Anyway
by M. Rickert

"What if you could save the world? What if all you had to do was sacrifice your son's life, Tony's for instance, and there would be no more war, would you do it?"

"Robbie's the name of my son," I say. "Remember, Mom? Tony is your son. You remember Tony, don't you?"

I reach into the cabinet where I've stored the photograph album. I page through it until I find the picture I want, Tony and me by his VW just before he left on the Kerouac-inspired road trip from which he never returned. We stand, leaning into each other, his long hair pulled into a ponytail, and mine finally grown out of the pixie cut I'd had throughout my single-digit years. He has on bell-bottom jeans and a tie-dyed T-shirt. I have on cut-offs and a simple cotton short-sleeved button-down blouse and, hard to see but I know they are there, a string of tiny wooden beads, which Tony had, only seconds before, given to me. I am looking up at him with absolute adoration and love.

"See, Mom," I point to Tony's face. She looks at the picture and then at me. She smiles.

"Well, hello," she says, "when did you get here?"

I close the book, slide it into the cabinet, kiss her forehead, pick up my purse, and walk out of the room. I learned some time ago that there is no need for explanation. She sits there in the old recliner we brought from her house, staring vacantly at nothing, as if I have never been there, not today, or ever.

I stop at the nurse's station, hoping to find my favorite nurse, Anna Vinn. I don't even remember the name of the nurse who looks up at me and smiles. I glance at her name tag.

"Charlotte?"

"Yes?"

"My mother asked me the strangest question today."

Charlotte nods.

"Do the patients ever, you know, snap out of it? Have you ever heard of that happening?"

Charlotte rests her face in her hand, two fingers under the rim of her glasses, rubbing her temple. She sighs and appraises me with a kind look. "Sometimes, but you know, they …"

"Snap right back again?"

"Would you like to talk to the social worker?"

I shake my head, tap the counter with my fingertips before I wave, breezy,

unconcerned.

Once outside I look at my watch. I still have to get the groceries for tomorrow's dinner. It's my father's birthday and he wants, of all things, pot roast. Luckily, my son, Robbie, has agreed to cook it. I've been a vegetarian for eighteen years and now I have to go buy a pot roast.

"What if you could save the world?" I remember my mother asking the question, so clearly, as if she were really present—in her skin and in her mind—in a way she hasn't been for years.

"Mom," I say, as I unlock the car door, "I can't even save this cow."

That's when I realize that a man I've seen inside the home, but who I don't know by name, stands between my car and his (I assume). He stares at me for a moment and then, with a polite smile, turns away.

I start to speak, to offer some explanation for what he's overheard, but he is walking away from me, toward the nursing home, his shoulders hunched as if under a weight, or walking against a wind, though it is early autumn and the weather is mild.

On Sunday, my dad and Robbie sit in the kitchen drinking beer while the pot roast cooks, talking about war. I have pleaded with my father for years not to talk to Robbie this way, but he has always dismissed my concerns. "This is men talk," he'd say, elbowing Robbie in the ribs, tousling his hair while Robbie, gap-toothed and freckled and so obviously not a man, grinned up at me. But now Robbie is nineteen. He drinks a beer and rubs his long fingers over the stubble of his chin. "Don't get me wrong," my dad says, "it's a terrible thing, okay? There's mud and snakes and bugs, and we didn't take a shower for three months." He glances at me and nods. I know that this is meant as a gesture on his part, a sort of offering to me and my peacenik ways.

The smell of pot roast drives me from the kitchen to the backyard. It's cooler today than yesterday, and the sky has a grayish cast. Most of the leaves have fallen, the yard littered with the muted red, gold, and green. I sit on the back step. "Didn't take a shower for three months," my father says again, loudly. I hear him through the kitchen windows that I had cracked open, trying to alleviate the odor of cooked meat.

I listen to the murmur of Robbie's voice.

"Oh, but it was a beautiful thing," my dad says. "It was the right thing to do. Nobody questioned it back then. We were saving the world."

For dessert we have birthday cake, naturally. My dad's favorite, chocolate with banana filling and chocolate chip-studded chocolate frosting. I feel quite queasy by this point, the leftover pot roast congealing in the roaster on top of the stove, Robbie's and my father's plates gleaming with a light gray coating—it was all I could do to eat my salad. "Why don't we have our cake in the living room?" I say.

