

# Cress

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Hadn't had a thought about Cressida Milligan, not in years, and Gary came home from work and told me she was dead. Not that I'd ever thought we'd make it up between us, but now the chance was gone. Cress was the girl who pulled me off the playground in second grade, when Mary Lou Cannon and Jane Douglas and that fish-jawed Donna Regan had me backed up against the swings because Bo Lebwith had kissed me in the lunch line. "I didn't ask him to, yuck," I said, and then, "I didn't ask him," again, but Mary Lou's baby teeth were bared and her fists clenched. Bo was hers, and the three of them swarmed closer, and I felt my head lifting off my neck, starting to float away, I was that scared, when Cressida Milligan, the tall girl who never wore dresses, grabbed my elbow and yanked me around the swing-set pole.

"Leave her alone, Cannon Ball," Cress said, and I don't think in my entire life I have ever admired anyone more. She had the kind of mouth that set one way, horizontal, and a pug nose and the biggest eyes I'd ever seen, sharp blue, so that you couldn't imagine lying to her. In those days, no adult cared to battle with Cress about her hair, and so it straggled down her back in a multitude of knots and lumps and lanky strands. It was a soft chocolate brown that later, when we were older, everyone wanted to run their fingers through.

"Cannon Ball," I whispered.

Cress sank to the matted dirt against the chain-link fence, and patted the clot of dandelions next to her. I didn't care what my mother would say about the seat of my blue-flowered dress. I sat. Cress closed her eyes, leaned back on the wire mesh, and sighed. Like my father did when he took the first sip of his beer. Since we moved, Mamma served it in a glass but Pop's point was he was in it for the taste.

When I thanked Cress, she opened those outlandish blue eyes and shrugged. "They're jerks, that's all. You new?"

"Yes. I hate it here. I hate my house. The hall smells. We had goats and now there isn't even grass, just a stupid porch with the upstairs apartment's bikes crowding it. And one step and then the sidewalk. Next door the lady yells all the time. I wish we didn't move. And all the kids are mean."

I was out of breath.

"It'll be okay," Cress Milligan pronounced.

I shook my head, no.

"Seriously," she said. "Those girls won't come near you again, not if you're with me."

"Why not?"

When she leaned closer, I felt like her eyes could swallow me, like she had a strength other kids didn't have. So when she stated, "I'm a luck stealer," I believed her. If I remember correctly, I nodded.

"They know. If I want, I can take good luck from anyone." She re-closed her eyes, leaned against the fence, folded her hands in her lap. "Not you, of course."

I nodded, as if her eyes were open, as if my exemption were as obvious to me as it was to her.

"We're going to be friends forever," she informed me.

Fear drained from the tight place in my stomach. The sky overhead looked as blue as her eyes; I could hear robins sing, the honking horns of the cars on the nearby highway no longer signaled danger and the boys shouting at tetherball no longer sounded anything but gleeful.

"What's your name?" she asked me. I did not yet know hers, and I felt the remnants of a cringe returning as I muttered, "Isabella."

"Not as bad as mine," she said. "Lucky." She told me hers, and when my eyes widened in sympathy, we burst into laughter. Mary Lou Cannon and Donna Regan pumped back and forth on the swings, facing our direction with baleful faces, angling high in the air

but never coming close to us. Once Donna shouted, "Water Cress," but when Cress didn't even blink in response, they went back to pretending they were having tons of fun.

We shared how many pets we had, though Cress was considerate enough not to mention all of hers, not after I told her about Trip and Gabe, my goats, and about the chickens, and about how my father had been tired of trying to drum up sales of novelty items—plastic swords to spear olives and paper umbrellas for drinks and my favorite, little tin cans that spilled a clown's head when you turned the lid right—in farm country. Moving to the city was good for his career because, honestly, how could a man with aspirations make a living in a tiny town like Denton? Cress's mother was an artist, and my mother was a poet, but while my father was a salesman, Cress's father did something called "managing our affairs." I knew before I saw their house that the Milligans would have an enviable yard.

I will say that over all the years I knew them, the Milligans were kind to me: They never condescended, and they never pretended not to have what they had. They demonstrated grace, over and over again, and as I grew up, I resolved always to be as fluidly decent as Betty and Roland Milligan. And as wealthy.

