a few miles she found herself in front of a nursery. Flowers had never interested Margaret that much. She didn’t understand their appeal, especially cut flowers. She recalled the many floral bouquets in the funeral home and at Joe’s gravesite. She also recalled making Joe’s funeral arrangements with her mother, who maintained with bitterness the absurdity of a child dying before his parents. As she roamed the open aisles Margaret tried to imagine Joe’s gravesite a day or two after the funeral. She postulated that, along with a mound of fresh soil, there must have been a bed of roses and carnations wilting and seething. Now she had his car, had inherited his belongings, his unhappiness. “I’m okay,” he would have told her if she’d thought to ask, if she’d thought to take care of him. If she had refused his sound-bite assurances and forced the issue, what then?

And what did it say about Margaret that she chose not to honor Joseph’s memory in a way that satisfied others? Surely she had nothing to prove to Liz or to her mother or even to Carrie. Something had to give, a compromise meted out. Against her better judgment Margaret bought a potted hydrangea and two bunches of white lilies. She took a few steps onto the sidewalk. She need only take a few more steps to become him, to understand what it was like to be stopped in the middle of the night on a dark street with nothing to show but a worn jogging suit and no identification. She felt under the right conditions she might agree to take that walk, but as the sun warmed her face, she thought, _no, not today, not this day_, and instead called a cab, trembling with the knowledge that one possibility was passing into another, without her express permission.