"Aw, no," my father says. "You don't have to get all fancy for me."

But Robbie sees something in my face that causes him to stand up quickly. "Come on, Pops," he says, and, as my father begins to rise, "you and mom go in the living room and talk. I'll bring out the cake."

I try not to notice the despair that flits over my father's face. I take him by the elbow and steer him into the living room, helping him into the recliner I bought (though he does not know this) for him.

"I saw Mom today," I say.

He nods, scratches the inside of his ear, glances longingly at the kitchen.

I steel myself against the resentment. I'm happy about the relationship he's developed with Robbie. But some small part of me, some little girl who, in spite of my forty-five years, resides in me and will not go away, longs for my father's attention and yes, even after all these years, approval.

"She asked me the strangest question."

My father grunts. Raises his eyebrows. It is obvious that he thinks there is nothing particularly fascinating about my mother asking a strange question.

"One time," he says, "she asked me where her dogs were. I said, 'Meldy, you know you never had any dogs.' So she starts arguing with me about how of course she's always had dogs, what kind of woman do I think she is? So, later that day I'm getting ice out of the freezer, and what do you think I find in there but her underwear, and I say, 'Meldy, what the hell is your underwear doing in the freezer?' So she grabs them from me and says, 'My dogs!'"

"Ha-a-appy Birrrrrthday to youuuu." Robbie comes in, carrying the cake blazing with candles. I join in the singing. My father sits through it with an odd expression on his face. I wonder if he's enjoying any of this.

Later, when I drive him home while Robbie does the dishes, I say, "Dad, listen, today Mom, for just a few seconds, she was like her old self again. Something you said tonight, to Robbie, reminded me of it. Remember how you said that during the war it was like you were saving the world?" I glance at him. He sits, staring straight ahead, his profile composed of sharp shadows. "Anyway, Mom looked right at me, you know, the way she used to have that look, right, and she said, 'What if you could save the world? What if all you had to do was sacrifice one life and there would be no more war, would you do it?'"

My father shakes his head and mumbles something.

"What is it, Dad?"

"Well, that was the beginning, you know."

"The beginning?"

"Yeah, the beginning of the Alzheimer's. 'Course, I didn't know it then. I thought she was just going a little bit nuts." He shrugs. "It happened. Lots of women used to go crazy back then."

"Dad, what are you talking about?"

"All that business with Tony." His voice cracks on the name. After all these years he can still not say my brother's name without breaking under the grief.

"Forget it, Dad. Never mind."

"She almost drove me nuts, asking it all the time."

"Okay, let's just forget about it."

"All those fights we had about the draft and Vietnam, and then he went and got killed anyway. You were just a girl then, so you probably don't remember, it almost tore us apart."

"We don't have to talk about this, Dad."

I turn into the driveway. My father stares straight ahead. I wait a few seconds and then open my car door; he leans to open his. When I walk beside him to guide him by the elbow, he steps away from me. "I'm not an invalid," he says. He reaches in his pocket and pulls out his keys. Together we walk to the door, which he unlocks with shaking hands. I step inside and flick on the light switch. It is the living room of a lonely old man, the ancient plaid couch and recliner, family photographs gathering dust, fake ivy.

"Satisfied?" he says, turning toward me.

I shake my head, shrug. I'm not sure what he's talking about.

"No boogeymen are here stealing all your inheritance, all right?"

"Dad, I—"

"The jewels are safe."

He laughs at that. I smile weakly. "Happy Birthday, Dad," I say.

But he has already turned and headed into the bedroom. "Wait, let me check on the jewels."

My father, the smart aleck.

"Okay, Dad," I say, loudly, so he can hear me over the sound of drawers being opened and closed. "I get the point. I'm leaving."

"No, no. The jewels."

Suddenly I am struck by my fear, so sharp I gasp. He's got it too, I think, and he's going to come out with his socks or underwear and he's going to call them jewels and—

"Ah, here they are. I honest to God almost thought I lost them."

I sit down on the threadbare couch I have offered to replace a dozen times. He comes into the living room, grinning like an elf, carrying something. I can't bear to look.

"What's the matter with you?" he asks and thrusts a shoebox onto my lap.

"Oh my God."

"These are yours now."