When we were twelve, Betty Milligan had a chicken coop built in their backyard because, she said, she would love to paint the way the light reflected on the roof in different lights, and the chickens pecking, and her favorite girls hard at work. See, the agreement was that Cress and I would take care of the brood. We worked tirelessly, swept it out every afternoon, collected the eggs and checked the water and food that entire summer. I brought eggs home to my Mamma every afternoon. Mamma didn't much care for Mrs. Milligan's eggs, said they tasted no better or worse than the grocery store, that they had nothing on the eggs my Gramma's chickens laid. Mamma couldn't get a handle on Cress's mom; Betty rarely called her, except to arrange taking me for a weekend. And Mamma always offered to do her part, to drive me and Cress to the movies, or pick me up

on Sunday night, but Betty's point was that with Tansy and Bill there full-time to do just that kind of work, why should my Mamma bother?

"It gives me time to write," Mamma admitted softly. Pop liked that Mamma was a poetess; he always told his big clients about how his wife wrote poems just as good as Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson rolled into one. See, when he was courting her, she used to read him poems on the swing glider on the porch at the farm. "Words," he used to say, shaking his head back and forth like it surprised him still, "Words made me fall for your Mamma like she was telling tales to save her life."

There was a princess she had told him about who did that. My Pop loved it when Mamma corrected his grammar, or quoted a poem to him. He loved that she was born there, in the mountains. He loved that even though she came from the same kind of people he did, she turned out individual. Unique. My Pop had aspirations, and my Mamma was part of them.

She was working on a chapbook of her poems, and she and Pop talked about it all the time, how she was going to have to be prepared for fame, would have to buy some clothes for readings, what a marvel it would be. Their faces would light up with the excitement of it; as the sun set, the glow of the gas stove would flicker and they would parse the promise of the future. My Pop swore he'd pay out of his own paychecks to publish her poems, even if we had to do without, that as the man of the family, it was up to him to make sure the world knew how talented she was. Some nights, they would still be sitting hours later, planning her success, while dinner gummed in fatty pools on the plates and I took myself upstairs to bed.

Often, I thought of asking Cress to steal luck from someone unworthy (Donna Regan's mother perhaps) and give it to my Mamma. But I never did. I never wanted Cress to realize my mother was not perfect like Betty. I never wanted her to know.

At the end of the summer, Betty Milligan presented me with a painting she had done of the chicken coop, of me laughing so huge

you can see inside to the back of my throat, while chickens peck at my toes and Cress balances fresh eggs in the base of a wicker basket. Cress looks so serious, and me so rashly free, you have to wonder if Betty Milligan had gotten us mixed up. I brought the painting home and gave it to my mother.

"It's good, isn't it?" I said.

Mamma studied the painting a good long while. "You look pretty," she said, eventually. I expected her to hang it in our living room, but she didn't. She put it in my room, on top of the pile of last year's homework still on my desk, and left it there.

I went back to Denton with my mom just before school started; Granpa was sick and Mamma thought this might be our last chance. I still loved Denton, but now I saw how poor and shabby Mamma's parents' house was, and how driving up the dirt road clogged your lungs with dirt. Squirrels buried their acorns under the porch, and red foxes taunted us, sitting in the scrabbly bushes back of the hen-house without fear. There was no breeze; even the birds were silent until just before dawn when they would call to one another, waking me so I could count how many new chigger bites I'd earned twisting under the single sweat-damp sheet.

Mamma brought her chapbook to show Granpa and Gramma, and I noticed how Gramma wouldn't read Mamma's poetry collection though Granpa flipped through it in bed without his glasses on and called it "very nice." Mamma spent the afternoons lying on the swing seat on the porch, flipping the pages of her chapbook and mouthing the words of her poems. It was the only book she ever published, and it meant Pop didn't pay off the car loan until I was finished with eighth grade and the Chevy was a junker. But he was proud of Mamma. Even when his business went through its worst, he was always going on about his wonderful poetess wife.

I was proud of her too. It wasn't until years later I realized how sad it all must have been.

It was windless in Denton, and the black flies were at me day and night. Time moved so slowly I felt the pressure of wanting the

week to pass, a throbbing, dull ache, as if it were one of the menstrual cramps I had only recently begun to endure.

