

PILGRIM GIRL

FOR ANOTHER SECOND Allison is safe. She's outside the Wingerts' house, and the front door is still shut. But Janie Wingert is coming down the hallway, her tasteful heels clicking on the terra-cotta tiles, and Allison has dressed up as a traveling saleswoman, though she doesn't know why. She has no products. Why didn't this occur to her before now? It seemed like a great idea when she was in her bedroom, not raking her shag rug, the thing she was supposed to do when she got home from band practice. It seemed like a great idea to root the frosted-blond wig out of her mother's stocking drawer, where her mother hid it after the Lions Club Mardi Gras party. It seemed like a great idea to jam it on her head and walk across the street.

Janie Wingert opens the door, holding her orange cat, Mr. Teddy. Janie is in sales, real sales, important sales that

include clients, accounts, quotas, and jumping on planes, and this occurs to Allison, the unreal salesperson, too late. Janie looks at Allison in her band blazer and the black funeral skirt that she filched from her mother's "occasional wear" drawer.

What was Allison thinking? Perhaps she was trying to "get out of herself," something her mother made her write on a piece of paper last Sunday—"I, Allison, will try to get out of myself"—and sign and affix to the refrigerator.

"Hi, Janie," Allison says. "I'm a saleswoman." And she can see the look in Janie's eyes, the kind she would, for example, give a Hare Krishna, the sort of individual that Allison recently heard Janie describe to her mother as a "tangled soul." Though Allison suspects Janie would just as soon kick a Hare Krishna as look at one.

Janie is deft at appearing out of herself. She pries Mr. Teddy from her shoulder, Mr. Teddy of the six toes on each foot and the continually shell-shocked look, and holds him in her arms, as if he were a homecoming queen bouquet.

"What are you selling, Allison?" Janie says as she stares at Allison's white vinyl and yellow-flowered overnight bag, which Allison grabbed at the last minute as a sales prop.

"What you need to buy, Janie." Allison is completely aware of her crummy sales technique. Mr. Teddy, who is generally inactive, suddenly bats one paw in her direction.

Janie squints at Allison and begins to back away from the door. Then she stops and says, "Rick, honey, come

here. Allison from across the street is trying to be funny or something.”

And then it hits Allison. Rick. Rick. Janie’s husband who has a blond beard and works at an insurance company, but seems very outdoorsy nonetheless, the type that she could easily see as a carpenter, for one day Allison hopes to move to California and marry a carpenter. It’s Rick. The reason she is pretending to be a traveling saleswoman. Again, this occurs to her too late.

“Hey, Allison, what’s shakin’?” Rick always knows just what to say. Once, when Allison was riding her bike home from school, Rick asked her if she was all right and she said she was, and Rick said she seemed totally depressed. That was one of the happiest days of her life, so far.

“What’s the good word?” Rick takes a bite from a roll in his hand. It seems more exotic than the rolls at Allison’s house. It has seeds. She looks at the bread between his index finger and thumb, how he’s squeezing it just a little bit, ever so gently in between each bite.

Suddenly her head is itchy. Sweat runs down the back of her neck.

“What’s in that suitcase of yours?” Rick asks. And Allison remembers that she hid her sketch in there, the one she’s been working on for two months, entitled “A Woman’s Mind.” Allison is a terrible artist, but she has taken great nightly comfort in working on this picture of a woman’s brain that extends upward like a multilayered

parking lot, on each level squeezing in all kinds of subversive thoughts and romantic hopes, each of them encoded in strange symbols that would mean nothing to anyone but her. Still, she hid it. Rick must not see this.

“Products,” she whispers.

“Allison,” Rick says. “Allison, you’re a real laugh riot.”



AT HOME, ALLISON’S mother and Aunt Tuley are waiting in the kitchen for her. Tonight is the last night of the Family Fun Expo at the mall, and her mother really, really wants the three of them to go to a costume photo booth called “Old-Fashioned Days” and get their picture taken as pilgrim ladies because they live only two towns away from Plymouth, Massachusetts, because this photo could have Christmas card potential.

“Where have you been, Allison?” asks her mother.

“Trying out for the seventh-grade play,” Allison says, using the fabulous excuse she cooked up while crossing the street from Janie and Rick’s driveway to her own, and already she sees that her mother is fixated on the fact that she’s wearing her wig and funeral skirt. But for a moment Allison has special powers. She has been referred to as a laugh riot by a twenty-four-year-old man.