I take a deep breath. I can handle this, I think. I've handled a lot already; my brother's murder, my husband's abandonment, my mother's Alzheimer's. I lift the lid. The box is filled with stones, green with spots of red on them. I pick one up. "Dad, where did you get these? Is that blood?"

He sits in the recliner. "They were in the bedroom. They're your responsibility now."

"Are these—"

"Bloodstone, it's called. At least that's what your mother said, but you know, like I told you, she was already getting the Alzheimer's back then."

"Bloodstone? Where did she—"

"I already told you." He looks at me, squinty-eyed, and I almost laugh when I realize he is trying to decide if I have Alzheimer's now. "She wouldn't stop. She almost drove me crazy with her nonsense. She kept saying it, all the time, 'Why'd he have to die anyway?' You get that? 'Anyway,' that's what she said, 'Why'd he have to die anyway,' like there was a choice or something. Finally one day I just lost it and I guess I hollered at her real bad and she goes, 'What if you could save the world? What if all you had to do was sacrifice one life, not your own, but, oh, let's say, Tony's, and there would be no more war, would you do it?' I reminded her that our Tony—" His voice cracks. He reaches for the remote control and turns the TV on but leaves the sound off. "She says, 'I know he's dead anyway, but I mean before he died, what would you have done?'"

"And I told her, 'The world can go to hell.'" He looks at me, the colors from the TV screen flickering across his face. "The whole world can just go to hell if I could have him back for even one more day, one more goddamned hour." For a moment I think he might cry, but he moves his mouth as if he's sucking on something sour and continues. "And she says, 'That's what I decided. But then he died anyway.'"

I look at the red spots on the stones. My father makes an odd noise, a sort of rasping gasp. I look up to the shock of his teary eyes.

"So she tells me that these stones were given to her by her mother. You remember Grandma Helen, don't you?"

"No, she died before—"

"Well, she went nuts too. So you see, it runs in the women of the family. You should probably watch out for that. Anyway, your mother tells me that her mother gave

her these stones when she got married. There's one for every generation of Mackeys, that was your mother's name before she married me. There's a stone for her mother and her mother's mother, and so on, and so on, since before time began I guess. They weren't all Mackeys, naturally, and anyhow, every daughter gets them."

"But why?"

"Well, see this is the part that just shows how nuts she was. She tells me, she says, that all the women in her family got to decide. If they send their son to war and, you know, agree to the sacrifice, they are supposed to bury the stones in the garden. Under a full moon or some nonsense like that. Then the boy will die in the war, but that would be it, okay? There would never be another war again in the whole world."

"What a fantastic story."

"But if they didn't agree to this sacrifice, the mother just kept the stones, you know, and the son went to war and didn't die there, he was like protected from dying in the war but, you know, the wars just kept happening. Other people's sons would die instead."

"Are you saying that Mom thought she could have saved the world if Tony had died in Vietnam?"

"Yep."

"But Dad, that's just—"

"I know. Alzheimer's. We didn't know it back then, of course. She really believed this nonsense too, let me tell you. She told me if she had just let Tony die in Vietnam at least she could have saved everyone else's sons. There weren't girl soldiers then, like there are now, you know. Course he just died anyway."

"Tony didn't want to go to Vietnam."

"Well, she was sure she could have convinced him." He waves his hand as though brushing away a fly. "She was nuts, what can I say? Take those things out of here. Take the box of them. I never want to see them again."

When I get home the kitchen is, well, not gleaming, but devoid of pot roast. Robbie left a note scrawled in black marker on the magnetic board on the refrigerator. "Out. Back later." I stare at it while I convince myself that he is fine. He will be back, unlike Tony who died or Robbie's father who left me when I was six months' pregnant because, he said, he realized he had to pursue his first love, figure skating.

I light the birch candle to help get rid of the cooked meat smell, which still lingers in the air, sweep the floor, wipe the counters and the table. Then I make myself a cup of decaf tea. While it steeps, I change into my pajamas. Finally, I sit on the couch in front of the TV, the shoebox of stones on the coffee table in front of me. I sip my tea and watch the news, right from the start so I see all the gruesome stuff, the latest suicide bombing, people with ravaged-grief faces carrying bloody bodies, a weeping mother in robes, and then, a special report, an interview with the mother of

a suicide bomber, clutching the picture of her dead son and saying, "He is saving the world."

