

You Turn it Off Like That

I thought it would be a kind of monastery, not that Baptists would be capable of anything so spare and elegant. But I thought it would at least be spiritually demanding, the best approximation of monk or nunhood I could come up with given my dismal Protestant background.

The day she invited me to live there, Lynette leaned against the kitchen cabinet, drilling me with her eyes, stressing the high level of commitment required.

“Think about it, Amanda. You need to be sure.”

“I’m sure!”

“Because this is for people who want to go deeper.”

“I do,” I said. “I do want to go deeper.”

I didn’t know she meant deeper into bullshit.

Opening the refrigerator, I looked for something to eat. The choices were uninspiring. Margarine instead of butter. A chunk of Monterey Jack cheese. White bread. Bland, common vegetables: carrots, iceberg lettuce, hard orange tomatoes.

The food was a compromise, over which we had all fought bitterly and for which we all seemed to be paying an exorbitant sum. Our arguments over food were enough to make a person give up all hope for world peace. If four well-fed Baptist virgins were ready to kill each other over what was for dinner, what did that say about the prospects of people starving in Africa?

Thursday. That meant, thank God, that Lynette had a supper meeting and we wouldn’t be having a communal meal. As head of the Baptist women students on campus, Lynette was always busy meeting with somebody, trying to straighten somebody out.

I took out a cube of waxy yellow-white margarine, whacked it in half, and stuck it in a saucepan. I put a pot of water on the back burner and took down a box of Kraft macaroni and cheese. The chipped wooden cabinets were painted yellow. At the window hung red and white gingham curtains with ruffles down the side. All that red and yellow made the room feel crowded, made it difficult to breathe.

But for once I had the kitchen to myself. I hated communal dinners. I hated dividing the food. When we ate together, I never felt like I got enough. Also, I was embarrassed to use as much salt as I wanted. Lynette criticized everything: the way we conveyed food to our mouths, the way we chewed, the way we patted our lips with our pink paper napkins. Not eating with the others was pure joy. Just to eat what I wanted how I wanted in the quantities I wanted.

The margarine was starting to sizzle as Lynette walked in. She looked at the pan on the stove but didn't say anything about it.

"We're having a house meeting tonight," she said. "Seven-thirty."

"House meeting?" I turned away from her to check the water on the stove. Steaming, but not quite ready. "Isn't it Thursday?"

It was Thursday, the only day I had to myself. On Wednesday, I went to prayer meeting. On Friday, I attended Campus Crusade for Christ. We hosted prayer breakfasts at the house every Tuesday and Saturday. Twice on Sunday, morning and evening, I played the piano for the local Baptist church while the music director led the congregation in song. I was studying classical music, but I'd learned to play the piano like a Baptist, octaves frilling the upper registers, one-four-five chords thumped out below. I could make as much noise with a piano as anybody, as women much larger than me.

I couldn't believe Lynette proposed to steal my Thursday.

"We have to talk," Lynette said. "Just the four of us. We have issues to address."

I shook my head.

"What, Amanda?"

"I just don't know if I can make it," I said.

Lynette folded her arms and leaned against the counter. I could tell she was mentally charging me for the macaroni on next week's grocery bill. I could tell she hated it that I was fixing food for myself, not offering any to her. But she'd just had a supper meeting. She wasn't getting my macaroni.

"I've got to practice," I told her. "I have piano class tomorrow."

I'd never expected the cubicles at Kimbrough Hall to become a refuge. You got your own piano, but you could hear two dozen other pianos through the walls. If you don't have a headache, try listening to twenty-four music majors pound out twenty-four different pieces all at once and see what that does for you. But Kimbrough had begun to seem downright peaceful to me.

“Can’t you go practice now?” she asked.

“I want to eat something. Then I’ll go.” My back felt stiff and fragile under her gaze, like a straw that might snap.

“So go and come back at seven-thirty.” The pot of water on the back burner had begun to boil furiously. I dumped the box of Macaroni into it.

“All right?” she pressed.

“I’ll try to get back in time.”

