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The University of Southern Mississippi

QUARRY LIGHT AND OTHER STORIES

by

Claudia Lois Smith

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2012

ABSTRACT

QUARRY LIGHT AND OTHER STORIES

by Claudia Lois Smith

December 2012

Quarry Light and Other Stories is a collection of short stories and one novella articulating themes of violence, trauma, and sexuality. The stories in *Quarry Light and Other Stories* are arranged according the theme, movement, and tonality. Although they can stand alone, the stories are meant to be read interdependently. The collection is accompanied by a critical introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

My stories tend to deal with women in transition, living through that in-between time that often accompanies big life changes – a birth, a divorce, a death, an assault. Perhaps this is because I often write during these times - after life has taken over and I'm still trying to catch up with it. My first collection of short-shorts, *Put Your Head In My Lap*, dealt directly with childhood, and it was only later, as I was assembling the stories and preparing to submit them, that I realized I had been writing about childhood probably because I had just given birth to my first child. At that time, writing short shorts was a practical choice; I was nursing and caring for an infant, and living in relative isolation with him. It took me about twenty or thirty minutes to get through the draft of a short short, roughly the time I had free in between naps and feedings. My second collection, *Put Your Head In My Lap*, tends to deal with marriage and adult relationships. I wrote many of those stories as my first marriage was unraveling; at the time I was writing most of them, I believed the stories were about endurance, commitment, and what it means to truly know someone. The collection didn't get published until I'd been separated and divorced for some time; it was only then, when editing and tweaking the final pieces, that I could clearly see what I wouldn't or couldn't see before; nobody knows the ending to her own story, not really. And the characters in those shorts may or may not end up together. They may or may not even love one another, or know one another, but that doesn't mean there isn't some beauty, some graceful moment, to be found in their struggle.

Some of the stories in the following collection, *Quarry Light and Other Stories*, began years before I started to write the short pieces in those previous collections. I

wanted to write a novel when I was in my early twenties, and elements of *Box City* were already in place in the draft I wrote at twenty, a novel about a young girl overcoming her difficult childhood with a submissive mother and a villainous uncle. I couldn't bear to make the man her father. "Ray" was nothing like the much more complex and troubling "Trip" – if he resembled any character in this book, it was Melanie of "Catgirl" without charisma. The story was narrow, told in first person, and it focused on a young woman's heroic journey to ultimate adult enlightenment. At twenty, I still believed in the end of a fairytale, and my belief system wasn't too far from Trip's – it involved my own Manhattan apartment filled with cottage style furniture, a Meg Ryan wardrobe, and lots of sparkling conversation around tables in fancy restaurants. After graduating college I spent several months in semi-homelessness – camping out in friends' Brooklyn apartments, pounding the pavement in cheap shoes looking for a job no one would hire me for because I was too desperate and skinny. I drank too much coffee and my hands shook during interviews. Like Trip, I was passionately devoted to the pursuit of my vague dreams. Like Trip, it was the glamour of the dream – its gauzy trappings – that captivated me. Trip is the dreamer gone haywire; his idealization of Tammy takes on frightening proportions. His love for Nora is what keeps him sympathetic; but, like Addy's, his love can be damaging. The lost little rich girl becomes Nora's role model; nailing the audition is a fulfillment of Trip's wish, but prostituting herself is also an enactment of his instruction. The heat and spark of the story is drawn from what Nora and Trip become together. It's a love story, not about Nora and Ray or Trip and Tammy, but about parent and child. Trip may be an uncle, but he is the best parent Nora's got. When she finally finds him in Houston, where he has been all along, she has come back

full circle. The domestic scenes are that time in-between- time I mentioned at the start of this introduction; they are the lull. It is that moment of recognition in the diner with Trip, when she offers him stories, that she is jolted into movement again.

Like Trip, Addy, the grandmother in “Lucy,” is a broken down dreamer. “Lucy,” The first half of the novella, began without Lucy the dog. Addy, Tammy’s grandmother, is the heart of the piece. The story begins after her funeral; as the narrative progresses, slowly and quietly, the main character, Tammy, begins to understand that she has no significant ties to anyone but her dead grandmother. Addy’s love for her granddaughter is as hard, real, as tangible as the marble she gives to Tammy and tells her to throw away. It can’t be reasoned with, bargained with, and it will never let go. Blighted by life, Addy knows what love can make one capable of, how fragile we can be in its grip. For Addy, love is neither “good” nor “bad,” it simply “is.” Her love both sustains and hinders Tammy. She is Tammy’s key to warmth, home and hearth; she is also a hoarder who teaches her granddaughter to let go of everyone and everything.

At its heart, “Lucy” is also a love story – not one of sexual romance, but between the grandmother and granddaughter. The story began with a swirling structure, a series of vignettes in Tammy’s every day, current life. My intention was to show her isolation, her downright inability to make lasting friendships and connections. But the story needed the dog as a through line and anchor. Lucy – fat, dying, slightly stinking with her unknowable past, is a survivor. The dog’s arrival, life with Tammy, and eventual death give the story an apparently superficial line, when of course it isn’t. The loss of the flatulent old dog she has found herself confiding in has left her completely and utterly

alone, and it is this loss that finally lays her bare. It is only then that Tammy can allow herself to face Addy's reverie.