I turn off the TV, put the cup of tea down, and pick up the shoebox of stones. They rattle in there, like bones, I think, remembering the box that held Tony's ashes after he was cremated. I tuck the shoebox under my arm, blow out the candle in the kitchen, check that the doors are locked, and go to bed. But it is the oddest thing: the whole time I am doing these tasks, I am thinking about taking one of those stones and putting it into my mouth, sucking it like a lozenge. It makes no sense, a strange impulse, I think, a weird synapse in my brain, a reaction to today's stress. I shove the shoebox under my bed, lick my lips and move my mouth as though sucking on something sour. Then, just as my head hits the pillow, I sit straight up, remembering.

It was after Tony's memorial, after everyone had left our house. There was an odd smell in the air, the scent of strange perfumes and flowers (I remember a bouquet of white flowers already dropping petals in the heat) mingled with the odor of unusual foods, casseroles and cakes, which had begun arriving within hours after we learned of Tony's death. There was also a new silence, a different kind of silence than any I had ever experienced before in my eleven years. It was a heavy silence and oddly, it had an odor all its own, sweaty and sour. I felt achingly alone as I walked through the rooms, looking for my parents, wondering if they, too, had died. Finally, I found my father sitting on the front porch, weeping. It was too terrible to watch. Following the faint noises I heard coming from there, I next went to the kitchen. And that's when I saw my mother sitting at the table, picking stones out of a shoebox and shoving them into her mouth. My brother was dead. My father was weeping on the porch and my mother was sitting in the kitchen, sucking on stones. I couldn't think of what to do about any of it. Without saying anything, I turned around and went to bed.

It is so strange, what we remember, what we forget. I try to remember everything I can about Tony. It is not very much, and some of it is suspect. For instance, I think I remember us standing next to the Volkswagen while my dad took that photograph, but I'm not even sure that I really remember it because when I picture it in my mind, I see us the way we are in the photograph, as though I am looking at us through a lens, and that is not the way I would have experienced it. Then I try to remember Robbie's father, and I find very little. Scraps of memory, almost like the sensation when you can hear a song in your head but can't get it to the part of your brain where you can actually sing it. I decide it isn't fair to try this with Robbie's father because I had worked so hard to forget everything about him.

I wonder if all my mother has really lost is the ability to fake it anymore. To pretend, the way we all do, to be living a memory-rich life. Then I decide that as a sort of homage to her, I will try to remember her, not as she is now, in the nursing home, curled in her bed into the shape of a comma, but how she used to be. I remember her making me a soft-boiled egg, which I colored with a face before she dropped it into the water, and I remember her sitting at the sewing machine with pins in her mouth and once, in the park, while Tony and I play in the sandbox, she sits on a bench, wearing her blue coat and her Sunday hat, the one with the feathers, her gloved hands in her lap, talking to some man and laughing, and I remember her sitting at the kitchen table sucking on stones. And that's it. That's all I can remember, over and over again, as though my mind is a flip book and the pages have gotten stuck. It seems there should be more, but as hard as I look, I can't find

any. Finally, I fall asleep.

Two weeks after my father's birthday, Robbie tells me that he has enlisted in the Marines. Basically, I completely freak out, and thus discover that a person can be completely freaked out while appearing only slightly so.

"Don't be upset, Mom," Robbie says after his announcement.

"It doesn't work like that. You can't do this and then tell me not to be upset. I'm upset."

"It's just, I don't know, I've always felt like I wanted to be a soldier, ever since I was a little kid. You know, like when people say they 'got a calling'? I always felt like I had a calling to be a soldier. You know, like dad with figure skating."

"Hm."

"Don't just sit there, Mom, say something, okay?"

"When are you leaving?"

He pulls out the contract he signed, and the brochures and the list of supplies he needs to buy. I read everything and nod and ask questions, and I am completely freaked out. That's when I begin to wonder if I have been fooling myself about this for my whole adult life, even longer. Now that I think about it, I think maybe I've been completely freaked out ever since my mother came into my room and said that Tony's body had been found in a dumpster in Berkeley.

I start to get suspicious of everyone: the newscaster, with her wide, placid face reading the reports of the suicide bombings and the number killed since the war began, my friend, Shelly, who's a doctor, smiling as she nurses her baby (the very vulnerability of which she knows so intimately), even strangers in the mall, in the grocery store, not exactly smiling or looking peaceful, generally, but also not freaking out, and I think, oh, but they are. Everybody is freaking out and just pretending that they aren't.