One evening, Mamma wiped her hands on a flour sack dishtowel, and steered me over to the window above the sink, the one that looked up the mountain, not down. We stood there for a long time, silent. I could feel her heart pounding against the back of my head. She was angry, I could feel it, but I didn't know why. "You don't ever, ever let someone tell you to be who you don't want to," she said finally, and took her hands off me, and put the earthenware bowls back up on the shelf. I went to help her but she shooed me off, told me to go up and sit with her daddy.

At the end of the second weekend, Mamma drove us home, the Chevy station wagon rattling down the dirt pass. I could see her lips move, but did not know what she was muttering to herself.

All the way home, I couldn't wait to see Cress Milligan.

**For six years, Cress Milligan and I had been the entire world** to one another. She completed me. I never imagined needing more. Sure, I knew that boys—princes, husbands—were out there yearning to possess us, I had felt the pull, but I had never fathomed what this could possibly mean to us. I dreamed of love, we both did, I aspired to it. I simply had not practically considered its ramifications.

That September, Cress Milligan, my friend Cress, still answered to her name, still returned my phone calls, still sat with me in her yard drinking lemonade. But I was the only one to rake the chicken coop; Cress no longer wanted to get dirty. While I had been away in Denton, she had been irredeemably altered.

Cress always went to the Cape with her parents on summer weekends. They took me regularly, insisting on it even when my mother gently protested that they were much too generous. "You know how much we love Bella," Betty would say, talking straight through my mother's offer to have Cress stay with us some night. "So it's settled. We'll pick her up Friday after school."

Often my mother would leave her hand on the black telephone

receiver long after Betty had hung up. Even now I can recall the pensive expression on her face. I guess I thought she was putting a poem together. If I thought about it at all.

While I was held prisoner of boredom up in Denton, the Milligans had been in Wellfleet for two weeks. And without me to provide entertainment, Cress Milligan had met three boys: Gary Dugan, Peter Gaites, and Nils Foster. "They swam up to me in Long Pond, and started splashing me," she said excitedly, and she arched her back and ran her two hands down her body. Suddenly I saw that Cress Milligan had breasts, large ones, and that she had found reason to grow proud of them. "We hung out all week, Betty loves them. I couldn't decide, they're all so cute, you'll pick one too, Bella! They live in Newton, it's easy; we'll see them this weekend." And she sighed, that long exhalation of the sated.

**Cress, Nils, Petey, Gary. And me.**

It is still the same five of us, four years later, at sixteen. Nils likes me. I know this because we talk every evening on the telephone, for hours. He tells me all about his family, his older sisters, the way his parents scream at one another. He is having sex with Cress, because she picked him out. Nils is proud of being the first. But I am the one he talks to.

One spring afternoon, Petey picks us up from school; we head into Cambridge and then he keeps going, out toward Newton. Petey is the oldest and he has an enormous cassette collection. His parents are divorced; he hates both of them. The one time he met my mother, Petey said, "You're the lucky one, Bella. No matter what anyone tells you." "Right," I said sarcastically. My mother was the only one who didn't look like a mom. She looked homeless, I thought, and she was shy and anxious, but at least she wasn't as bad as my father, with his stupid memorized jokes and his sweaty palms. All I wanted was to be out with my friends, with Cress and Nils and Petey and Gary.

Like today: None of us care where we are going; we like to be

together. In Watertown, Petey stops at a drugstore so Nils can buy condoms. The rest of us feel mature because we are all blasé about it. I am jealous, but I am still blasé.

The music blares, David Byrne tells me to let the days go by. I am extremely happy. I exist, and I exist as part of the five of us, and no matter the problems with it, it still leaves me content.

Petey pulls over to pick up a hitchhiker in Arlington. The radio is on, the windows down, we are so very cool, the five of us, and the kid looks sweet and harmless. Gary slides the side door open, and, without warning, the Land Rover is invaded by a group of thugs. Scissor-chopped hair, tight jeans, T-shirts tucked into leather belts, cowboy boots, but we admire all of that. It is the way they settle in around us, separate us, smile without humor.

I make no eye contact; I watch my kneecaps, how the right one knobs to the left and the left one to the right. I have a mosquito bite on my ankle. It throbs with itching. I will not move. And it turns out I am right, for in a moment they are far less jolly. The big one in front pulls a knife on Nils in the passenger seat, and the burly one in back pulls one on Cress, and they tell Peter to drive them home. “Got to get to Medford, speed it up.”