Lynette watched as I stirred the cheese packet into the margarine. Somehow I’d gotten a hair in the pan. When I extracted it, she made a face. The oily hair stuck to my fingers. I scraped it off on the rim of the garbage can.

My hair was straight and light brown with a slightly greenish tinge, not particularly good hair. But to me it represented a kind of safety. Never mind it was so long it kept getting shut in car doors and dangled in coffee and zipped into zippers. My hair was my boundary. It was at once a thing to hide behind and the thing that made me unique. In eastern Washington’s Palouse in the 1970s, ninety-five percent of young women wore Farrah Fawcett hair, frilled down the sides like our kitchen curtains. Without my long straight hair, I feared I’d blur right into everyone else. I might lose my soul.

Lynette looked at the hair. Her eyes were a pale whitish-green, chilly as two chips of iceberg. Like that kind of lettuce, they never softened. After a second she ripped a paper towel from the plastic paper towel holder, pinched up the hair with it, and shoved the towel deep in the trash.

“That macaroni’s going to come out in a glob if you don’t stir it,” she said.

I kept stirring the cheese and margarine. She waited. Gritting my teeth, I reached back and stirred the macaroni.

“So you’ll be on time?”

“I’ll try,” I said. “If my piece is going well I should be able to make it. I just don’t want to promise. It’s like a test. Piano class is a test. I need to prepare.”

She let out a short, gusty breath. “When you moved in you promised to make the household a priority.”

“It is a priority, Lynette. Come on. I already barely have time to--”

“Eight,” she said. “I hate to stay up late but oh well. We’ll move the meeting to eight.”

Dropping the spoon on the stove, I turned off both burners. Lynette said, “Are you going to eat *all* of that?”

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Wind stirred the candy wrappers in the gutter and rattled the dead leaves on the trees with an almost identical sound. Hair snaked around me as I hurried through the dusk toward the music building.

“Hey, Mandy, how’s it going?” T.J. Tomlinson slouched in the doorway at the side entrance, smoking a joint. At the sound of her voice, I remembered I didn’t have to care what Lynette thought. I was somebody else. T.J. Tomlinson knew me. I’d bought a lid from her.

She offered the joint. “Practice time?”

“Maybe.” I hesitated. “I might go see Peter.”

She nodded, holding her breath. I sucked in a deep, tissue-searing lungful of smoke, then let it out. In ninth grade I was a great admirer of T.J. and the other kids who hung out behind Pullman High School, smoking dope. Dark Dave Capparelli with his knowing eyes and divorced mother. Smooth blonde Heather, with the highest I.Q. in the school. T.J., who was already dealing. She later quit school and wound up on the roof with a crew of burly tanned workmen, shouting down insults at us with the best of them. These days she was hanging out with some students who had a rock band. She was the drummer. When I went to her house with Pete to buy the lid, she talked for a long time about the influence of Emerson, Lake and Palmer on her work.

“So you’re still seeing Peter,” T.J. said in a pinched voice. She looked at me for a while before she exhaled.

“Yeah, well,” I said from behind a blurred screen of hair. “Yeah, sort of.”

All my life I’d had hair. Once in third grade I let my mother bully me into a pixie cut and I’d hated it. I felt humiliated and exposed. I would stand in the bathroom with a towel over my head, squeezing fistfuls of terrycloth and pretending I had my hair back.

I returned T.J.’s joint.

“Okay,” she said. “See you around.”

“Yeah, all right. Thanks a lot.” Pulling my coat around me, I stepped hesitantly away from the building.

I did have a piano class, but I didn’t think I could concentrate on Mozart after all. I was cracking. Sometimes I would go into a practice room, and two minutes into my scales, break down and just start poking one note over and over, or let my fingers fumble limply over the keys, any keys, just making sounds. Once I saw the chairman of the department peeking in the window at me. I knew he would have kicked me out of the practice room if he hadn’t recognized I was a music major.

The quickest way to Pete's was to cut behind Holland Library and circle the football stadium. I stayed close to the stadium's curved concrete wall, liking the way the shadow engulfed me, how solid the blackness felt compared to the rickety feeling in my gut. I hadn't eaten the macaroni.