As I began to go over the work I'd written over the past four years, I noticed themes echoing one another, glaring similarities in my characters, even an overlapping of names at times. At first I began to re-write them, to iron out the kinks, the seeming repetitions. Upon closer inspection, however, I realized that when read all together, the stories created a layering effect, echoing and enhancing one another's themes.

This is how I would humbly ask you to read this collection; let the stories interpret one another. For example, alone, "As If Someone Polished The Air" may seem more like a vapor, an atmosphere piece, but in the context of the other stories I believe it adds dimension, depth, and resonance to their interpretation. The lost yellow haired girl is a totem for the entire book, and this story directly addresses her. The preoccupations, fears, and dreamings of the story's lonely protagonist, Agatha, take on a kind of magical quality, and Agatha's vision of the adult world is crucial to the rest of the stories in the collection. Daisy, the little girl who comes out of the walls the rats used to inhabit, appears, like Lucy the dog, just when she is needed. Daisy is like some dusty wraith from one of Agatha's fairy-stories, more fulfilling and yet more frightening than the rat-boy she made up. But is also a reflection of Agatha's mother; magical and candlelit, like some unfulfilled promise Agatha knows is important but cannot comprehend. Her mother's belongings – Chanel No. 5, Chinese slippers, her dresses – offer a glimpse into an adult world that is both seductive and frightening.

Much of childhood – my childhood, at least – was spent dreaming up the future that would be the fulfillment of what I supposed my mother's wishes were. We were the

sort of family who made games out of unpacking and repacking boxes. My mother called this game “getting ready to go back to Montana.” She would take boxes out of the attic, boxes that held objects she’d carried from place to place – a snowsuit that proved I’d once seen snow, a yellow dress with daisies, a bit of amber my father had given her. I had isolated, vivid memories of our life there; we had lived there for a brief time in my early childhood. These memories were visual, silent – I was deaf until an ear tissue transplant when I was three – but as we pulled out the belongings, I’d pull out the memories for my mother’s inspection: a pair of pink sparkling slippers at Christmas, walking in the snow to some unknown destination, a pair of warm tiger pajamas. These memories were magical because my mother made them so; she spoke very sweetly and wistfully about the time we’d spent there. There was no doubt in my mind we would find a place like that again.

As a young woman I felt betrayed by the glamour my mother cast over months spent in a place we never went back to, because there was nothing and no one there for us. Then, later, when I became a mother myself I understood better what she’d meant by this. Now, when I look back on that game – I realize it never happened when my father was around. My interest now is in recreating my mother as she was then; too skinny, probably from anxiety, her hair still dark and thick. The mothers in my stories might not always resemble her, but they loom large as she did to me then.

Time moves oddly in these stories, back-and-forth without much ceremony or conscious transition. I learned, from Alice Munro, that the real trick to this movement is perspective, not the movement of time. You can leap from year to year as long as you have a through line, a vision that carries both your characters and your readers.

Although the stories deal with themes of trauma, rape, neglect, obsession, and fear - what strikes me most about the stories are the moments built around their major events. In an act intended to both move and disturb my readers, Agatha's mother places her daughter's hand against her breast; in "His Lovely Hands," a girl sits down on an ugly sofa and greets the men who will soon brutally rape her. Those same men wipe her down and later cook themselves a supper of Hamburger Helper. After writing the scene in which Nora picks up a man and takes money for a sex act, I knew it wasn't finished until I envisioned her walking home. It was then that I remembered the dying palm trees outside of the Dot's Coffee Shop off 1-10 in Houston, Texas. It was then that I remembered how those palm trees struck me when I lived there, and when I wrote the line "she didn't know much about the lives of pine trees" I knew the section was done. It is in the moment that Nora considers how everything should look different but doesn't that her act begins to become real to her, and to the reader as well.

These are the moments that give shape to the events that haunt my characters. I've always found this to be true of my own life, and so it is getting inside the details of a moment that often bring me to the direction my stories are going to take. It's in putting on the Chinese slippers that Agatha feels safest and closest to her mother, and the reader needs to see that moment in order to fully comprehend what it feels like for Nora to touch her mother's breast; it is in watching her hand move uncontrollably back and forth that Marnie is reminded she is still alive; it is in watching her uncle sweat and pace in a gas station parking lot that Nora realizes he does, indeed, look like a miscreant. In every one of these moments, reality is there but tilted, turned upside-down, tested.

The collection *Quarry Light and Other Stories* cracks open three times, once near the beginning and once at the very end, in the stories “His Lovely Hands,” “Box City,” and “Catgirl.” I wrote the rape scene in “His Lovely Hands” from beginning to end (before revisions) in one sitting. I turned the air conditioning unit on full blast, and kept the television tuned into an old sitcom with a laugh track. Before then, I had tried writing such a scene but it never worked. But that white noise coupled with a dull headache made it work. The murder scene in “Catgirl” is meant to resemble to the hallucinatory violence of William Friedkin’s brilliant film *The Exorcist*. I want the reader to experience the complete destruction of the girls’ innocence, and to shudder at the banality of Melanie’s pleasure in the violence. This can only be understood when one of the survivors grows up and raises her hand over the ocean, echoing her mother’s own enchantment over her daughters, but this time, in a gesture of protection and love.

Often my characters orbit the kind of brutal violence depicted in the center of “His Lovely Hands” and “Catgirl.” While Addy and Trip are both capable of damage and some destruction, the only truly evil character in this collection is Melanie. She scares me. My intention was for the reader to utterly believe in her dark, seductive power.