Petey’s hands are shaking. He pulls back into traffic, and silently drives. I fix my eyes on the crumpled Burger King bag on the floor at my feet; it was yesterday when we stopped there. We were bored, I remember, and Gary fired up a joint. Nils’s ears turned red when he got high; his coloring was pale and he could hide nothing from us. He started talking about this idea he had, about a way to run a year-round weatherproof farm using water cycling and greenhouse glass and very little land. He was sure no one else had ever considered this brilliantly simple scheme. It bored Cress, and she started massaging Gary’s shoulders. Nils looked at me, and I at him, our faces unmoving. I thought he was brilliant.

Nils’s ears turn red again, today. I feel stopped in time, as if these might be the moments telescoping to the end of my life.

Gary moves closer to me. Nils lowers the sun visor, and uses the

makeup mirror to let his gaze flit past mine reassuringly. And then the thugs start tossing words back and forth. They look like us, but they don’t sit like us: they sprawl broadly, knees wide, arms muscular along the back of the seats. Their movements are slow, laced with resentment. They think we are rich kids. They are certain we are weaklings, they have proven it. But still they want us to hurt more.

“How’s about a little rapismo?” The phrase lingers in the air. I don’t look up. I am having trouble figuring out precisely what he means—not because of his words, but because my frightened brain gets stuck imagining how his brain formed them. And then the fleshy one, back by Cress, begins to chuckle. It is then that my stomach turns in on itself, tightens like a vacuum around the distant memory of lunch, a salad, oyster crackers. I tighten my grip on the seat; I will not let them see me react.

“How’s about a little rapismo?”

Petey drives.

Even though when we get to the McDonald’s parking lot in Medford, they will say they were kidding, it is terrifying. And infuriating, because they barely notice me. But mostly terrifying; I sit as still as I can. The one with the knife, his deep-set eyes so dark it’s as if they’re all pupil; it would have been much easier to like him, but he keeps rubbing higher and higher on Cress’s pale thigh. I see he is enjoying himself and I learn to hate him. Her expression never changes; she tolerates him. No matter what happens to her, no one can affect the core of Cress, she is too completely herself. There are three more of them but only one is important; he is the skinny boy we stopped for, before the others rushed us. He apologizes as the others lumber from the van in sloppy haste, says his older brother was late for work. “They were only kidding,” he tells Cress, who has begun to cry now that they are gone and she is safe. He slips out the door and slides it closed.

Gary, Pete, and Nils are ashamed of themselves, and Cress is trembling, and I go to sit with her in the back, and she cannot stop crying. Her dark hair sweeps over her legs; she does not realize as

she keens that she is pulling her own hair. I begin to cry. “How’s about a little rapismo?” I hear, over and over again at the oddest times, even years later, sometimes the words wake me up at night. And we are lucky. I wonder if Cress thought of this as well.

**When we were teenagers, I was in love with Nils and he with me,** but nothing ever happened. Cress went out with each of them, most notably and painfully Petey, and dropped them one by one. After high school, she moved to Manhattan. The rest of us went on to college. In his sophomore year, Nils confirmed that he had developed a patentable process for farming exotic mushrooms, and he dropped out to focus on it. Shiitakes, oysters, trompettes, morels, they are in your grocery store because Nils Foster imagined how to do it when he was very young, and did it right. Before the rest of us graduated, he was already enormously rich and beginning to consider how to use his gains for the greater good of mankind. Nils was always remarkable; I am proud to have been the first woman to understand this.

Cress Milligan became an artist. Cress drew on paper with water, then used a blow torch to burn extraordinary images on the surface. She was good, I think, though Betty was appalled and thought it a form of artistic grandstanding. Cress married a realtor. They had two children, but then Cress left him. And we lost touch until Gary came home from work and I learned that she was already dead.

**Twenty years ago, I was in Cress Milligan’s country-club** wedding, the teal taffeta–draped maid of honor. She was in the simplest white satin dress; it clung to her perfectly, showed her to be a lithe princess, all lazy promise. She sauntered up the aisle with that smile of hers, the secretive one that made a mockery of what anyone else treasured, but then made you disbelieve your imagination. I was her handmaiden, carried the filmy carpet of her veil, my grin awkward and exhausted, my gait arrhythmic. I was too tired to keep time to the processional music, too nervous, too proud, and too ashamed.