“Well, that’s a step in the right direction,” says Aunt Tuley. Aunt Tuley is her mother’s younger sister. “Much younger,” Tuley will always add. Tuley is only eight years

older than Allison. She was voted Most Pert in her high school yearbook. "What play?" she says.

"A new play."

"About?" says Allison's mother.

"About salespeople," Allison says. There's a horrible feeling inside the wig, as if there are warm scrambled eggs on top of her head. She'd mushed down her long brown hair with Vaseline, such was her eagerness to get that blond shag wig on her skull.

"I could see you onstage," says Aunt Tuley, lying.

That's not a thing that would come to anyone's mind, Allison thinks. She's too still, for one thing. Actresses move around a lot. She has dead arms.

"Though you are a little static." Aunt Tuley is an English major at Salem State College, and she constantly throws around her "Power People" vocabulary words.

Allison bursts into tears. Aunt Tuley and her mother are both so used to this that neither one reacts, and her mother, not even looking at her, pours her a bowl of Apple Jacks to eat in the car on the way to the mall. Allison watches Tuley and her mother walk out the door, and she stands there, crying in her hot wig with her dead arms. And it's completely out of the question that her mother's going to wait in the car while she changes out of her traveling saleswoman getup. Allison yanks the wig off her head and savagely whips it across the kitchen table. Then she picks up the bowl of Apple Jacks and dumps it in the trash, a pathetically tiny

“fuck you,” and every bit of her newfound, Rick-induced composure has vanished, as if she never had it at all.

NO ONE IS at the “Old-Fashioned Days” booth except Dee Deluca, who works there every year for extra cash. Dee, a professional drill team coach, can often be seen stomping around downtown with a canvas sack of batons over her shoulder. Might as well be a sack of guns.

Dee tells Allison’s mother there’s only one female pilgrim costume left. There used to be more, being that they were so popular, but people ripped them off.

Aunt Tuley has the brilliant idea that Allison will be the one and only pilgrim girl, and before Allison knows it, she’s in a dowdy black dress that smells like K2r spot remover, and Dee presses something that looks like a doily on her head and slowly rotates it as if she’s screwing in a lightbulb. Allison remembers that she’s heard rumors about Dee, how she’ll tie a girl’s wrists to her baton with fishing wire if she drops it in practice. And when she hands Allison a fake stone mortar and pestle with its grubby Pier One sticker half-melted off, Allison doesn’t want to touch this item that in part reminds her of a tiny stone penis, but she takes it anyway, and when Dee commands her to hold it directly in front of her belly button, she keeps it there. Allison doesn’t mention to Dee that the pilgrim costume is

basically bogus, that pilgrims actually wore colors. She read that in one of her favorite magazines, *The Young Historian*.

Dee fiddles with the camera, and asks, "How tall are you, miss?"

"Five-eight," answers Allison.

"Tall. That's tall for a pilgrim girl," says Dee, as if she's doing them a big favor. Allison closes her eyes, and all around her, she hears the swish of voices.

"Open your eyes," says Aunt Tuley. "Don't be churlish."

How powerful of you to say that, Tuley, and through her closed eyelids Allison sends electric hate beams.

"Open them, Allison, don't be childish," and Allison gets some small satisfaction that her mother has misrepeated Tuley. And she's about to open her eyelids. But just before she does, she has a moment such as she's never had before, and as it happens, the outside of herself completely drops away, and she is suddenly and completely in her own underneath, a quiet place where her hidden softness and wonder are gathered and kept in waiting for someday, somewhere, another person on earth to know.

And then, again, she is Pilgrim Girl. One shot is taken with mortar and pestle and one without. Tuley goes to smoke a cigarette outside the Ross Dress for Less loading dock, and Dee comes in for the big kill now that she has Allison's mother alone. Dee is pushing this horrible faux-wood frame on her mother that costs three times what the

pictures themselves did, and Allison can see that Dee is wearing her down. And she feels sad for her mother, because she knows she'll buy it.

On the way home, Allison sits in the backseat and looks at the picture, which Tuley said looks austere. "Austere in a good way." Each time they pass a streetlight Allison frantically tilts her photograph and studies it, and each time she hopes to, but does not, see loveliness.