I take up smoking again. Even though I quit twenty years ago, I find it amazingly easy to pick right back up. But it doesn't take away the strange hunger I've developed, and so far resisted, for the bloodstones safely stored in the shoebox under my bed.

When I visit my mother it is with an invigorated sense of dread. Though I grill her several times, I cannot get her to say anything that makes sense. This leaves me with only my dad.

"Now, let me get this right, Mom believed that if she buried the bloodstones—are you supposed to bury just one, or all of them?—then that meant Tony would die, right, and there would never be another war?"

"He had to die over there, see? In Vietnam. He had to be a soldier. It didn't matter when he died in California; that didn't have anything to do with it, see?"

"But why not?"

"How should I know?" He taps the side of his head with a crooked finger. "She was nuts already way back then. Want my opinion it was his dying that did it to her, like the walnut tree."

"What's a walnut tree have to do with—"

"You remember that tree in front of our house. That was one magnificent tree. But then the blight came, and you know what 'caused it? Just this little invisible fungus, but it killed that giant. You see what I'm talking about?"

"No, Dad, I really don't."

"It's like what happened with … It was bad, all right? But when you look at a whole entire life, day after day and hour after hour, minute after minute we were having a good life, me and your mom and you kids. Then this one thing happened and, bam, there goes the walnut tree."

That night I dream that my mother is a tree or at least I am talking to a tree in the backyard and calling it Mom. Bombs are exploding all around me. Tony goes by on a bicycle. Robbie walks past, dressed like a soldier but wearing ice-skates. I wake up, my heart beating wildly. The first thing I think is, What if it's true? I lean over the side of the bed and pull out the shoebox, which rattles with stones. I lick my lips. What if I could save the world?

I open the lid, reach in, and pick up a stone, turning it in my fingers and thumb, enjoying the sensation of smooth. Then I let it drop back into the box, put the lid on, shove it under the bed, and turn on the bedside lamp. For the first time in my entire life, I smoke in bed, using a water glass as an ashtray. Smoking in bed is extremely unwise, but, I reason, at least it's not nuts. At least I'm not sitting here sucking on stones. That would be nuts.

While I smoke, I consider the options, in theory. Send my son to war and bury the stones? Did my father say under a full moon? I make a mental note to check that and then, after a few more puffs, get out of bed and start rummaging in my purse until I find my checkbook, with the pen tucked inside. I tear off a check and write on the back of it, "Find out if stones have to be buried under full moon or not." Satisfied, I crawl back into bed, being very careful with my lit cigarette.

There's a knock on my bedroom door. "Mom? Are you all right?"

"Just couldn't sleep."

"Can I come in?"

"Sure, honey."

Robbie opens the door and stands there, his brown curls in a shock of confusion on his forehead, the way they get after he's been wearing a hat. He still has his jacket on and exudes cool air. "Are you smoking?"

I don't find this something necessary to respond to. I take a puff. I mean, obviously I am. I squint at him. "You know, people are dying over there."

"Mom."

"I'm just saying. I want to make sure you know what you're getting into. It's not like you're home in the evenings watching the news. I just want to make sure you know what's going on."

"I don't think you should smoke in bed. Jesus, Mom, it really stinks in here. I'm not going to die over there, okay?"

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

"Don't be ridiculous. Nobody knows something like that."

"I have to go to bed, Mom. Don't fall asleep with that cigarette, okay?"

"I'm not a child. Robbie?"

"Yeah?"

"Would it be worth it to you?"

"What?"

"Well, your life? I mean, are you willing to give it up for this?"

I bring the cigarette to my lips. I am just about to inhale when I realize I can hear him breathing. I hold my own breath so I can listen to the faint but beautiful sound of my son breathing. He sighs. "Yeah, Mom."

"All right then. Good night, Robbie."

"Good night, Mom." He shuts the door, gently, not like a boy at all, but like a man trying not to disturb the dreams of a child.

The next day's news is particularly grim: six soldiers are killed and a school is bombed. It's a mistake, of course, and everyone is upset about it.