The stories in *Quarry Light and Other Stories* are arranged according the theme, movement, and tonality. “Lucy,” one of the longest stories, is in minor key, while “Catgirl” reaches a fever pitch. The story was originally written for a Noir anthology and, at first glimpse, is seemingly incongruous with the rest of the collection. For some time I considered placing it in the center of the book, hoping it might work as a kind of hallucinatory and magical illustration of the book’s themes and meditations. But in the

center of this collection, it is too stylized, too different in tone and mood. Although “As If Someone Had Polished The Air” can be read as a child’s dreamscape, Agatha’s way of coping, the story does have elements of magic realism; tonally, it has more in common with “Lucy” than with “Catgirl” -- it lulls rather than awakens the reader. I instead chose to end the book with “Catgirl’s” crescendo as a kind of epilogue, the hand, if you will, reaching out of the coals to grab at you.

In all my stories, there is a lot of darkness, but there are also pinpricks of light. There is a struggle, but the battle is never really won or lost, and life continues. I’m proud of this collection; I believe these stories are lived-in, that there is a verisimilitude to all my settings and situations, and that I have done justice to my characters ‘ endurance, to their experience of love in all its beauty and its ugliness. Love is no magic amulet in these stories, but it is what keeps my characters from a kind of spiritual numbing that leads to something perhaps more frightening than death.

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LUCY

The day she arrived home from her grandmother's funeral, Tammy found someone had left a panting dog inside the back porched-in area of her apartment. This dog was no puppy. Her fur was matted and filthy. She was of indeterminate age, with bad teeth and floppy brown ears. She was fat.

It wouldn't have been hard to leave the animal; Tammy's apartment was empty half the time since she no longer had a roommate. Still, it was an odd place to leave a dog. Most people dumped animals in parks or college campuses, didn't they? And her home wasn't exactly dog-friendly. No grass, no trees in her small enclosed yard, just river rocks and cacti. She rented an apartment that was a little beyond her means, but she liked living in the bohemian part of town instead of some big apartment complex in the suburbs. But the cast-iron fence was tall, too tall for the old creature to have jumped herself. There was no telling how long the dog had been there; Tammy had been gone for days.

The dog didn't seem hungry and she wasn't too dirty, either. Tammy didn't know much about animals and she wasn't sure how to approach this one. "Dog," she said, "Hello, dog." It looked up at her for a moment, then turned around three times and found a spot in the dirt to lie down.

The first thing to do was to buy it some kind of food. She wondered if she should leave it outside – would it bark? But the animal seemed docile. Probably old enough to know that kind of behavior wouldn't get her anywhere.

Tammy planned to call the humane society the next morning. But then she thought, maybe she could make some signs first. She never got around to the signs, though.

Tammy felt oddly put out, as if dogs knew anything about etiquette. Of course the dog couldn't help being dumped, and what kind of person would she be if she dumped the dog somewhere else after hours? She drove to Kroger's. At first she just meant to get some kibble but she ended up getting a couple of chew toys and a purple dog collar that looked wide enough. The dog had a very fat body but her head was small, beagle-sized.

"You came at a bad time, I just got home from a funeral," she told the dog when she got back. It stood awkwardly when she opened the door. "Do you want to come inside?" Tammy asked. The dog just looked at her forlornly. She had expressive eyes. Maybe it was the shaggy eyebrows that lifted quizzically at Tammy; they anthropomorphized the old thing. "Well, okay. Here is your food." The dog was not interested in the chew toys.

Tammy sat at her kitchen table facing the French doors, watching the dog watch her. Her grandmother Addy had taken in strays. Tammy didn't want pets. She preferred stray people. On the flight back, instead of thinking of her grandmother, Tammy remembered the Greyhound bus rides she'd taken from California to Texas when she was in college to check up on Addy. The trip took about a day and a half, and she loved that middle part, New Mexico and part of Arizona by moonlight. She looked forward to those stretches of time on the bus more than the arrival. She liked the stops at diners and gas stations in the dusty little towns with names like Fairy, Knickerbocker,

Marfa. There was a feeling she could get lost somewhere if she wanted. Get a job in a one of the diners like a heroine from one of Addy's old Harlequins and fall in love with a sensitive small town doctor with a dangerous past.

Addy never came to meet her; Tammy always took a cab to the squalid old house.

Gazing out the window at the rather pathetic dog, Tammy recalls one of those overnight trips, the one when she met a boy and told him stories. She must have met the boy ten years ago, when she was about to graduate and feeling guilty about Addy all alone in that filthy house. Tammy usually stared out the window or read, avoiding conversation with seatmates, but this time she'd felt like talking.

She told the stranger about the attic room at her grandmother Addy's and Grandpa Paul's, and her mother's cotton slip hanging to dry by the bed in the moonlight, how they washed their clothes in a basin upstairs, separately from Addy's and Grandpa Paul's. She told him her beautiful mother was dead – that was always what she told people back then at parties or bus trips. This fact was, she believed, the saddest and most interesting thing about her. That night, telling this boy she'd never see again, it seemed very real to her that she would never see her mother Audrey again. New Mexico in darkness was bare mountains looming out the window like a giant's bones, giving the conversation a solemnity and proportion she appreciated. She was weepy without being drunk.