I was cracking and Pete was the one who'd cracked me. In the past month I'd downed my first beer, learned to smoke marijuana, and paid my first visit to Family Planning. In two months and four days, just as soon as the safety period elapsed for taking the pill, I would lose my virginity.

The whole thing was crazy, because I hadn't even liked him at first. He was short, shorter than my 5'6", with an odd ducking walk. He sat in front of me in Chaucer. He always wore one of those blue ribbed caps yanked down over his ears, smashing his stringy brown hair. He looked as if at any moment he might roll it down the rest of the way and rob a bank. He was a Viet Nam vet. I thought he seemed kind of creepy.

Then he approached me, looked into my eyes, and I realized that I had been looking all my life for just his kind of intensity.

"Want to go out for a beer?" he'd said.

Peter lived in one of the pink and green duplexes reserved for married couples, but his wife lived in Ritzville. He said they had an open marriage. He'd told me about it over that first beer at the Nobby Inn, after he asked my astrological sign. Actually, he'd had the beer. I ordered Coke.

"Aren't you jealous?" I asked.

"No. No, well maybe I got jealous once."

"When?"

"When she told me she liked black men best."

I could feel my heart thumping, my cheeks stinging with blood. I couldn't believe I was engaged in such a conversation. I was afraid he'd notice the wild jerk of my heartbeat under my blue ribbed sweater. I tried desperately to be cool.

"What about her? Doesn't she get jealous?"

"Only about one thing."

"Yeah? What's that?"

He grinned widely, raking me up and down with his eyes. "Younger women," he said.

He was the wolf in sheep's clothing, the wolf in student housing. His wife never came to Pullman, but sometimes he climbed in his dented tan station wagon and drove away for days,

even weeks at a time, and I knew he'd gone to see her, to give all her black men a rest. He didn't care what it did to his grades. He just did what he felt like, precisely and only that. When he was gone jealousy ate at my nerves like acid, until I felt numb and moved slowly. During those times, I was one big aching tooth and life was the bite.

I ran past a tipped-over tricycle and a bank of creaky swings. Past porches with potted plants left out to die in the bitter fall. Past the flickering blue lights of TVs behind droopy standard-issue drapes.

Peterpeterpeterpeterpete--

He hadn't been in Chaucer today but he might be home by now. I was happy to run twenty minutes across campus to find out.

"I can't believe you're sitting there on my sofa," he'd told me the first time I went to his house. "You're like this big gorgeous flower. I can't believe you're really sitting there. Coke?"

"I didn't know you drank Coke." My fingers curled around the cold wet can. They were shaking.

"I got it for you."

He'd known I would come to him even before I had known it myself.

The station wagon was there. I rapped on the glass. My heart was pounding. A green blotch appeared behind the steamy glass pane, then the door opened and the blotch became a shirt, the luckiest shirt in the world, the green plaid shirt which covered the top half of Peter.

He grinned when he saw me. His eyes glinted before he stepped back out of the street light, swung the door wide to let me in. "Hey. Hungry?"

"No," I said. I hated to eat in front of other people. I hated the thought of Peter seeing me chew.

"Well, have a Coke." He always acted like my drinking Coke was the funniest thing in the world. He handed me one, then carried his greeny-blue plastic plate to the table. The only thing on the plate was steak, a floppy triangular wedge of meat about as thick as a doormat. The smell of grilled meat filled the steamy room. He'd forgotten to ask for my coat. Under muffling layers of felt and nylon, my stomach rumbled.

He began to eat, his jaw working methodically. Bob Dylan hooted and growled in the background, Pete's favorite album, *Tangled Up In Blue*. Peter thought Dylan was a genius. He played songs for me like lessons, comparing certain people in them to me. Those lines circled in my head constantly, day and night, like vultures waiting to land. *Ophelia, she's 'neath the*

window / for her I feel so afraid / At the age of 22 / she's already an old maid. And later: How does it feel / to be on your own / no direction home/like a rolling stone?

Peeling my coat off, I threw it over the back of the sofa and sat down. The sofa was old and squashy and low to the ground, covered by a dingy crocheted afghan, brown and gold. Whenever I sat down, my hair clung to the blanket. Sometimes there was so much static electricity you could see visible sparks.

