

*The New Year***Pamela Painter**

It's late Christmas Eve at Spinelli's when Dominic presents us, the waitstaff, with his dumb idea of a bonus—Italian hams in casings so tight they glimmer like Gilda's gold lamé stockings.

At home, Gilda's waiting up for me with a surprise of her own: my stuff from the last three months is sitting on the stoop. Arms crossed, scarlet nails tapping the white satin sleeves of her robe, she says she's heard about Fiona. I balance the ham on my hip and stuff my things—

CDs, my weights, a vintage Polaroid—in garbage bags she's provided free of charge. Then I let it all drop and offer up the ham in both hands, cradling it as if it might have been our child. She doesn't want any explanations—or the ham.

Fiona belongs to Dominic, and we are a short sad story of one night's restaurant despair. But the story's out, and for sure I don't want Dominic coming after my ham. I pack up the car and head west. The ham glistens beside me in the passenger seat. Somewhere in Indiana I even give it a seat belt.

I stop to call, but Gilda hangs up every time. So I send her pictures of my trip. The Ham under the silver arch of St. Louis; The Ham at the Grand Canyon; The Ham in Las Vegas. I'm taking a picture of The Ham in the Pacific when a big wave washes it out to sea. I send the picture anyway: The Ham in the Pacific Undertow. In this picture, you can't tell which of us is missing.