The boy was kind; he gave her his jacket to rest her head against and offered her the window seat. He told her that he had an addiction. He broke in to people's shower drains when he was at their houses or dorms and pulled the hairs from out of them. Sometimes he brought a piece of bent coat hanger to do it; sometimes he used a toothbrush. But if he used someone's toothbrush, he always threw it away, meaning no

disrespect. Almost always he sought women's hair, and if he were visiting a girl's house, sometimes he'd get a flash, an image of her while he was borrowing her bathroom for a few minutes. He'd feel urgency, a need to touch and feel the hair, and a great sense of relief once he held it in his palms. The hair was wet and matted. His favorite type was blonde, like Tammy's. That was always his hair color of choice. But once, just once, the hair had been ginger, long and matted, clogging the drain like a soft sleeping animal. He remembered this hair most vividly, and how tender and protective he felt later, once he spotted the girl in her kitchen drinking gin and coke with her roommates. She was a neat girl, compactly built but with beautifully full breasts. Her long red hair was pulled back over her ears, snaking down her back.

He retrieved women's hair from shower drains at least twice a week. Did he save the hair? Tammy wanted to know. No, never. He always threw it away after holding it and stroking it for a few moments. And no, he had never been caught.

She wanted him to stroke her hair. It was her best feature and fell smoothly past her waist at the time. Her grandmother called it Alice-in-Wonderland hair. But she knew the boy wasn't interested in her. He would never have told her such a story if he had been. Perhaps her golden hair was too gaudy, too obvious a prize for his taste. Or maybe it was simply that she had told him too much. He got off the bus sometime before sunrise, hours before she reached her destination.

And this day, September 19th, 1989, a decade after that late night bus conversation, Addy was dead and Tammy had long since stopped making the bus trips. What a hot month for a funeral in Texas! Although Tammy was born in September, for years she told people she was born in summer, not fall, because it was always the worst part of the year – everyone was so sick of the heat at that point. It took two weeks for them to haul off the junk from Addy's house after the funeral. Tammy had never taken so much time off from work. Thousands of bread bags, cat food tins piled high, boxes of doilies and gently yellowed National Geographic magazines, horse liniment and scarves, Avon products, scrap metal, closets of canned goods, the moldy dolls, the boxes of twine.... even the love knot Grandpa Paul had given Addy before they were married, lost in the piles. Tammy had it all carted away, and when she did, rats came out. The neighbors told Tammy that Addy had dealt with rat infestations herself, refusing outside help, even the exterminator at the church who had volunteered his services. Tammy remembered the rats, roof rats with tails longer than their bodies, moving in and out in droves, gobbling pathways through the high grass.

What turned her stomach most were the balls of string Addy saved from newspapers before they were delivered in plastic wrap. It was like seeing her grandmother's intestines strung out to dry in the sunlight.

The night after the wake it stormed, one of those sheet lightning summer storms that used to keep them up at night. *This fucking house*, Tammy had whispered to dead Addy. *I hate your fucking haunted house Addy*. Even the dishwasher smelled funky, kind of like rotten eggs. Who would buy this place, with its rat tunnels and moldy corners? Who in their right mind would want to live here? Even the sofa was the most

hideous color imaginable, vomity orange. Puce. A popular color for furniture in the 1970s.

But now Tammy was safe at home in her Pine-Sol scented apartment, heating up a frozen dinner for herself, some sort of Tex Mex chicken, the old dog eyeing her suspiciously from the porch the whole time. Or was that the dog's way of begging? Her eyes never left Tammy. She left the dog out on the tiny porch that first night, and while she went to work her shift at the library, then thought better of it and drove home to check on her during lunch. The dog hadn't been eating her kibble at all, an expensive brand formulated especially for senior dogs.

Halfway home it started to rain, and Tammy wondered if the dog was scared. But when she got there the dog seemed fine. She'd worked and burrowed her way into a hole by the potted geraniums and pulled the cushion off one of the lawn chairs to sleep on. When Tammy approached she made a low growl.

"Dog?" Tammy said, trying to sound non-threatening and sympathetic.

The dog burrowed deep into the cushion and kept growling.

Tammy made her voice gentle, cajoling. "Doggy dog dog," she said.

She should have gone inside, found a shelter to call. But instead she stayed outside, making more doggy baby talk until she too was soaked. After a while the dog stood awkwardly - she was fat and that must have been hard on her old bones - stuck her butt up in the air and started digging around the flower pots, jerking her ugly little tail. You couldn't call it wagging.

Tammy gave up and went inside. An obese dog like that must have belonged to someone. Probably not the waifs who smoked outside the coffee shop down the street. A

dog couldn't get fat like that on the streets. Maybe she had belonged to an elderly woman and the woman's relatives had dumped her. Tammy sat down at the table, thinking she might cry, but she did not. She missed her grandmother. She remembered the stench that had embarrassed her so much when she was a teenager asking boys to drop her off in the driveway. Addy had been beautiful and vain for years but after her daughter's death she had let herself go. After her mother died, and Tammy had trouble with nightmares, she slept beside her grandmother and would use the big bosom for a pillow, breathing in that sweet scent of soaked up dirt and Ben Gay.

After a while the dog came to the glass door and Tammy opened it.

"Don't tear up the house," Tammy told her. "I have to go to work. I'll be back."