My love, she speaks like silence / without ideals or violence, Dylan sang, through his nose. She doesn't have to say she's faithful / but she's true like ice, like fire...

I'd started buying every used Dylan album I could find. I scoured every song for hidden meanings. I memorized them, wanting them to explain all the things I thought Peter and his life pointed toward: how to live at maximum intensity, how to explode the safe lies and face the terror of truth. I had a gut feeling that truth would be terrible. But I wanted to face it. Tell me how to do that, I begged in my mind. Just tell me what to do and I'll do it, I swear I will.

Peter gulped the last bite of meat, then picked up the plate and swallowed the thin brownish-pink mix of blood and steak juice and salt that was left.

"Smoke?"

"All right," I said, hooking a finger through one of the afghan's misshapen holes.

He had a red plastic cigarette roller that reminded me of my grandfather's automatic card shuffler. It produced perfect thin cylinders every time. Now that I'd become a marijuana smoker, I'd thought about buying one, but finally decided not to ruin the ritual of rolling joints by hand. I didn't really like to smoke the joints but I loved to roll them, out on the back steps of the Baptist house in the wee hours of the morning. I would watch my breath and listen to the frat boys in the next courtyard grunting and yelling and chanting their weird caveman chants, ready to hide my contraband deep in the folds of my robe if one of my roommates appeared. I smoked because every time I did, it conjured Pete. I felt his presence writhing like a genie in each puff.

He fetched the cigarette roller from the bookshelf and sat back down, concentrating. When the joint was ready he lit it and inhaled, then handed it to me. Peter could hold his breath like a lifeguard. The longer you held it in, he said, the more it got you off. He held his breath as I clumsily re-lit the end of the cigarette. I inhaled, then spurted smoke, trying not to cough. Peter's dope was strong and harsh. It brought tears to my eyes.

Slowly, lingeringly, he exhaled. "So how's life at the cloister?"

“Same old same old,” I mumbled.

Now that I’d fallen in love with Peter, I was terrified to answer the simplest question, terrified that any word might make him realize I wasn’t the magical creature he’d told me he thought I was. Pete was the one who was magic. *He* was the one with the odd, burning eyes. *He* was the one who spoke in monosyllables and wrote poems like instructions from another world. My favorite was one about when he’d cut himself shaving. It ended, “And I knew I had gotten a warning.”

I imagined that Peter heard voices in his head and did exactly what they told him; that he performed dark rituals that took him deeper and deeper into the heart of Mystery; that his relentless intent could transform even ordinary behavior like eating underdone meat and groping Baptist virgins into something to ride. My biggest fear was that he would discover what an impostor I was before I could find my own way into the power he seemed to radiate.

“Want to hear some poems?”

“Sure.” My voice came out breathy, breathless. I thought he was going to reach across the table for the cracked black notebook full of his own work, but instead he fetched something that was clearly a text.

“This is Matthew Arnold.” He turned down the music and flipped through the book until he found his page. “Yes! in the sea of life enisled / With echoing straits between us thrown / Dotting the shoreless watery wild / We mortal millions live *alone*.”

After the first few words he looked up and kept chanting and I realized he knew the whole thing by heart. His voice was ragged. His eyes locked fiercely onto mine.

“A God, a God their severance ruled!”

I was spiraling downward but I felt awake, awake, as if the words had pushed me from some inner cliff. My stomach flopped like a dying fish. My heart wedged in my throat. I couldn’t breathe.

“And bade betwixt their shores to be / The unplumbed, salt, estranging sea.” Still staring at me, he closed the book. “So.”

“So,” I choked. The room was filled with steam from the square brown radiator and Peter’s cooking, but I couldn’t stop shaking. I got up and hovered over the radiator.

“Cold?”

“Sort of.”

I was saying all the wrong things. Completely the wrong things.

Peter laughed. Sweat gleamed on his forehead. I was in hell and he was the devil and all I wanted was to do his bidding, to throw myself at his feet. He got up and came to stand beside me. He set his hands on both sides of my shoulders, accidentally pulling my hair.