At the reception, I was alone on the wedding dais most of the time. The best man had brought his pregnant wife, and they clutched one another’s forearms and swayed together whenever the bride and groom went off to dance. Cress’s father rescued me, not once but twice. I hadn’t seen any of the boys during the service, and had assumed Cress hadn’t invited them, but I was wrong. Later, Gary’s mother told mine that Cress had insisted on inviting Petey, even knowing how fragile he was.

I was up on the terrace, outside the ballroom, pretending I was warm and needed air, when I looked down and saw Gary’s black ponytail. The smell of dope wafted up. He was the one of the three I felt the least close to, but I admit my heart did a little shimmy at the sight of him.

The two of us were just eleven months out of college, hadn’t seen one another since Thanksgiving, when Gary had drifted upstate from grad school to drop in on me at the newspaper. I lifted the hem of the teal monstrosity with both hands, scampered the length of the terrace, snuck past the ballroom doors, and scurried two flights downstairs. “Hey,” Gary said calmly, as if we were in the middle of a conversation that had only momentarily stalled. But he took my hand and held it, and drew me down next to him.

We sat on the cement steps by the swimming pool entrance and smoked a joint, and he told me about the night when Cress and he had sex in the back of Petey’s Land Rover, in Mrs. Gaites’ driveway, with Petey inside and less than ten steps away. “I knew she didn’t care,” Gary said. “But it was a rotten thing to do to Pete. The whole time he was in his mother’s kitchen fighting about some stupid thing, like why had he not told her he was going out with us. And Cress just wanted to, and so I slid into the back seat and I did.”

“What if he’d come out?”

Gary shook his head from side to side, very slowly. He was stoned. “I don’t know, man. It’s not what a friend does. But it’s like, Cress, she doesn’t care, so you feel stupid if you do.”

I nodded. The chlorine scent from the pool lifted hotly, warmed

the just chilly dusk, twined with the aroma of Gary's dope. I'd already had two glasses of champagne. The departing sun glowed in patches, its energy not yet at full summer power. It seemed as if the light on the pool surface glittered with cruel sophistication. I felt safe with Gary, on the other side of the pool fence, but I knew it was the only place in the entire club where I belonged. I edged closer to him, took the joint out from between his finger and thumb.

"I told Petey," Gary confessed. "Just now. He freaked. Had to get it off my chest. I wish I hadn't."

"Why in hell would you do that?"

He shrugged. I put a hand on his shoulder. I remember studying the white of my hand against the black satin of his tuxedo. I had the sudden knowledge it belonged there. Gary reached up, and took my hand, and held it between both of his.

I had never thought of Gary that way before.

"I wish I kept my mouth shut," Gary muttered.

I squeezed his fingers, put my other hand on top of his.

Later, I came to believe he'd been purging himself of the sense of weakness Cress wrought in everyone. Gary who chewed his fingernails and was so good with animals that even cats came up onto his examining table eager for a scratch and pat, all shots and examination invasions forgiven, Gary found Cress Milligan an animal he could not understand.

I liked sitting with Gary that night. It was spring, the way it is now, and the air blew gently over the patio at the country club, and on the terrace upstairs the line of French doors was open and we could hear the music from the ballroom. Crazy silly, that music, tailor-made for the parents, but laughter twirled with the dancers and echoed down on us. I was so aware of his body, his stomach in the stiff white shirt poufing slightly forward as he talked about school.

I freed my hands, and leaned back, behind him. I reached very carefully into the bodice of my stupid dress and slid first one rolled up sock and then the other out of the nylon cups of my bra. Cress

had giggled when I tried the dress on but it was too late to find a seamstress, Saturday afternoon before I arrived after driving all day long from northeastern Pennsylvania where I had my first job, copy-editing, for a small city newspaper. What I had gone through to get two consecutive days off. And oh how tired I was, and there, that foolish gaping top and my small chest and Cress, giggling. Not appreciating how hard it was, on top of everything, that Cress had taken every single one of our boys for herself and spat them out, while I had no one. And now if anyone noticed me it would only be to sneer.

My mother, bless her, thought of the socks. They were damp and lumpy and I felt as if everyone knew precisely what they were, but at least the view straight down my front had disappeared.

Gary was stoned and I suppose I was high, and Petey Gaites came out onto the terrace with that lovely old-fashioned dance music almost visible, swirling in the air, and he called down to us, something. I shaded my eyes with one hand to block out the glare of the lights up there, and I caught something in his gaze, a speculative something. And I knew, didn't I? That even Petey Gaites recognized me now. I sat up straighter. My waist was slim and my hips curved away from it sweetly, and I felt him see me. I hoped he wasn't looking down my dress.