It rained all night and the dog decided to sleep in the doorway of Tammy's bedroom. Tammy didn't try to dissuade her, although she was still a little nervous about the growling. It wasn't a pit bull or anything. In fact the dog looked a bit like an elderly, obese Benji, Tammy's favorite Hollywood mutt.

"Not your first thunderstorm is it?" Tammy said. "I used to be absolutely terrified of these kinds of storms."

When Tammy was a child, Addy would keep her up with cups of strong coffee during storms as they listened to the radio reports. Addy knew all the statistics, that more people died in flash floods and thunderstorms than tornadoes, or so she said. Her favorite shows were those involving real-life disaster stories.

"Whoever comes to take you, whatever comes to hurt, you must know I love you and there are angels," Addy would tell her. "Remember!" Spittle shot out from her mouth. She was vehement. They would pray together. Addy was Polish; Tammy's

grandfather had saved her from a hard life after the war. Whenever she got into funks or weird spells, everyone chalked it up to whatever bad things had happened to her in the war. It must have been a lot of bad things, Tammy had concluded over the years.

Addy had taken in strays, yes. But she was the kind of person shelters rescued animals from. After a few days, Tammy was used to the dog. It didn't really feel like a pet. She bought a leash, took her for some walks. The dog allowed her to slip the purple rhinestone studded collar around her neck. She lifted up her snout without looking at Tammy, as if she'd received many collars from many forgettable people over the years. Tammy found this endearing.

Friends. Of course Tammy had them, friends and occasionally (very occasionally) lovers. Tammy's only regular friend was another librarian, Lynette. She was a handsome woman in her forties. Her eyes were the same calm, muted silver as her long hair. They had lunch sometimes, but they didn't talk intimately. Who in real life has time for all that? It was a bit surprising to Tammy that others could forge the friendships she couldn't seem to make.

Tammy appreciated Lynette's healthy sense of boundaries. They met at work but bonded in a book club they both dropped out of because the women all wanted to talk about their aerobic classes, their husbands and kids and how to make good sun tea or Madelines instead of about books. She'd been to Lynette's house a few times, always for the book club. It was all earth tones. There was a pretty moss-covered fountain on a table in the corner of her living room. Lynette told Tammy when they met she considered herself a "spiritual but not religious" person. They had sushi for lunch a few days after Tammy's return from the funeral.

“Someone left a dog on my porch,” Tammy said, “And I think I will keep her.” It was funny, how ordinary a revelation this was and yet it felt very private and personal when she came out and said it.

“What kind of dog?”

“A mutt. Maybe part beagle. She has hound dog eyes. She seems pretty old and well behaved.”

They talked about Lynette’s date with a chiropractor.

“Did he crack your back?”

“No. He is looking for a wife, and one look at my hair and I could see that was it. I liked him though. He said he meditated. I’m sorry about your grandmother,” Lynette said. “I’m sorry about your date.” They tried the mango pudding. “I never know what to say when things like that happen,” Lynette confessed, “Pudding’s on me.”

Tammy liked but did not love Lynette. She liked her ex boyfriend, Dennis. She’d lived with Dennis for six months before he decided theirs was a lukewarm passion, and they had always been more friends than lovers. They broke up after their only serious fight. Dennis was angry with Tammy because she would only trim, not wax, her pubic hairs. His last girlfriend had done this for him.

“It isn’t that I mind some sexual grooming. But that hurts. A little landscaping is okay.”

“Forget I asked,” he said.

They argued for two hours. Did he really want her to? She would of course if he really did, but that just wasn’t *her*.

He turned away from her at night, and their sex before that was not what she imagined sex should be. Dennis came home with bikini waxing kits from the CVS. Her pubic area broke out in angry red bumps that made him scowl.

“Oh, this is ridiculous,” she told him. “If we have to negotiate the grooming of my private parts...” But she couldn’t finish. What had seemed a good idea wasn’t. But they remained friends.

He came to her grandmother’s funeral, which seemed a lovely gesture, and left right after. He gave her some baby’s breath bought at the grocery store. “I remember you liked this kind of flower,” he said. At the funeral there was a portrait of her grandmother in her early thirties, looking pretty and winsome, pin curls blurred around her face in a fuzzy halo. She was, Tammy thought, the most beautiful woman she’d ever known in person. Tammy loved that young Addy, with her small pointed chin, heartbreaking pale eyes and hollowed cheeks.

“She looked like you,” Dennis told her afterwards, and that was kind. They hugged awkwardly. He said he’d liked to have met her grandfather. Missing Addy made her miss Grandpa Paul. Her grandfather had worn dun-colored work clothes every week. He was a mechanic. On Sundays he put on a suit and a hat to cover his bald head. The hat usually had some sort of feather in it. He and Addy both sang in the choir. He’d once had a car shop, years before Tammy was born, but the business had failed. He still carried a key chain, a fake copper penny that said “A Penny A Day Drives A Henry J.” She remembered rubbing the top of his shiny head for good luck. She remembered his fondness for the television show *Hogan’s Heroes*, and the way he looked at her grandmother when she walked into a room.