My blood flared to meet his fingers. My stomach felt green and putrid and seemed to be oozing toward my feet. Oddly, it wasn't a bad feeling. The nausea had a blind, blunt urgency about it. It was like a stupid blind mule dragging me toward--well, toward sex, that particular act I hadn't committed before, though Doug Miller and I had certainly gotten warm.

We began kissing. Peter's hands fiddled with the ends of my hair, which formed a semi-circle against the seat of my jeans. The hair was pale where the ends were split, nubbly like a frayed blanket. He let go of the hair and felt under my sweater. His hands moved from the back to the front. The heat inside me increased until my body trembled like a pressure cooker. He pushed my bra upward, the rough dry ends of his fingers brushing my skin. I couldn't stand any more. I lurched back.

Pete looked at the empty space between his hands. "How do you do it?" he asked, sounding surprised. "How can you just turn it off like that?"

I tried to swallow but there was no spit in my mouth, it had boiled dry. The roof of my mouth felt sticky. My throat ached. "Two months and four days," I croaked. "You know. Until it's safe."

He shook his head. After a minute he tunneled his fingers through his own thinning hair. "Well." He took a deep breath. "So. What did I miss in old Chaucer?"

"Nothing," I said. "You didn't miss anything."

He wandered back to the dinette and sat down. "I suppose I should look at the book."

Bob Dylan was still singing and the air in the room was still full of steam, but everything suddenly seemed dry and flat. I felt completely flat inside. I knew that when I stepped back out into the cold the flatness would be punctuated by a sharp and merciless despair. I knew all about it. It had happened before.

"Maybe I'll drop that class," Pete said.

"You can't." I felt a spike of panic. "You're an English major, aren't you? You need it for a requirement."

"I could drop Chaucer for Donne. That would work just as well."

I tried to swallow. I couldn't drop Chaucer and transfer to Donne myself. That would look way too desperate and transparent. If he transferred I would have to tough it out, even if it

killed me. This seemed like a strong possibility. On some level I knew I was facing the beginning of the end with Pete. And he hadn't even relieved me of my virginity yet.

I never met anyone who could just turn it off like that, he said.

Well, being a Baptist gives you lots of chances to practice.

You turn it off when you're stuck for hours on a hard pew in twisted pantyhose and pointy heels that pinch your toes.

You turn it off when you catch yourself thinking something catty about the smug fat fakiness of the preacher's wife, or the awfulness of her pantsuit.

You turn it off when you're angry.

You turn it off when you're at a Wednesday potluck and you want two desserts.

You turn it off when you're sitting in Bible class and you flash on the feeling of Doug Miller's fingers creeping up the inside of your thigh on prom night.

If you're a Baptist girl you turn yourself off twice a minute. You're just one big breaker waiting to be thrown.

I sat with glazed eyes, listening to Lynette bitch about the way we were all neglecting our household chores. We were doing them, we just weren't doing them well enough.

Judy listened with her chin tilted up, unsmiling. Instead of looking at Lynette, she looked at the dishes piled high in the dish drainer. The sponge sat near the faucet, leaking a thin stream of water into the sink. Carrie looked at Lynette, blinking and turning her head back and forth, back and forth. The movement was very small, no more than a quarter-inch either way, but it made her look deranged.

Lynette moved on to the problem of how someone was using all the hot water before everyone else (i.e. Lynette) got their showers. I looked at her acne-scarred face, trying to find something to feel besides belligerence. Lynette had thick lips and a flat nose, darting black eyes, and hair like a crow's wing. As usual, she had chosen to stand while everyone else sat down.

Finally she arrived at the raw, painful climax of her diatribe, the grocery bill.

"Someone seems to be eating more than her share of the food," Lynette said.

I dropped my head. Hair slithered forward, screening my face. Sometimes I take the frontmost edge of one side of my hair and flip it over my shoulder, but I don't really want it behind me. I want it in my eyes. I love how it sidles around my arm like someone sneaking into seats that aren't paid for. When I need it, my hair is my cover.

