Hell—We’re All Sinners!
March came in like a lion, giving us morning after morning of wet and wild energy. I felt as if I’d lived through a thousand years of days just like that. Zoe kicked like she was dancing back and forth across the ballroom of my womb. It was like the whole world was open for me, waiting for my words to paint a picture of it, pin it down. Everything was out there, waiting, poised at the edge of spring. In a matter of weeks my novel would be out, in the stores, and maybe people would buy it and read it and like it. Maybe they would talk about it. Maybe someday I would get on a bus somewhere and see somebody reading my book. I was full of power, full of love for Connie. We unloaded the car and unlocked the front door, pulling the mail out of the box. We both saw the letter at the same time, at the bottom of the stack, the return address immediately familiar.

Connie picked it up gingerly, holding it out as if she didn’t really want to touch it. “It’s from my mother,” she said.

I nodded. We both looked at it for a moment, and then Connie took a deep breath and tore it open. I could feel all the wildness of March going flat inside me, like a bottle of seltzer when you leave it out on the counter. Connie sat down at the kitchen table, one hand holding the letter, the other propping up her head. I sat down next to her and waited, playing with one of the piles of junk mail. Finally Connie sighed and looked up. We looked at each other for a few minutes.

“Well?” I said.

Connie shook her head. “She says that Satan has a hold on me, that it’s wrong for me to have this baby.”

I felt a flash of irritation, quickly complicated by the old familiar shiftings of fear inside my stomach. Connie’s father had said in his last letter that I was Connie’s “enticing ticket to Hell.” I’d felt kind of complimented—did that mean he thought I was attractive, that he had watched me move across the room, admired the sway in my hips, the wiry thinness of my body? At the same time, however, I’d felt uneasy. It was ludicrous enough to laugh about, the idea that they would truly believe that Satan had a hold on us, but this was her family after all; they had conceived her, birthed her, raised her.
Their tentacles extended still, locked deep into some obscure recess of her soul, as if at any moment they could tighten their grip and retract, suck her back into their womb, tuck her in and pat her down and hide her away from me forever.

The next week brought a torrent of rain, slicking down the pavement and turning the grass a deep and vibrant green. Robins appeared spontaneously at every corner of the lawn and hopped about the ground, pecking at the pine needles beneath the trees. Birds sang from every direction. I lay in bed next to Connie, listening to the tires slide on the wetness. There was a light outside that came from spring, as if the sky were lit from within. I felt a slow stirring, deep in the pit of me. My belly was full and round and hard as a ball. Connie lay beside me, a tumble of dark hair and amber skin. The room was soft, ripe with our smell, dark and damp and tinged with musk. Inside me Zoe rippled from side to side as if she were swimming laps. I could almost make her out beneath my skin, bubbling just beneath the surface of my stomach like volcanic rock. Satisfaction filled me like a quiet rain.

Connie sighed with pleasure and turned toward me in her sleep as I touched her earlobe with my tongue. Yesterday I had canceled my classes and she’d called in sick and we’d stayed in bed all day and just made love. Saturday night we had made love even though it was late and I was tired. Friday we made love before meeting friends for dinner. My body felt eminently sexual. All I wanted to do was to hold and be held, to feel Connie’s fingers exploring my clitoris, slipping into my vagina, making me come. All I wanted was her fingers everywhere, touching my back, stroking my sides, cupping my ass, sliding down my thighs. All I wanted was the feel of my breasts against hers, my whole body pressed up against hers, my arms around her and my mouth against hers, sucking her lips as if for water. I couldn’t get enough of her smell, her taste, the warmth and texture of her skin, the color of it in the morning light. Outside the air was damp and heavy, as if the whole neighborhood were a moist vagina, waiting for entry, longing to be touched. I pulled Connie toward me, buried my face against her throat, plunged my fingers deep into the hair between her legs, while all around us the rain-slicked road, the deep green grass pressed flat by the rain, the moist, heavy air, the dampness of the light, enveloped us in their soft velvet walls, lulling us with their smell, my fingers so deep inside her it seemed they could pulse with the beat of her heart, till there
was nothing else except the movement of our bodies, in the quiet wild wetness of the spring.