It was kind of pissing her off, his great love. If you grow up seeing that, you can take it for granted it'll happen to you. Well, it certainly hadn't for Tammy. After her breakup with Dennis, she discovered that she'd rather daydream about the man she used to be in love with than go out with men she probably would never more than like. She had not seen or spoken to him over a year. His name was David, and he had traveled a lot for his job, so most of their romance had been conducted over the phone, in conversation. He was a medic who travelled with vacation packages, cruises and trips to California vineyards for retirees who wanted to travel but keep someone who knew what to do for their old hearts and parts close. Before that he'd driven an ambulance.

They never talked about sex. They talked about books and memories. He told her about his days driving the ambulance. If he had a bad day, he told her about it and not the way he had at first, with carefully constructed rescue stories, honed over years of practice, designed to impress. What impressed her most was the window he had into other people's lives at crucial moments, life-or-death moments. He would remember their faces, their stories but to them, he was a medic, anonymous. The most beautiful story he told was of an old woman who held her husband in her arms, long after he was dead, and would not relinquish. She was naked, her old breasts loose as she rocked him back and forth and back and forth. She'd come running from the bedroom, not wanting to waste a moment of time. "She might have hated him for half the marriage, but right then you could see he was everything." David had been married once.

Tammy read him poetry, usually over the phone.

Sometimes they flirted.

The last time they spoke, he told her that the hotel he was staying in was like a giant space station, and he wished she was there.

“Are there waffles? Can you make your own waffles?”

“They make them for you.”

“Nice. Three-stars then.”

“Definitely.”

“Do they make those little flutes out of the towels? What are they called?

Flutes?” She asked.

“They do and there’s even a bathrobe for you here, my dear,” he’d said.

“Bring me back a fluted towel,” she said, smiling at the warmth in his voice. But he did not.

Lynette and Dog were her only socializing these days. Mostly, she’d come home from her shift at the library, heat up Lean Cuisine, turn on some nightly crime show after walking the dog. The dog was so fat she didn’t get very far; she sniffed around the trees a bit, relieved herself, and then turned around to go back and eat canned food. The dog did not seem too interested in affection. She was content to eat, sleep, sniff around a bit.

“Oh where have you been doggy girl?” Tammy asked her one night. It was funny, how she sometimes burst into doggy/baby talk when the dog never seemed to have patience for it and Tammy wasn’t the sort to enjoy that kind of prattle. The dog sighed. Tammy propped her legs up on the dog’s almost-flat back; she was practically as big around as an ottoman. But then the dog growled, and Tammy removed her feet.

“Sorry,” Tammy said. Tammy was doing her best not to go back to inside the closet. Sometimes, she slept in there. She’d been sleeping in closets since she left home.

It made her feel closer to her grandmother. Once inside for the night, she could hear rustling, smell the pickled fish, the Ben Gay. The wet cotton-in-her-mouth feeling spread to her eyes, her nose. With the lights turned off and an old coat pressed against the crack below the door, she would lie in the deep black. The space could be anything, anywhere.

Addy had hidden in closets, before she was rescued. She had taken her granddaughter inside them, to tell stories and stroke her hair. Most people threw junk into closets, but Addy's home was reverse; the closets were clean, tight spaces. The junk was all outside.

That night, when Tammy closed her eyes, David told her she looked elegant in her camel coat. A woman in the restaurant asked her if it was vintage and she answered "yes." It had been Addy's. There were white tablecloths and fat round lamps hanging over them, spilling the kind of light that made her think of a warmly lit church on Christmas Eve. They ordered steamed clams, and then he said, let's try caviar. He could never have been called Davey, or Dave. He had the same way about him that Tammy had; shy with others, and a kind of caustic humor that broke out sometimes and surprised people. Most people Tammy was acquainted with didn't understand that humor; they thought because she was quiet she was also sweet and docile. But David, well. She felt at home with him, when she was with him. As he'd felt with her, she knew this.

They had a scare, but that evening in the restaurant they knew she was not pregnant, and so now they talked about names happily. "Beatrice Beethoven Bernard," she said. They were going through the alphabet. His smile was wide open.

When he fell asleep beside her that night, she whispered "I love you" and gave his shoulders butterfly kisses, not caring really so much if he heard. There was a scar on the

back of his left shoulder from the time someone had jumped him in Oslo, when he was a young student, and she kissed it good night. She loved his two scars. He'd been to South America, to Europe countless times and also to China twice. She wanted to go to another country too, but only with him.

At some point in the night when she had thought more about David than she could stand, Tammy opened the door and the dog joined her, finding a spot near the crumpled up laundry. It was comfortable, more so than being alone or with another human. The dog was a heavy breather, and that, too, was soothing. At what point did this kind of yearning become self-indulgent? For some reason, this time when she closed her eyes, she saw Grandpa Paul and Addy, dancing in a starlit lounge, all sepia-tones. Addy's fuzzy blonde hair was fluffed up enough to reach Paul's shoulders, and they knew the steps, they would dance for hours like this.

Tammy worked in a small library, a branch of the local community college. She was not a very ambitious person, although she seemed to have achieved more in her thirty-two years than her mother ever did. And her mother had been an ambitious woman. Tammy had no real interest in becoming head librarian.

If it weren't marked on the calendar, Tammy would have forgotten this day, September 30th, a Wednesday, was her birthday. When she woke up she thought of her dream of him last night, something reminiscent, but of course they were someplace they'd never been, like Paris, and they had a little black-haired girl with hair cut straight across her cheeks. Name like Madeline or Elspeth or Iris, an impossibly quaint storybook name. There were bubbles over their heads, and, at some point, she was watching him

with the little girl and understood that the girl was not her daughter, that she was not traveling with them. Then the little girl blew up her cheeks and floated up and away.