“How can that be?” Judy asked. Her face was smooth and shiny. Under stress it gleamed like a cue ball. She scrubbed her knuckles into the sides of her short blonde perm. “I don’t get it. We all pretty much eat together.”

“I’m just saying that I’m noticing we’re going through certain items really fast, and I don’t understand it because *I* haven’t eaten any of them.”

“Like what? What do you mean?” Carrie said. The plump one, she was easily thrown on the defensive. She cried at the drop of a hat. She had a gorgeous molasses voice, but she’d only perform the sappiest songs. She loved Debbie Boone.

“Like peanut butter,” said Lynette, crossing her arms. “Like macaroni. Like bread.”

“I made macaroni tonight but I didn’t eat it,” I said. “It’s all still in the fridge.”

“It can’t be you, Amanda,” Judy said. “You’re too skinny.”

Carrie turned pinker. “Well, I eat peanut butter, but I thought that’s what it was there for. I thought we bought food for that purpose. For eating.”

“Of course we buy food for eating. I’m just saying it’s not fair to all pay the same amount if some of us are eating most of it,” Lynette said. “Like, I eat out a lot.”

“Is that our fault?” Judy said.

Carrie started to cry. Judy patted her shoulder.

I realized I wasn’t the only one at the table who was seeing Lynette as a fascist. But then I did a cowardly thing. To cover myself, I defended Lynette.

“It makes sense if she eats less she should pay less,” I said.

“Well, let’s sleep on it,” Lynette said reasonably. “Let’s all write down our ideas and share them at next week’s house meeting.”

I stopped breathing.

Judy said, “Are we going to have a house meeting every week?”

“We need to,” said Lynette. “We’re supposed to be an example on campus. We’re supposed to be motivated by a spirit of love. But I’m feeling like we’re not, like we’re fragmented.”

The three of us looked at the floor. We could hardly argue with that.

“Does anyone besides me want tea?” Lynette asked, putting on the kettle. Having dealt with business, she grew suddenly chatty. “Boy, you wouldn’t believe the story I heard at my supper meeting tonight.” She launched into a story about a woman whose car had been stopped on a deserted road by robed figures. I tried to tune it out. Lynette poured three cups of hot water. Judy rummaged in the cabinet until she found a box of herb tea, then set it on the table.

“That’s awful,” said Carrie, clutching her cup.

Judy lit a candle and turned out the light. “That’s nothing,” she said, launching into a story of her own. This one involved burning crosses and animal corpses.

“I don’t believe it,” I said. I thought the only reason they had to repeat such sensational trash was that nothing was happening in their own lives; their own religion wasn’t real. They were bored out of their minds, that was their problem.

I thought of Peter’s piercing gaze, of mirrors, sex and blood. *And I knew I had gotten a warning.*

Something thumped against the back door. Carrie shrieked. Lynette gasped. Judy tucked two fists under her chin.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” I said. I stomped out on the porch to see what it was. A cat shot from behind the garbage can, rattling the screen.

“It’s a stupid cat,” I said, going back in the kitchen.

“I can’t believe you did that, Amanda,” said Judy. “Weren’t you scared?”

“It’s always the quiet ones,” Lynette said. “It’s always the quiet ones that surprise you.”

I blushed. She almost made it sound like a compliment. She almost sounded like she was egging me on. Suddenly I wanted to find a way to really surprise Lynette.

Judy lay on her back with her mouth open, her nose making a slight fluttery noise with each in-breath. I could see her silhouette against the wall. It was dark, but our twin beds were less than three feet apart. Judy had a small nose, shaped like the end of a shoehorn.

The sound of her breath made me feel claustrophobic, made me want to throw open the window even though the ground outside was frozen solid and cars that stopped at the corner left white streaks in the brittle air.

My bed was so narrow that my arm kept falling off it. It was so low that my fingers fell flat against the carpet, a patchwork of 12-inch squares of different colors and textures, red pile, gold shag, green indoor-outdoor. Everything in the house looked like it had come from an idea in *Family Circle*. That, or it was cheap. The warped K-Mart mirror that created ugly, inaccurate bulges that rippled when you moved. The accordion-style closet doors from Sears. Every time I opened the closet, things fell out. Judy’s clothes were crammed so tight on the rack that she had to wrestle out an armful just to extract the garment she wanted. I threw my clothes on the floor.

