In Topeka, Pete bought a "New Yorker" magazine. He showed me a cartoon--its caption was "the town where time stood still." Something like that.

We were driving cross-country, staying with friends and relatives on our way to Japan. In Kansas I wanted to show him my grandmother's house in Wakarusa, a small town just outside Topeka where I'd grown up. When we got in, it was late afternoon; we were hot and tired. Walgreen's on Kansas Avenue was open, so we stopped for a quick bite.

Pete said, "Oh my god. Phosphates. Honest to god phosphates." He drank three of them: cherry, lemon, chocolate.

I went to the washroom behind the kitchen. When I came back, two women in a booth looked at me.

One of them said, "I bet you don't remember us."

"Jackie and Donna," I said promptly, as if I'd just been thinking about them. It's a protective device for which I'm sometimes grateful. At the same time I was marveling that I could be the same age as these two middle-aged women in whose faces I could nevertheless see, as indelibly as a finger-print in cement, the expressions by which children recognize each other.

They showed me a list with my name on it.

"We're the search committee for the class reunion in September," Jackie said. "There's only seven people we couldn't find. Six now."

We talked about people we remembered. They remembered a lot more than I did, but then, I hadn't been very involved in school activities. Jackie, I recalled, had been president of St. Angela's pep club, and once she wrote a letter to the school paper denouncing all those who didn't show school spirit by not coming to the rallies.

There was a notebook with dividers in it: Missing, Coming, Not Coming. It was open to a page entitled "Reunion Activities." Among the predictable events (picnic, pictures, dance, etc.) I saw "review class predictions--have we fullfilled our early promise?" Mine, if I remembered correctly, was "buy a new wardrobe," someone's not so subtle hint at my definitely uninspired appearance on First Fridays, the only time we could wear "civilian" clothes. There had also been a reading of the class will when we graduated. The idea was that each graduating senior passed on some trademark of their own to an underclass student. All year I'd been tagged "the brain that wouldn't die" and if (for those times) it wasn't the most flattering label for a girl, at least it was personal. However, it was my "warm smile" which was bequeathed to a junior I didn't know and to whom, in any case, it meant nothing.

"Step into our office," Donna invited, sliding over. I saw she was pregnant. "Third one," she said, following my look. "You got any?"

"No."

"God, I'll be glad to drop this one. Being pregnant in the summer is no picnic, let me tell you." She was holding her water glass against her neck. Jackie pulled at the top of her halter. I could see sweat running down her neck.

She'd been the first girl in sixth grade to wear a bra, which was terribly embarrassing to the rest of us. We wore uniforms, blue plaid skirts, white blouses, blue sweaters. Sometimes, when it was hot, Jackie left off her sweater. The straps of her bra were clearly visible under her blouse. We were humiliated for her. We wondered if maybe she didn't know, if maybe she did it on purpose to attract the boys' attention. They certainly noticed. It was quite a topic of interest, Jackie's new breasts.

She said, "Remember Joe Pasquerosa? We're probably getting married." I smiled. "That's great." Jackie had cornered me in the girls' bathroom when we were thirteen. She had all her friends with her, the kind who wore make-up on weekends and dated boys from public schools. She said, "Just remember, Joe is my man." What kind of thirteen-year-old could get away with saying something like that? Jackie could, mostly because I was too embarrassed for her to follow up my first impulse (to laugh), and too ladylike ("above all that") to indulge in my second (to paste her one). The brain that wouldn't die was nothing if not adaptable.

The stand-off in the bathroom came about because Jackie had seen me coming to school with Joe. We had been neighbors all our lives and his mother regularly gave me a ride when she drove her son to school.

There had also been some sort of flap when Joe and I went trick or treating together. Later he asked me, "What's the deal with you and Jackie?" but I didn't know what he meant. We didn't go trick or treating together anymore anyway; we were getting too old.

A few years later I saw Jackie and Joe getting on the bus in front of the old Crosby building. They were having a shoving match in line and when it came time to board, Joe grabbed her by the neck and steered her up the steps.

Life can be so tenuous at times. Memories flick out of the line of vision like a lizard's tail spotted out of the corner of one eye. Entire years are reduced to a single scene. Probably I had seen Joe and Jackie together many times; I only remember this once, when he literally guided her in the direction he wanted her to go.