“Hey, you gave me good dreams, old girl,” Tammy said and the dog grunted.

They had a routine now. It was nice.

These reveries were a great source of pleasure but they were becoming a problem. David might as well be a character in one of her paperbacks, it had been so long since she had actually seen him. She was ready to go to work, to see real people. “Have a good day Scruffy,” she said before letting the dog out to pee. It was good to have someone to talk to, to remind her of the present, even if the someone was an animal. She’d started to use different names, to see if any one name stuck.

She dressed up more than usual, deciding on brown lipstick and ochre eyeshadow, a tweed jacket with shoulder pads that made her feel imposing. It didn’t matter to her what she looked like but if she started dressing as if it did, maybe it would start to matter. Maybe things would start to feel normal again. Her boss had a lovely old-fashioned name. Oliver. His office’s glass window faced the reference desk, although he usually kept the blinds shut when he was in there working. Someday Tammy would probably have a small office, like Oliver’s, and a life as quiet and ordered as that office.

Oliver probably had his own little pocket of filth, and if he did, Tammy didn’t want to know about it.

There were the other librarians, but it was a small branch and she hardly saw them because they worked different shifts at the reference desk. Trip, the media assistant, seemed to have a crush on her; he came in several times a week to sit directly across from the reference desk before applying for the job. He was awkward and tall, with bright red

hair. For awhile she tried to imagine him as someone else – sort of like the romantic, sensitive beast who lived in underground tunnels beneath the subway system in New York and courts a beautiful DA in a television program she used to watch. The sensitive beast was named Vincent and he was a bit stalker-y, often meeting with his beauty on her balcony underneath billowing curtains. But when Trip started coming to work stoned half the time smelling like wet cardboard, the little fantasy wore off and she had the feeling that if she ever did return his affections, she wouldn't be worth much in his eyes. She was glad to see he wasn't there that morning.

The day was rainy and slow. Oliver came in from a meeting with the bibliographers, looking, well - not ruffled. Oliver could never look ruffled. But not as crisp, not so sharp, as usual. "I'm sorry about your grandmother, Tammy," he told her, and half an hour later brought her a cup of black coffee.

"How are you doing today?" he asked her.

"I've been slipping into reveries," she said. "I miss her." She shrugged. He was considerate, almost a friend.

"Coffee should be black as hell, strong as death, and as sweet as love," she said. It was one of their office games. "Turkish proverb," Oliver said, "Thank you for your coffee, signor. I shall miss that when we leave Casablanca."

"Ingrid Bergman." Tammy said. Oliver smiled.

"Are you going out or anything? For your birthday?"

"No," Tammy said. She felt embarrassed. "I'd better check the desk."

At the end of the day, after coming in from break, Tammy found a basket of paper flowers and coffee beans beside the reference computer. Inside the paper petals of the largest tulip, Oliver had written the words "Coffee is a fleeting moment and a fragrance."

Tammy pulled out a pink memo and wrote out "It was a pleasant cafe, warm and clean and friendly, and I hung up my old water-proof on the coat rack to dry and put my worn and weathered felt hat on the rack above the bench and ordered a cafe au lait. The waiter brought it and I took out a notebook from the pocket of the coat and a pencil and started to write....."

This was the best and safest sort of kindness, Tammy thought, the sweet space between people who care for each other the way she and Oliver do. They have an allotted amount of time together and there are no real expectations other than a basic social contract. A boss. A student. A patient. A lover who never becomes a husband. God, she'd never share this idea with Lynette. It sounded so depressing.

One night David had called her up, not exactly drunk, but this time he seemed to be talking more to himself than to her. He said he was almost beginning to forget her face. But she had seen him just a few weeks before. He said it wistfully, lovingly, and it was only after they'd hung up that it struck her how - well, it wasn't something a man in love would say was it? Lynette would have called it insulting.

And she kept saying bright happy things throughout their conversations, but after that night it all felt changed. She kept thinking how he'd said that about forgetting her face. It sounded wistful, but maybe a little rehearsed. She thought about it so often that she realized she couldn't remember, exactly, how he'd said it, only that he'd said it and she was probably a fool.

She was angry, but not at him. There was no explaining attraction. He was not the most handsome man in the world. But she loved his wire-rimmed glasses, his nicely pressed shirts, the scar under his left eyebrow. She loved the story he told her once, of how his father made him stand straight for two hours without scratching his nose or moving when he didn't do his homework. She loved the way he told it, with a kind of grudging admiration and awe for his parents. They were Vietnamese immigrants and wanted his success above all else. His father had wanted him to become a doctor.

She would not forget David's face. They'd spent a Christmas Eve together, walked through a light show in a park sipping powdered hot cocoa from Styrofoam cups. When they stopped in front of a live oak sparkling with lights and plywood elves her eyes welled up. From happiness! What was wrong with her? This was her first love, and here she was in her thirties.

When she had finished her cocoa, she stuffed her hand in the pocket of his coat for warmth. He told her his parents had never really understood the fuss over Santa but had made an attempt to celebrate an American Christmas with a small pink plastic tree. And she told him about Addy, how her grandmother had filled the house with sweets and candles. Addy had believed whatever happened on Christmas Eve would impact the rest of the year. So if anyone argued, this would mean a troublesome year. And what she believed, it somehow had a way of coming true.