Without even having to look at the note I wrote to myself on the back of the check, I call my father and ask him if the stones are supposed to be buried when there's a full moon. I also make sure he's certain of the correlations, bury stones, son dies but all wars end, don't bury stones and son lives but the wars continue.

My father has a little fit about answering my questions but eventually he tells me, yes, the stones have to be buried under a full moon (and he isn't sure if it's one stone or all of them) and yes, I have the correlations right.

"Is there something about sucking them?"

"What's that?"

"Did mom ever say anything about sucking the stones?"

"This thing with Robbie has really knocked the squirrel out of your tree, hasn't it?"

I tell him that it is perfectly rational that I be upset about my son going off to fight in a war.

He says, "Well, the nut sure doesn't fall far from the tree."

"The fruit," I say.

"What's that?"

"That expression. It isn't the nut doesn't fall far from the tree, it's the fruit."

. . . . .

The day before Robbie is to leave, I visit my mother at the nursing home. I bring the shoebox of stones with me.

"Listen, Mom," I hiss into the soft shell of her ear. "I really need you to do everything you can to give me some signal. Robbie's joined the Marines. Robbie, my son. He's going to go to war. I need to know what I should do."

She stares straight ahead. Actually, staring isn't quite the right description. The aides tell me that she is not blind, but the expression in her eyes is that of a blind woman. Exasperated, I begin to rearrange the untouched things on her dresser: a little vase with a dried flower in it; some photographs of her and dad, me and Robbie; a hairbrush. Without giving it much thought, I pick up the shoebox. "Remember these," I say, lifting the lid. I shake the box under her face. I pick up one of the stones. "Remember?"

I pry open her mouth. She resists, for some reason, but I pry her lips and teeth apart and shove the stone in, banging it against the plate of her false teeth. She stares straight ahead but makes a funny noise. I keep her mouth open and, practically sitting now, almost on the arm of the chair, grab a handful of stones and begin shoving them into her mouth. Her arms flap up, she jerks her head. "Come on," I say, "you remember, don't you?"

Wildly, her eyes roll, until finally they lock on mine, a faint flicker of recognition, and I am tackled from behind, pulled away from her. There's a flurry of white pant cuffs near my face, and one white shoe comes dangerously close to stepping on me.

"Jesus Christ, they're stones. They're stones."

"Well, get them out."

"Those are my stones," I say, pushing against the floor. A hand presses my back, holding me down.

"Just stay there," says a voice I recognize as belonging to my favorite nurse, Anna

Vinn.

Later, in her office, Anna says, "We're not going to press charges. But you need to stay away for a while. And you should consider some kind of counseling."

She hands me the shoebox.

"I'm sure I was trying to get the stones out of her mouth."

She shakes her head. "Are you going to be okay? Driving home?"

"Of course," I say, unintentionally shaking the shoebox. "I'm fine."

When I get outside I take a deep breath of the fresh air. It is a cold, gray day, but I am immediately struck by the beauty of it, the beauty of the gray clouds, the beauty of the blackbirds arcing across the sky, the beauty of the air on my face and neck. I think: *I cannot save him.* Then I see a familiar-looking man. "Excuse me?" I say. He continues, head bent, shoulders hunched, toward the nursing home. "Excuse me?"

He stops and turns, slightly distracted, perhaps skeptical, as if worried I might ask for spare change.

"Don't we know each other?"

He glances at the nursing home, I think longingly, but that can't possibly be correct. Nobody longs to go in there. He shakes his head.

"Are you sure? Anyway, I have a question. Let's say you could save the world by sacrificing your son's life, would you do it?"

"I don't have a son. Or a daughter. I don't have any children."

"But hypothetically?"

"Is this, are you …" He thrusts his hands into his pockets. "Is this some kind of religious thing? 'Cause I'm not looking to convert."

"Are you sure we don't know each other?"

"I've seen you before." He glances over his shoulder. For a moment I'm sure he's going to say something important, but instead he turns away and hurries to the nursing home.

I walk to the car with my box of stones. I have to decide. Robbie leaves in the morning. It's time to stop fooling around.

This, I think, is like a Zen koan. What is the sound of one hand clapping? The secret for these things is not to be too clever. The fact that I am aware of this puts me at risk of being too clever. Okay, focus, I think as I carefully stop at a green light, realize what I've done and accelerate as the light changes to yellow. It's really very simple. Do I bury the stones? Or not? Glancing at the box, I lick my lips.