ALLISON HAS BEEN working on a campaign to get people to call her Ali, pronounced like the boxer. The extent of her efforts amounts to writing *Ali, Ali*, in Magic Marker on the inside heel of both her sneakers, which she has just done while listening to Janie Wingert call Mr. Teddy into the house before she leaves for work.

Ali looks good. *Ali* has punch. *Allison*—a downward leaning, collapsed bridge of a name—has nothing to do with her. She saw the school bus come and go, but her shoes haven't dried, and Allison looks out her bedroom window and sees Janie standing in her driveway.

"Come here, Mr. Teddy . . ." calls Janie. "Mr. Teddy? Mr. Teddy WONderful . . ."

Rick walks out the front door and Allison thinks she can see that he's had just about enough. She predicts the demise of Rick and Janie's marriage. Too much cat sweet talk. Husbands and wives need to save their kindest words

for each other, even when tired or hungry. She read this in the September *Family Circle*.

Rick opens his car door and puts a bag lunch and a large black organizer on the front seat. Rick is a supervisor. Supervising is sexy. And Allison is sure that with just a few small changes Rick could make that leap to being a carpenter. Carpenters hammer alone, supervisors walk down halls alone. Because it doesn't pay to fraternize in that sort of position. This much she knows from her mother, who, though not a supervisor, works as an office manager in a dentist's office. She is "pleasant" to the patients, but she doesn't fraternize with them.

"Mr. Teddy?" and Allison sees Janie standing there in her gray dress that starts narrow at the top, but circles out at the bottom, and she thinks how very much she looks like a little lighthouse, what with her slender shoulders and her moronic head swinging back and forth like a beacon over the same part of the yard that she just looked at five times.

Then Allison sees Mr. Teddy Wonderful sitting to the side of the house, just out of Janie's view, unmoving, staring at air. And she could knock-knock-knock on the window and help old Janie out. She could.

Janie starts to get in her car, but before she does, she cleverly pulls a sweep of her dress fabric to the side with her thumb and index finger. So dainty, Allison thinks, so unlike the way she sits down first, then hurriedly and sneakily tries to snatch fabric from under her butt. No wonder people

buy things from Janie. Allison feels crying coming on. She stops and inhales Magic Marker for distraction and looks to the *Ali* heel markings for reinforcement.

Then she puts her feet in her shoes and thinks of the secret of her new and improved name tucked between her sock and tennis shoe. She does not foresee that by the end of the day, her socks will be stained blue, her *Alis* mangled and blurred, nothing left but a broken-down *i* in her right shoe, even its dot rolled away.

Allison runs down the stairs and out her front door, because there may be a moment after Janie backs out when Rick goes back into the house for something. It has happened before.

Allison has pictured him striding back into his kitchen, which, still smelling of waffles and coffee, has settled into the hush of a day's wait. And that's when she imagines herself suddenly appearing in the lovely, quiet kitchen with him, as if she's always lived there, and right away he pulls her into the living room, and lies down on the couch with her and holds her. And this is the thing she thinks of every single day in the time between watching Janie's Jetta pull out of the driveway and flying out the door of her own house, finding most often the gaping emptiness of the Wingerts' driveway and Rick's blue Jeep, already at the corner stop sign, stopping not for her.

But today she is lucky. Rick's coffee cup sits on the hood of the engine, and he's searching for something in the

front seat. He pulls his head out just as she comes to the end of her driveway.

“Hi, Allison, how’s business?” Rick smiles at her, and she gets a little scared because he’s wearing a dress shirt, and this throws her off. She scrambles to think of some laugh-riot thing to say about products. All she can think of is a TV commercial about alarm clocks.

“Fine,” she says.

“Do you want a lift?” He says this to her as if he gives her lifts all the time. A lift: slick and elegant, unlike what her mother gives her: a ride, with the *r* wrenched out of her mouth in a specific, exhausted way.

“Do you want me to drive across the street to get you?” And Allison realizes she hasn’t answered him, and she is completely aware that this is a joke, but sadly, her mouth has broken.

“Or you can walk. If you need the time alone.” No one—no one—has ever suggested that she needs this. Rick turns away, and Allison wants to sob at the sight of his back.

Then suddenly she is across the street and in the Jeep. She’ll be unable to recall how she got there when she replays this moment on her continuous brain feed as soon as fifteen minutes from now.