Gary called out, "Hey man, come on down," and I remember how elation shivered my ribs. I suppose Cress was inside, bowing gracefully with that swan's neck, accepting tribute and accolade in all its forms. In memory, the music grows louder, and Petey steps away from the railing and cocks his head, and Gary waves, and Petey makes a gesture that seems so half-hearted it is difficult to believe his body committed to it, and the next thing I know he is over the railing, falling boy in penguin suit, and lying by my side, neck twisted, eyes open, tongue dripping blood. Two floors, high ones, he has managed it.

I think that was when the music stopped.

**It was cruel of you to invite him, Cress. Gary's mother told** mine that Petey had tried twice before. That your mother said you called him and insisted he come. Garbled half-chewed facts oily with spreading, but I guessed they were true. Do you know, Cress, no one else said a word of blame about you? You had postponed your wedding trip, and they felt sorry for you.

All afternoon, we murmured and remembered, and hugged and sat together quietly. "Peter's friends from high school," his mother repeatedly said, waving a hand over at us with an edge of resentment she could not contain. We were still alive. And poor Peter was not. And yet I did not miss him, my brain had not begun to comprehend. The expectation of grief nipped with gentle teeth, but I could not feel yet. I could not cry.

You cried and cried and cried, and your new husband had one arm around you and held you by the other hand, each of you bucketed on one of the cheap plastic seats. The whites of your eyes were pink, the tip of your nose swollen. The husband looked confused and serious; he had not expected so much duty on the first day of married life.

Just before Gary drove me and my mother home, I went to hug you, to say goodbye. At first I thought that you were angry I was leaving, but then you pulled me down so that my ear was next to your mouth and you hissed, "Stay away."

"Huh?" I drew back. Your eyes glittered, your lips were far too red, and I swear that for the first time in my life I thought perhaps you were not brilliant but insane.

"I'm running out of it," you said. "I may not be able to help myself."

"I'm sorry?"

I glanced over my shoulder, to where Gary and my mother stood waiting for me, at the archway that separated the blandly ecumenical room from the even blander hallway. My mother looked utterly exhausted. Gary stood just behind her, and watched me just closely enough.

"Bella," you said, pulling at my arm so that each of your individual fingers made pressure burns. "I don't want your luck, I don't want to take it." The new husband watched you uncomfortably. "Stay away from me," you said, then stretched your long neck, ran one of your hands through the length of that hair, and turned back to the husband with a hard-edged calm.

That was the last time I saw you.

I never thought how kind my mother was, dressing up and coming with me to Peter's wake. Not once mentioning how the other families had excluded her and Dad so regularly. She was not so much older than I am now, my mother, but her hair was grey and wild, her skin lined, her skin livered with age spots. The other mothers kept their deterioration in check, so that when Gary's mother hugged mine, it could have been a mother and grandmother embracing. I was, although I swallowed it, ashamed of where I came from, of the Denton background so visible in the shiny worn surface of my mother's cheap black suit and scuffed brown loafers, the snags in her pantyhose, the awkward way she held her purse. Her deferential politeness.

Do you know, Cress Milligan, that as kind as Betty was to me, she never once let you sleep at my house? Did you realize that? I suppose we all agreed, without ever saying the words, that it would be more comfortable to linger night after night in your princess's bower. Did you know there was a poem my Mamma read me about roads diverging in a yellow wood, and did you know my Mamma saw the road I took to be your friend and never stopped me? And that after Petey died and Gary drove me home from your wedding and held me in his arms outside the front door of my parents' shabby row house, he said to me, "I always want to hold you, Bella," and our cheeks slid past one another, slick with tears? Patience was what we shared. And soon, devotion. And when needed, forbearance.

Gary came home from work today, Cress, and told me you were dead. Do you know, my parents are still alive, retired, happily ensconced in my grandparents' rickety house on that mountain in

Denton? My father's hair is in a ponytail, now, and Gary is the one with the close crop. When we go up to visit my parents, the girls are thrilled. The pond, the animals, the views: There is no shame in owning a farm in the mountains, not any more.