---

I spotted the plain manila envelope in my mailbox as soon as I got to work. Only my name was on it. No routing slip, no return address. My fingers hesitated above the seal for a moment, and then I tore it open and reached inside. When I pulled it out, I nearly dropped it on the floor. It was the “lesbian issue” of *Playboy* magazine. Who would put this in my box? Almost instinctually I glanced around. I was alone in the mail room. Gingerly I flipped the pages. I didn’t have a problem with pornography. Did I? I was cool about this kind of thing. There was nothing too spectacular in what I was looking at, nothing too disturbing. I took a deep breath. I could handle this. Then I turned to a full page spread of two very un-lesbian looking women engaged in oral sex. Their long blond hair cascaded across their backs; their pubic areas were shaved and glistening, exposed, there for everyone to view. Zoe stirred in my belly and I snapped the magazine shut. My heart was pounding. I fought down a wave of nausea. I stuffed the magazine back in the envelope and threw it in the trash, then just as quickly pulled it out again. It had my name on it; what if someone found it and thought it was mine? I slipped it into my briefcase and snapped it shut. My cheeks burned with shame. I would take it home and throw it out where it was safe; no one would find it there. All that mattered, I thought, was that no one think it was mine.

The spring weather dissolved at the beginning of April. Frost covered the ground like scattered ashes and filled the air with mourning. “It’s like an April Fool’s joke,” Connie said, peering out through the window that overlooked the kitchen sink. A cold breeze slipped in through the glass like a thief. I squeezed my tea bag out and tossed it into the trash. Fuck April, I thought, lifting my cup to my lips. Zoe kicked me so suddenly I nearly choked. Connie brought her coffee over to the table. It smelled like rot.

“So,” she said brightly. “You ready for that discussion group tonight?”

I sipped my tea and glared at her. Had she always been so cheerful? I glanced at her coffee with a sudden longing. When would I ever have caffeine again? No wonder I was always tired. So much was going on. I had forgotten we were doing another discussion group. For a moment I felt almost cheered. A church in a nearby
city was attempting to educate its membership about homossexual­ity, hosting a round of discussion sessions in people’s living rooms with gay and lesbian volunteers from the area. It was part of a process to address the spiritual needs of gay and lesbian congre­gants. This particular church had been active in the abolitionist movement, breaking from its parent church in order to state its opposition to slavery. The first discussion group we’d done had gone well, with the congregants seriously interested in what we had to say. People had brought a lot of desserts and many well-consid­ered questions. Afterward a member had asked us whether we might have Zoe baptized there.

“I don’t know,” I’d said, looking at Connie helplessly. The ques­tion startled me. It had never occurred to me to baptize Zoe any­where. But I felt so warm and welcome and full of chocolate cake that it suddenly seemed like a great idea. This particular church was liberal in the best sense, ready to denounce our oppression just as they had denounced that of African Americans a hundred years before. So what if a couple hundred years before that they’d been burning witches at the stake? We could have our own church, a built-in community that would automatically support us in ex­change for our embracing the tenets of their faith. True, I hadn’t been in a Protestant church since my childhood, when my brother’s dodging the draft during the Vietnam War had exiled us from the congregation. But here was the church again, back in my life, seeking me out this time instead of pushing me away. Who said small towns were narrow-minded?

I took another sip of tea and savored the warmth as it traveled down my throat. Another discussion group. I kind of enjoyed these things, being the center of attention, getting to talk about myself and my personal struggle with spirituality. Besides, who knew what dessert they’d have this time?

“So,” said Alice, the group leader of the evening, happily looking around the circle. “We have Connie and Louise with us tonight, ready to talk about their experiences. I’d like to just start with a lit­tle history of the process.”

“Just a minute,” a man said, getting to his feet. “I just want to check the score.” He lumbered into the other room. I dumbly watched him go. Harvey was an active church member, but he appeared more interested in the game on television than in the
issues concerning his fellow congregants. “Fred, you want a beer while I’m up?” he asked. Fred looked up eagerly and nodded. I felt a trickle of dread easing down my spine like a reluctant rock climber.

Trixie, the hostess, jumped up. “Anybody want another drink?” she asked. All the women in the room raised their empty glasses. Connie and I exchanged a glance. In the next room Harvey turned up the volume on the set. The announcer’s voice filtered into the room, only mildly softer than Alice’s. I looked around. The coffee table was bare. Where was the dessert? I could feel Zoe moving restively inside me. I checked my watch, wondering how long I could go without food before she would revolt, sending my blood sugar plummeting.

An hour later there was still no food. “Listen,” Fred said, leaning forward and slurring only slightly. “I’ve been meeting with a lot of people who don’t like the direction this church has been going.” Heads nodded around the circle. Trixie got up to freshen everyone’s drinks.