The car rolls out of the driveway, and Allison is in love with this moment, with the way the tires bounce over a bit of uneven pavement, with the way Rick puts his hand on

the back of her seat as he turns his head to look at oncoming traffic, with the way the Jeep stalls, and how when Rick shifts, the car shoots forward a little, and Rick laughs. Her life has burst open, and she feels a gush of love for the door handle of the Jeep, which she is clutching.

“Would you like a sip of coffee?” Rick asks Allison.

Her arms feel like swollen water balloons. “Only if it’s leaded.” Her mother’s line.

“Leaded with a little milk and two sugars.” Rick hands her his Allstate Insurance mug. The mug isn’t hot, and she sets it down on her crotch. She doesn’t know why. She instantly feels between her legs a small circle of heat begin to spin, and Allison wills it to stop, but the circle only flies tighter in upon itself. She stops breathing.

“I’m sorry,” says Rick. “Do you not drink coffee?”

“No, I do. I do.” She puts her palm over the top of the mug. Another bad choice. She might as well have put her hand down her pants. Allison is sure he knows everything. She still doesn’t think she’s breathing.

The two drive in complete silence for nine minutes. Rick stops at the stoplight in front of Cappy’s Clam Shack.

“They’re closing next week for the season,” says Rick, looking out the window. Cappy’s is halfway to school, and Allison is aware that already it’s almost over, this perfect lift, this holding of a lettered mug, this almost-drinking of coffee.

She lifts the mug to her navel and holds it there, as she did her Pilgrim Girl pestle, and she remembers Dee Deluca

telling her to hold it “naturally, as if it was something you touched all the time.” She keeps the mug very straight. Still, she does not drink the coffee.

“I love their fried clams, and I surely miss them in the winter,” says Rick. To *surely* miss something indicates to Allison great sensitivity. *Now* is the time to drink his coffee to signal her understanding. But she can’t. And she doesn’t know why. And the space between her legs seems as if it’s opened into her lap, which now feels like a tumble of warm socks.

“What do you think, Allison, do their fried clams rate in your book?”

“I’ve never had them.” Her mother calls Cappy’s “Crappy’s.” She isn’t allowed to eat there.

Rick pulls into the school yard. Allison desperately tries to think of some impressive food she once ate.

Rick turns his head to look at her, and she sees up close that the middle of one eyebrow is missing. She looks at the little skin road, which zags at a diagonal toward his nose. Belatedly she gets a hit of Dial soap off his beard. She tries to enjoy it, since she fears she’ll never get this close again.

“Did Mr. Teddy cut your eyebrow?” she asks, hoping.

“No, I fell on a dock when I was ten. But Mr. Wonderful *did* do this,” and he holds up his right hand and shows her a scratch on his knuckle. “Though Janie doesn’t care. That cat’s her baby.”

The Jeep idles in front of the entrance to Allison’s school, and Rick looks at her, waiting, waiting for something. And

maybe it's his mug of coffee. But unfortunately, she just rolled down the window and dumped it out, and some of it's dripping down the side of his Jeep, and she can't believe she did that, because when she was little, her mother and Tuley used to drive to New York City in the middle of the night, and they wouldn't stop at a public restroom and they made her pee in a juice can and dump it, and she *never* hit the car.

She weighs the benefits of telling Rick this story.

"Well, I guess that's that," he says as Allison hands him his empty mug.

"I'm sorry," she says and offers to run into the school snack bar to get him an orange juice or chocolate milk.

"Don't sweat it," and Rick pats her thigh, and her lap starts up again, and she feels a deep tugging that makes her think of beach grass, of how you can pull and pull on it, but it never lets go.

"I'll tell you what, though, you *can* buy me a beverage this week when I take you to Cappy's for lunch. How 'bout that?"

"You're going to lunch?" Because Allison thinks she heard what she heard, but maybe she didn't.

"I go to lunch every day, silly." He reaches out and very lightly pretends to slap her face, and she does nothing. Absolutely nothing.

"Oh, Allison . . . such a serious girl." And he takes her hand and brings it to the side of his face, and she feels the pulse in his jaw, a tiny beating heart.

“Well, think about it, and tell me what day would work for you.” He abruptly drops her hand.

“Thursday,” she says, not thinking about it, because it’s the obvious choice. She loves Thursday, which she thinks of as a complex, violet day, unlike the other days of the week, which are primary colored and lack all subtlety.