I try to imagine a fitting end for you, a tribute, and I realize I have hardly said why you mattered so and then failed to matter at all. Gary and I never speak of you, although we sometimes visit Nils and his wife in Westchester and marvel at what he has managed to create. And sometimes we visit Peter Gaites's gravesite. He is buried with his parents, three enemies together in that cemetery off the highway, and someone keeps the area clean and tends the flowers. I do not know who Peter was.

"I could never," I tell Gary fiercely. "No matter how bad things were. I would try to change them, I would leave you, I would fight. But I would never take a life."

Gary, who frequently helps the animals under his care pass quietly from pain to peace, agrees that life is valuable.

**This morning, I drove the girls to school, the younger ones to elementary, and Cassandra to middle.** I came home and began to clear the breakfast dishes from the table. But then I got myself a cup of coffee and went out onto the back deck, and sat, watching the birds peck for edibles in the new spring grass. The sky was a paler blue today, and there were clouds, and I imagined I could sense the damp hovering, ready to spill rain on us later in the day.

In the last week of our senior year, we went to assembly for the ceremony when class gifts were given out. All the high-schoolers were in the middle section; teachers flanked us on the sides. Trophies were handed out, for popularity, for looks, for class comedian. Most likely to succeed. Cress fidgeted.

"Who cares about any of this?" I whispered.

"It isn't fair, they make us sit through this shit." We closed our eyes, sank lower in our seats. We were not undistinguished, but we

did not belong. I remember I was wearing ripped jeans; Mr. Hall had glared at my knees when I strolled into math but didn't report me. Graduation so close; one would have had to smoke a cigarette in the lunchroom to get booted. Cress was wearing a white blouse. She had taken to dressing in an oddly conservative manner that last month, as if thumbing her nose even at the notion of protest. Since no one really spoke to us, hadn't made the effort in years except to get a homework assignment or share lab equipment, this struck me as one more sly joke on Cress's part. Not that I asked her. I had stopped asking questions.

In hindsight, I believe I had begun to figure out some answers on my own. I was changing. But at the time, all I knew was that I didn't want her to look down on me for being naïve enough to wonder.

The end of high school was happening all around us, the laughter, the buzz-buzz of shared history, the applause, but it was silent and still in the cocoon that held me and Cress. And then Anthony Birdsall, our newly anointed class comedian, strolled to the center of the stage, removed the microphone from its stand, pulled an egg out of his pocket, and proclaimed: "And the unanimous vote for class stud goes to ... Cressida Milligan!" I heard her name before I saw the egg flying through the air, soaring over the heads of our dullard fellow seniors.

Class stud.

Her mouth was slightly opened, a flush spreading across her neck and cheeks. All in slow motion, her hands lifted, palms out. An egg! They were going to smear my Cress, humiliate her; I couldn't let them. I didn't think, I threw myself across her, shoved her hands away, ready to take the fall myself. And then her right hand shot up, pushed mine aside, and caught the egg deftly.

It was boiled.

Face flaming, Cress lobbed the egg right back on stage, clipped Anthony Birdsall in the chest, and smiled. "Thank you!" she called,

cheerfully. “An honor!” Around us, the hush broke, a gaggle of whispers and giggles, and then a huge, deafening round of applause. Later, on the pathway down to our last French class of high school, she took the congratulations of our peers with straight-faced élan. I saw how brightly her blue eyes glittered, and I stayed by her side, grinning pleasantly along with her, and we never, ever talked about the class awards again.

I never told her how incredible I thought she was that day. I never assured her that I had never talked about her, ever, to anyone. That no matter who she screwed, or why, she never had to be ashamed. I figured she knew.

I loved Cress Milligan. For being braver than me. For always knowing what to say. For loving life and doing what she pleased, with whomever she wanted. Even if, as time passed, what pleased her was no longer me.

**I didn’t think about Cress Milligan for years, not until yesterday** evening, when Gary came home from work and told me that Donna Regan, his office manager, had been listening to the news all day, ever since the first reports about the construction accident, the careless dynamite detonation that buckled the highway and collapsed a slate and gypsum cliff just north of the city. It was Donna who heard that Cress Milligan had been the woman in the car, fish-jawed Donna Regan who was the first to hear she didn’t make it.

“Ever since we were kids, I stayed away from Cress Milligan,” Donna told Gary. “I can’t explain it, you just knew. You could tell, we all could, remember? There was something about her. Right? You just knew something bad was bound to happen. Didn’t you? Remember?”