“What’s the score in there?” somebody asked.

“Thirty-eight—sixteen,” a man called back. Everybody groaned.

“What sport is it?” I whispered to Connie. She shrugged. Her look was mildly alarmed.

Fred took another sip of beer. “It’s the pastor,” he said. He knocked back the rest of his beer and crushed the can in his hands. “The sermons used to be so nice,” he said. “Now they’re all full of social issues.”

Heads nodded around the room. Irritation flooded through me. Social issues. Wasn’t that what Jesus was all about?

Beside me, Harvey nodded succinctly and settled back on the couch. “There was all that civil rights stuff in the sixties,” Fred said, shaking his head. “And what good did that do? There’s still discrimination!”

“Oh, of course, there’s still discrimination,” I said before I could stop myself. “But it’s illegal now.” I looked around the room, hoping to get their attention. Nobody looked at me. A few men were turned toward the other room, where the television was. One woman had her fingers deep into her glass, trying to retrieve her slice of lemon. “It’s not illegal to discriminate against gay and lesbian people,” I said vainly. Across the room Alice, the discussion leader, sat still, as silent as if she’d suddenly lost her voice. Come back, I implored her, wordlessly. Take control of the meeting!
“There will always be discrimination and prejudice,” I said, looking back at Fred. “That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t fight against it.”

“Oh, I’m not saying we shouldn’t,” Fred said quickly. “I don’t have any problems with gay people.” He looked around the room. “I mean, hell,” he said, his voice flushed with feeling. “We’re all sinners!”

Not me, I thought. My whole body felt hot, as if the thermostat in the room had gone out of control.

Harvey nodded sagely from his spot on the couch, his chin sunk deep into his chest. “I always think of my dear old great-aunt,” he said suddenly. “She was truly Godlike,” he mused, gazing off past our heads as if she might be in the room, floating around behind us. “She walked with God in a whole different way than I do.” He paused. We all waited as he studied the wall above our heads. “She was Italian Catholic,” he said. “Dear old Concetta.” I could feel another surge of irritation flooding through me. I was starting to hate the woman. “She wouldn’t agree with what I’m doing,” Harvey said, “but I’m just trying to walk with God.” He stared off into the next room. I waited to see if he would say something else, but apparently he was no longer with us. Maybe he was communing with Aunt Concetta.

“This issue is just causing too much divisiveness,” Fred said.

A woman from across the circle nodded. “You can’t even say anything about gay people anymore without someone accusing you of being homophobic!”

Connie leaned forward. “You’re going to have a schism anyway,” she said. “You already have it.” She paused. I could feel her take a breath. “All you can do is act in your integrity.” She looked around the room. Everyone avoided her gaze. “I mean, the division in the church is too deep to repair.”

I looked at the others. Some men were concentrating on the television in the other room. Harvey was still staring vacantly at the wall. Fred shook his head. “I just wish we didn’t keep talking about schisms,” he said. He sent a beseeching look around the room. “I mean, what about the old people?” he asked. “All I care about is old Bill Somes, eighty years old and a member of this church all his life. He should have a safe place to die.”

“My mother’s eighty years old,” I said, “and she’s been working through her feelings about my being gay.” I could feel a hot flush working its way up my face. “And I think she’ll die a wiser woman because of it.” Nobody paid any attention to me. The meeting was
breaking up all around us. The men were spilling out into the
other room to catch the end of the game. Trixie and the gang were
heading for the kitchen, their drinks in their hands. “I’ve got a
great recipe I wanted to show you,” Trixie was saying. I glanced at
my watch. 9:30. I could feel the blood rising to my head. I was dizzy
from lack of food.

“You look great,” Harvey was saying next to me as I pulled myself
to my feet. “Pregnant women are so beautiful,” he announced,
fumbling for my belly.

I dodged his hands and headed for the door, pulling Connie
along with me. “I hope you’ll consider baptizing Zoe with us,”
Alice said softly as we neared the door. In your dreams, I thought,
looking down at her. In your fucking dreams. I pushed open the
door and breathed in the crisp wintry air on my way to the car.

“Idiots,” Connie said, opening the door for me.

“Morons,” I said, pulling the door shut behind me. Morons, I
repeated, to myself. I felt furious with them for not taking us seri­
ously and furious with myself for ever thinking I could find a place
with them.