“Thursday it is. Shall I steal you away at noon?” And again Allison is shocked that he talks to her as if she decides things about her life all the time.

“My class eats at 11:25 AM.” She is aware that no sophisticated lunch-taker would say this.

“That can be managed,” says Rick, and he shifts in a way that makes the Jeep go back a little before it goes forward, and Allison finds this all incredibly sexy, the supervisor talk, the way the Jeep moves like it has hips.

She walks away whispering, “That can be managed, that can be managed,” while simultaneously tapping into the continuous brain feed and rewinding it to the exact spot when Rick offered her a lift. And by the time she reaches the school door she has speed played every single glittering instant that followed.



THAT NIGHT ALLISON works on her drawing of “A Woman’s Mind.” She is stuck on the perfect symbol for this morning’s events. She tried a coffee cup, but it looked too rest-stop-sign, too Girl-Scout-badge.

She overhears her mother and Tuley talking downstairs in the kitchen about Tuley's Saturday night date. Allison can't hear everything, but Tuley comes through loud and clear every time she pounces on "gyrational." This may not be a real word. Tuley is greedy and sneaky that way; the more words she knows, the more she pretends to know.

Tuley dates a lot. Allison's mother doesn't, ever. Because her mother loved her father.

Allison's father was killed crossing a street, and her mother says about that, "Don't poke at it." Allison once heard Tuley tell a date that her father was drunk and that he was hit by a car full of drunk Boston College students. She asked Tuley whether the students went to jail. Tuley said, "Don't poke at it."

Allison hears her mother take a pass at the living room's braid rug with the electric broom, and then she begins to snap off lights, and Allison knows that's a signal that she is planning to go to bed. She can hear Tuley in her bedroom, recording words and their meanings into a tape recorder, which she'll play back while she sleeps.

There is a pause between the turning off of the front window light and the pulling of the overhead dining-room chain lamp, and Allison can tell her mother is listening all the way upstairs and hoping she'll come down and talk to her. But she won't.

"Mr. Teddy?" Allison scrambles to the window, because it's Rick's voice, and this is like a magic sign; he never calls

the cat, and of course he's doing it just so he can secretly communicate with her. But then she sees that Rick is with Janie. They're in their bathrobes, waving flashlights in tiny circles toward the shrubbery, under the car, under the Jeep. Rick takes Janie's hand, and they call some more.

"Janie said Mr. Teddy has been gone since this morning," says Allison's mother. She has a habit of creeping around in her stocking feet, and already she's halfway across Allison's room. In her hand she carries a blue ceramic coffee cup with pink painted letters that read "Camille." Allison's father made it for her years ago, and it's the only one she ever uses.

It's too late for Allison to hide her sketch, and her mother curls up on the end of the bed and puts out her hand. Her at-work, pleasant, and in-charge face has almost completely given way to her at-home, tired, and wondering face. She leans toward Allison, and Allison can smell her Trésor perfume and the faint office fragrance of Xerox and pens.

"What's this a picture of, Allison?"

"A picture of thinking."

She looks at "A Woman's Mind," and turns the picture sideways, even though to Allison it's obvious the head only goes in one direction.

"Oh." And that's it. That's all her mother says about the entire catalog of her secret life. Allison is equally relieved and furious.

Rick and Janie have moved to the backyard and their calls sound weaker, yet more urgent, as if carried across water.

Allison's mother lies back on her bed. "You put so much time into a cat, and off it runs anyway," she murmurs. She's in her pre-konk-out, depressing-proclamation phase. Allison hates the dental patients on whom all her mother's niceness is spent. Her mother starts to breathe from her throat in a delicate, puzzled way that sounds as if she'll never get enough breath, never get some important question answered.

Rick and Janie stop calling Mr. Teddy, and it occurs to Allison that she was, in fact, the last person to see him. She puts her hand to the cold windowpane, where she holds it until it stings.

Allison puts her comforter over her mother, although she doesn't tuck her in, and goes downstairs to walk the different colored circles in the braid rug until exhausted, to think a Rick thought for every color, beginning with the green circle: cracked eyebrow.



THURSDAY MORNING, WHILE Allison waits for the school bus, she sees Janie standing silent and unmoving in the Wingerts' driveway. The bow of her peach silk blouse is tied in a floppy, hasty manner, and already it's slipping loose. Janie doesn't turn her head or look around. She seems preoccupied, carrying out the impossible task of measuring loss.