School was a time of great stress for me. I used to get a cold every September. My stomach seemed forever upset. Once, for instance, I greeted a classmate I hadn't seen all summer. She didn't seem to hear. I said her name again, passing my hand in front of her face. She turned away deliberately. The others around us fell silent. I took my
seat, my face flaming. I heard her say to a neighbor, "I guess I showed her." A week later, as if nothing had happened, she asked me for help with her French homework.

Jackie said our class had turned out to be a pretty interesting bunch. One boy had his own store where he sold dinette sets; another had a pinball concession, and another could be seen nightly on television.

I was surprised, not remembering him as the type to go into show business. He owned a used car lot, Donna explained, and made commercials which could be seen during the late-night movie.

Oh.

And what of the girls?

We were an interesting bunch too, it seemed. Some of us had married very well. Some of us might even have nice jobs.

Among those missing were my two best friends. "June's in Chicago," I said. "She's a photographer."

Donna nodded. "She used to bring her camera to school, didn't she? I got the oldest boy a nice Instamatic for Christmas."

"And Hong Hai's a doctor; she went back to Vietnam."

Jackie, who had been writing all this down, frowned. "You mean Elizabeth, don't you? Or is Hong Hai her married name?"

"Elizabeth is what the nuns changed her name to, so she could fit in better. Her real name was Hong Hai. It means Pink Sea." I was staring at Jackie in some amazement. Surely she hadn't forgotten the class's amusement the year Hong Hai announced her name change and that thereafter she would no longer be Elizabeth. It was Jackie, in fact, who began calling her "Hang High Nguyen;" Jackie who dubbed me and my two friends the Big Three.

"Pink Sea," she repeated. "That's pretty."

She said she worked for the telephone company. She was a supervisor, making really good money. Joe worked for the telephone company too.

I turned to Donna. "How about you? What are you doing?"

She laughed. "Making babies, mostly. I do secretary work in between." She said her husband was in construction and that they would soon be building their own home.

Donna had transferred to St. Angela's from a school in St. Louis. She came at the start of 8th grade; we would have been thirteen. It was just in time for the class elections. The understood rule was that the most popular boy was voted student body president, his best friend got vice president, and the prettiest girl became secretary. To everyone's immense discomfort, Donna ran for president, apparently unfazed by the ridicule she encountered. Even the nuns were amazed. The principal, Sister Charlotte, called Donna's mother to get her to talk her daughter out of this preposterous idea. Donna was creating excitement at school.

Instead, Donna's mother came to the school and made a speech herself. We'd never seen anybody like her. She wore what looked like ice cubes for earrings, and a mu-muu. She was supposed to have taught art in St. Louis. (If this wasn't bad enough, Donna's father smoked a pipe and refused to join the Knights of Columbus). The gist of the speech was that this was a free country and that if her daughter wanted to run for president, of the school, of the United States, nobody had the right to stop her.

I remember quite well the speech Donna gave, especially the title and last line, which were the same: "Peticoats in the presidency? I say yes!" She pounded with her fist on the podium too, which I found exciting, but which a lot of the students said was embarrassing and just what you'd expect from somebody who'd gone to a public school in St. Louis. Donna didn't win the election, and I don't remember her running for any others. In fact, I barely remembered her at all after that.

Jackie said, "You'll come to the reunion, won't you?"

I hesitated. Unlike characters in Mark Twain novels, not everyone likes to crow about the apple they're eating, especially if there's not enough to go around. When I explained that we were leaving for Tokyo, Donna and Jackie stared at me as if I'd said I was going to the moon. I had to keep myself from promising not to have a good time.

Jackie had been examining Pete. "Japanese," she mused. "I guess that could be real handy."

There is a point at which the past can no longer have any claims on us. I found myself making excuses, promising to write and hoping my enthusiasm didn't sound as hollow as it really was. I didn't want to share any more of myself with these two; our memories of the past, our understanding of the present were just too different. What they visualized for the future, I shuddered to know. A character in an Andrea Dworkin story says something to the effect that she's willing to fight for such women, but she sure doesn't want them calling her up.

In the car Pete showed me the cartoon and we had a good laugh over it. Sometimes I find myself wondering how exactly it was worded, because it captured perfectly what had just transpired, but I have never looked it up. What would be the point? That moment, for me, has passed; but for others it stretches out infinitely in muggy summer afternoons and lists of those who will never come back.