When I get home, Robbie is there with several of his friends. They are in his room,

laughing and cursing. I knock on his door and ask him if he'll be home for dinner. He opens it and says, "Mom, are you all right?"

"I was just trying to get the stones out of her mouth."

He shakes his head. "What are you talking about?" His eyes are the same color as the stones, without the red spots, of course. "You remember about the party, right?"

"The party?"

"Remember? Len? He's having a party for me? Tonight?"

I remember none of this, but I nod. It's apparently the right thing to do. There's some rustling going on behind him and a sharp bang against the wall, punctuated by masculine giggles. Robbie turns around. "Guys, be quiet for a minute." He turns back to me and smiles, bravely I think. "Hey, I don't have to go."

"It's your party. Go. I want you to."

He's relieved, I can tell. I carry the shoebox of stones into my bedroom, where I crawl into bed and fall asleep. When I wake up, feeling sweaty and stinky, creased by the seams of my clothing, it is like waking from a fever. The full moon sheds a cool glow into the room and throughout the house as I walk through it aimlessly. In the kitchen I see that Robbie amended the note on the magnetic board on the refrigerator. "Gone. Back later. Love."

I go to the bedroom to get the box of stones. I drop them onto the kitchen table. They make a lovely noise, like playing with marbles or checkers when I was young and Tony was young too and alive. I pick up a stone, pop it into my mouth, and see, almost like a memory but clearer (and certainly this is not my life), the life of a young man, a Roman, I think. I don't know how long this process takes, because there is a strange, circular feeling to it, as though I have experienced this person's entire life, not in the elongated way we live hours and days and years but rather as something spherical. I see him as a young boy, playing in a stream, and I see him with his parents, eating at some sort of feast, I see him kiss a girl, and I see him go to battle. The battle scenes are very gruesome but I don't spit out the stone because I have to know how it turns out. I see him return home, I see his old mother's tearful face but not his father's, because his father was killed in the war, but then there are many happy scenes, a wedding, children, he lives a good life and dies in a field one day, all alone under a bright sun, clutching wet blades of grass with one hand, his heart with the other. I pick up another stone and see the life of another boy, and another, and another. Each stone carries the whole life of a son. Now, without stopping to spit them out, I shove stones into my mouth, swirling through centuries of births and wars and dying until at last I find Tony's, from the blossomed pains of his birth, through his death in Berkeley, stabbed by a boy not much older than he was, the last thing he saw, this horrified boy saying, "Oh, shit." I shove stones into my mouth, dizzy with the lives and deaths and the ever-repeating endless cycle of war. When my mouth is too full, I spit them out and start again. At last I find Robbie's, watching every moment of his birth and growing years while the cacophony of other lives continues around me, until I see him in a bedroom, the noise of loud music, laughter, and voices coming through the crack under the door. He is naked and in bed with a blond girl. I spit out the stones. Then, carefully, I pick

up the wet stones one at a time until I again find Robbie's and Tony's. These I put next to the little Buddha in the hallway. The rest I put into the box, which I shove under my bed.

. . . . .

The next day, I drive Robbie to the bus depot.

"I don't want you worrying about me. I'm going to be fine," he says.

I smile, not falsely. The bus is late, of course. While we wait we meet two other families whose children are making the same trip as Robbie is. Steve, a blue-eyed boy with the good looks of a model, and Sondra, whose skin is smooth and brown, lustrous like stone. I shake their hands and try to say the right things, but I do not look into those young bright faces for long. I cannot bear to. When their parents try to make small talk, I can only murmur my replies. Nobody seems to blame me. It is expected that I act this way, upset and confused. Certainly nobody suspects the truth about me, that I am a murderer, that I have bargained their children's lives for my son's.

When it comes time to say good-bye, I kiss him on the cheek. Oh, the wonderful warmth of his skin! The wonderful certainty that he will survive!

I stand and wave as the bus pulls away. I wave and wave even though I can't see his face, and I have no idea if he can see mine, I wave until somebody, Sondra's dad, I think, tries to get me to stop, then, mumbling, walks away. I stand here waving even after there is no bus on the road. People walk in wide circles around me as if somehow they know that I am the destroyer of the world. They are completely freaked out but act like they're not, because, after all, what can they do about it, anyway?

The End