Just before the bus pulls up, Allison watches Janie walk to the end of the driveway and check the "Lost Cat" sign taped to the telephone pole in front of the Wingerts' house. Janie seems to read the words as if she hadn't written them herself, as if they might instead be directions to where the finding should begin.



THERE ARE ONLY a fisherman and a woman with her elderly mother in Cappy's, but Rick takes Allison to the porch that overlooks the water. Strains of "Midnight at the Oasis" float from the kitchen. Allison thinks that she and Rick are a secret, and a secret is like carrying a pitcher of water that almost sloshes over, one she tries to keep from spilling, one she almost hopes does.

Rick removes the food from both lunch trays and sets it on a picnic table. Allison wishes she had done that. Janie would have. She moves her purse next to Rick's big black organizer. Her purse slouches over, looks like an embarrassing lavender kidney.

Allison ordered only a cup of clam chowder. Her mother has always said that when someone other than family feeds you, you wait until a specific food item is offered. But Rick said, "Whatever you want, Allison, whatever."

In the gray afternoon light, the blond in Rick's hair seems turned inside out, a flat shade of brown. He's halfway through his fried clams when he stops to gulp the orange

soda he didn't let Allison buy after all. Allison doesn't usually watch grown men eat, and she's surprised at the speed with which he bites and swallows, the concentration. When her mother explained sex to her, she said it involved the man "concentrating very hard."

Rick opens his organizer and Allison gets a whiff of real leather. He turns to a certain page, taps it, continues to eat.

The wind whips her hair into one eye, and she pushes it back only to have it happen again. She takes the little blue comb from inside her purse and tries to fix her hair while staring into her lap, as if this makes the action invisible.

Rick stops eating. Then he says, "You know, Allison, you're the type of girl who will be beautiful someday, but probably not until you're thirty."

Allison looks at her chowder, which has congealed on top. Thirty. Seventeen years to wait. Might as well be nine hundred. The front of her chest feels thinned out, brittle, like a square of cold tin.

Rick says, "Allison? Allison?" He cocks his head like he's talking to a young girl. Not her.

She hears the ocean water slap stupidly, quickly against the porch pilings, as if to say, "What what what what?"

Rick closes his organizer and pushes it with some deliberation to the side of the picnic table and away from Allison's purse, which sits there foolishly, seeming to wait for the next little bit of his attention.

“But I love you now,” she says. She is aware that her mouth is slipping around, that she doesn’t look joyous, that people should be happy and confident when they say this thing.

“Oh, Allison.” And she thinks that she sees in his eyes a certain sort of allowance, an acceptance such as a person who loves you back might have. But then something within Rick immediately pulls to the surface, something that neatly steps over whatever he might feel, and over the fact that she is crying. Her arms have gone extra dead.

“Thank you, Allison.” Rick smiles at the picnic table. She is being supervised.

Then Rick asks her if she is going to eat her chowder, or she thinks he did—her listening is spotty at present, and it’s not unlike being in the faulty ALM language booth at school, the one that spurts French conversations over a crackling headset. Whole sentences go missing, always the ones you really need.

Rick takes the roll that came with her soup, and he wraps it in a napkin, puts it in her purse, tells her to make sure to eat it later. He asks if she wants a cup of coffee. She shakes her head.

“Shall we, then?” he says. Now they are getting up. Getting up is the thing to do. Allison follows Rick to the wooden porch railing, all the while staring at his back. Embarrassment and longing press equally inside her heart, as if on either side of an equator. Rick puts her Styrofoam

cup of chowder on the porch railing, and a gull immediately swoops down, only to stand one inch from it, not eating, not taking.

"Ha, ha," laughs Rick.

"Ha," laughs Allison. And she's grateful, because for a moment they are just two people laughing at a stupid bird.

Then they walk toward the stairs that lead to the parking lot, but just before they get there Rick stops. He seems to consider something. He takes Allison's hand and awkwardly swings it once before he leads her behind Cappy's kitchen to an enclosed, hidden area, where there's nothing but a Dumpster and a jumble of wooden crates on the ground. She doesn't understand why he puts her in front of him with his hands on her shoulders. It seems like he's about to calculate her height.

But instead he pulls Allison closer and very gently puts his hands on either side of her face, and he looks at her like a person who long ago resigned himself to a certain measure of life. No more, no less.