Opening a window wouldn’t make me feel any better. You would have had to bulldoze a wall out. Even that might not work.

I got up and groped my way into the kitchen. Holding my breath, I opened the fridge. In a way it felt bad, stealing food and sneaking off to Peter's behind Lynette's back. But in another way, it didn't feel dishonest at all. It felt like I was finding my way into honesty for the first time. I had to find out who I was. Even if I turned out to be terrible.

I set food out on the counter, thinking of ways to shock Lynette.

I could quit as church pianist.

Refuse to go to some meetings.

Tell her about Peter.

Cut my hair.

No. But I could, I could cut my hair. Lynette was always trying to get me to cut my hair. I didn't want to cut it but she would fall over backwards if I actually did. I knew she would.

Light from the hallway illuminated a slice of the counter, a stack of about eight slices of white bread. I'd carefully figured out how much I could eat without causing an uproar, without bringing a load of suspicion clanging down on my head. What I did was, I ate a little of everything. This much bread, that much butter, so many crackers, so much cheese. Vanilla wafers dipped in marshmallow creme, but only a fourth of the jar or a fourth of the box.

I was past the stage of lying in bed feeling hollow, but just getting into the stage of strategy. I still hadn't come to the mornings-after at the Student Union, tallying calories and sipping coffee and prepping myself to fast until I'd atoned--sometimes for three or four days. I was still some distance from the stage of slipping out to buy groceries from my slim personal budget to replace what I'd consumed.

But I was on the way. The midnight binges were fast becoming my own secret, sacrilegious sacrament. I was turning into the antiBaptist in that religious house, the voracious beast that only came out at night.

I hacked off a quarter-inch wedge of margarine, broke it into three pieces with my fingers, and pushed the chunks into torn pieces of soft white bread. I stuffed wads of smashed bread and butter into my mouth. After I finished my allotment of margarine, I would get into the Miracle Whip.

Wonder Bread.

Miracle Whip.

The names sounded Baptist. They made me think of the scary language in the Bible about the Lord's Supper, saying how if you swallow the crummy, pellet-sized wafer and swig down a thimbleful of grape juice without meaning it, you could roast in hell forever. I didn't

believe it, but it was scary anyway. People did get hijacked into imaginary hells, not even their own hells. Hells other people made up. It had already happened to me several times.

I unscrewed the Miracle Whip so slowly that the scraping sound of the lid became almost inaudible, then slathered some on a piece of bread. Everything on the counter was white, or nearly white. Margarine, Miracle Whip, vanilla wafers, marshmallow creme, Wonder Bread, leftover macaroni.

Suddenly the glow on the cabinet vanished. Lynette stood in the doorway, blotting out the light. I realized I'd been waiting for her.

Yanking the tie on her bathrobe tight, she glared at me. Her hair stuck up on one side. She looked like the witch in the Hans Christian Anderson book I'd had as a child. She looked like the scribbled drawing of the retarded woman in *Harriet the Spy*. She looked like somebody had scribbled her onto the light backdrop of the doorway with an angry black pen, someone who didn't draw very well.

"What are you doing, Amanda?" she said.

I didn't answer.

"I said, what are you doing?"

"I'm hungry," I said, my voice almost inaudible.

"Do you know what time it is?"

"I didn't have any supper," I said, thinking of my list of things I could do to shock her. Wishing I had the nerve to do even one.

I didn't know that I would eventually be doing all of those things, most of them pretty soon. It wouldn't be long before I climbed on a bus for San Francisco, where I didn't know anyone. I would go there because it was where Peter had come from, and I figured if San Francisco had produced Peter, it had to have something for me.

"You call that supper?" Lynette's voice cracked. She flipped on the light switch and a blaze of yellow lit all the white food. The counter was crammed with boxes and cubes and packages and jars of food, all of them open, most of them white.

Lynette's mouth fell open, and I realized I'd already done it. I had knocked Lynette's socks off, and without even trying. I had done it in spite of myself.