Then he kisses her and her insides unfurl, suddenly beautiful, like a lush bolt of fabric thrown out upon a table.

"If you were older, you would possess me," he says, and at that she ventures to touch him, but all she can do is gently, awkwardly, press a spot just above his right hip.

"I bet there's some boy right now who's smitten by you," and the word *smitten* will forever mean the inside of his mouth, the temperature of his tongue, and how he

sucks on her upper lip for just an instant, before kissing her for the second and final time of her life.

And suddenly there's light within her and light between them, a generous bestowal that spills everywhere and all at once.

Then they are simply two people, leaving a restaurant and crossing a parking lot stretched beneath plain and unending daylight.

During the drive back to school Rick says, "I have a very important meeting this afternoon." He says this too quickly, too loudly.

"What's it about?" Allison says.

"What's what about?"

"The meeting." And Rick looks puzzled for a moment, as if she'd asked a particularly personal question, and she can see that she's stepped outside a certain domain into one that now doesn't include queries about actual life activities.

"It's about benefit packages." Further questions don't seem to be expected, and Rick checks his watch, although there's a clock on the dashboard. It's 12:11, only eleven minutes past the first time Allison was truly and completely out of herself.

Just before she gets out of the car, Allison asks about Mr. Teddy.

"Still lost." Another narrowing in of all that has gone before. Rick looks down at his steering wheel. Then he looks at her and says, "Allison," and she sees one last

glimpse of inexplicable yearning and confusion already corralled by guilt.

"I hope you find him soon," she says.

"I'll pass that on to Janie," says Rick.



IT'S SATURDAY MORNING, and Allison waves goodbye to her mother as she leaves for a half day of work. Her mother thanked her for this, thinking she got up early to see her off.

But Allison has a secret plan, a plan to give Rick Wingert her Pilgrim Girl picture. She stayed awake all night, polishing and rotating her memory of light until now in remembrance, it's lost all streaming capacity, is caught and hardened like a pearl.

A last push of summer sun falls across the small of Allison's back, but a cold, businesslike wind blows directly at her chest. Her body is a useless wall between two seasons.

She hunches over and stares at the Wingerts' house, willing a curtain to be drawn back, the porch light to go off. The house, unbudging, refuses to reveal anything. She traces her eyes in ever-widening circles around the home, as if it's caught in a bubble against which it threatens to burst.

Then she sees him. Mr. Teddy. He's lying motionless, stretched out on a piece of cardboard near the Wingerts' mailbox. Allison stands up, though she doesn't move, and she watches two, three, four cars drive by. It rained last

night, and the road is slightly damp, as if sweating from the effort of being driven upon. She watches the road awhile longer before she looks back to the mailbox. Mr. Teddy is still there, alone.

Allison runs inside to get a towel, and she looks in the bathroom closet, but all that's left are guest towels, which are never to be used, not under any circumstance at all, and she ends up grabbing her own pink towel, which is still wet and smells of her jasmine hair conditioner.



SOMEONE EVEN CROSSED Mr. Teddy's paws, and Allison sees no visible sign of harm until she stands over him. Then she sees that something is wrong with his mouth, which hangs open crookedly, graceless. There's so little blood for him to be dead. The air around Allison seems to tighten, and her hands feel completely weightless as they throw the towel over Mr. Teddy and bundle him up, as if he were a baby.

Allison rings the Wingerts' doorbell over and over. Its triple-tone chime sounds ridiculously, horribly happy.

Janie opens the door just a crack, already suspicious. "What is it, Allison?"

Allison looks at a little clot of face lotion that has dried near Janie's right eye.

"*What, Allison?*" And Janie pulls the collar of her robe tighter.

When she doesn't answer, Janie starts to close the door,

saying, "You're not funny, Allison, you're just not funny."

"I've got Mr. Teddy." And then Janie opens the door all the way, and she comes toward her, but Allison can't bear to put him in her arms, so instead she very gently sets him inside the house on the carpet. Janie rushes into the living room, screams for Rick, and Allison hears him running down the stairs.

The door to the Wingert home slams.

Allison turns away and starts to run. She runs like crazy, though there's no place to go. And she won't know exactly when her Pilgrim Girl picture flew from the pocket of her corduroys. But it must have, because she will never see it again, and she'll assume that it went blowing around the world, like a ticket to a place that has already been visited, of no further use to anyone.