"We won't quarrel then, not tonight," he'd said.

"Oh we'll never argue, not ever," she said, looking up at him, then down again.

"You know what else she said? That the first visitor on Christmas morning was

important. If it was a woman, it meant misfortune for the year. So if you are my first visitor in the morning that means a good year for me.”

“Ah, but what does it mean for me?” he asked.

And for a few months, in her time with him, she believed she knew what it had felt like for Addy to walk into a room on Grandpa Paul’s arm. That feeling she got, when they walked into a room and he rested his hand in the small of her back, it made her stand taller.

They talked about a future, but it was in a vague way. Places they might go someday. She told him how Addy and Paul liked ballroom dancing. They were graceful, well-matched. They danced in the living room sometimes, putting on a show. Somewhere in a dump were the pearl earrings and pretty shining brooches Addy had worn for him when he took her out for steak and dancing. They had been lost in the flotsam and jetsam for decades already.

Tammy decided to call the fat old dog Lucy. “Hey Luce, old buddy old girl,” she said to her as they went walking. The doggie talk came easily to her now. She’d brought home a book about dog training, although Lucy didn’t seem in need of much training. Tammy repeated the name again and again, as the book instructed, to teach Lucy to respond to it. But Lucy didn’t seem to care one way or another.

Tammy had started talking to this dog a lot. But the dog seemed to like it; she looked up with hound eyes, and thumped her tail occasionally. Tammy told her all about her grandparents, her sad poor dead mother, her lost love. “David. He’d said, ‘Why don’t we get married.’ David said that. I took him at his word. Oh, you should have seen me old girl. I emailed him the picture of a tiny cake, with champagne icing, just the

right size for two. I kept thinking it was all the more so if he wasn't saying it. Stupid, right? I kept thinking if you talk too much about something, about the truth, you annihilate it. But you know, he said, 'I was just being fanciful.'

What did I go and do? I read him a stanza from a poem:

Blue poured into summer blue,
 A hawk broke from his cloudless tower,
 The roof of the silo blazed, and I knew
 That part of my life was over. –

It's from a poem called *End of Summer*, Lucy. By a poet named Stanley Kunitz. He told me I had a beautiful voice. This was the best I could offer him; Addy's waterfall Alice-in-Wonderland hair, and my good reading voice. You like my voice too, don't you Lucy?"

The dog had been staring at Tammy throughout the entire story. She thumped her tail.

On her way in to the foodie grocery store Tammy decided to mention the dog to some of the homeless kids gathered in front. It had been about three weeks, but someone could still be missing her. They were an androgynous couple, one with a shaved head, the other unshaven and tall. She asked them if they were missing or knew anyone who had lost an old dog. She's seen those kids, or at least some like them, with dogs on a rope. They looked back at her with flat expressions. What was she thinking? Kids like

that would not be good for a dog. “Naw,” the girl said. “Do you have a dollar and fifteen cents?”

Once inside Tammy asked the butcher for bones. This would be something for Lucy to savor. Some of them had just a little raw meat hanging off. Tammy had read that the bones could sometimes be dangerous and splinter, causing choking. But Lucy was old. She needed some pleasure out of life.

She and Lucy slept in the closet regularly now. So what? Weirdness is part of the human condition, isn't it? Certainly sleeping in closets wasn't as weird as collecting hair out of shower drains. Or hoarding. Or – Tammy's mother was probably a nymphomaniac for God's sake.

After her mother died, after Grandpa Paul died, Tammy slept with her grandmother downstairs. Addy rolled her hair in rags at night, as she had since she was a girl in Poland; after a nightly ritual of Pond's cold cream and hair-rolling, she would scratch Tammy's back with her thumbnail. The house was skittering with nocturnal life but with her grandmother beside her, this wasn't so frightening to Tammy. It occurred to Tammy, coming home to her old dog now every evening, that this was probably the first time she hadn't been lonely since she moved everything out of Addy's house.

“My mother was sort of a slut,” Tammy told the dog one night. “But she was very clean. She was a fastidious slut.” Audrey, Tammy's mother, was a suicide. People said she had killed herself over some disgrace with a man but even as a girl Tammy knew the real reason was more complicated and depressing than that.

Audrey was just tired, too tired to keep on going. Everyday life had been an effort for her for as long as Tammy could remember. She had bursts of cheeriness,

mostly when she came back from her time away from the family. Every year she travelled to cities Tammy had never been to; it was one thing Addy never scolded her about. She must have known her daughter needed it. Audrey would come back with gifts and extra money.

Ill gotten, Addy called the presents, but she wore the scarves and necklaces Audrey gave her; a bit of real coral, a silver and pearl brooch found in an antique store in Maine. As she grew, Tammy began to suspect the gifts came from men but this was not something she ever asked.

The dog would now allow Tammy to rest her feet on the old fat back. As long as Lucy was lying down, the weight of her mistress's feet didn't bother her too much. "My mother's name was Audrey, after the movie star. And she was very pretty. She had Addy's same eyes, pale blue, almost animal blue. You know what Addy wanted to call me? Tiffany. After *Breakfast At Tiffany's*. My mother wouldn't though. It's funny because of the two of them Addy was the practical one, my mother the dreamer. And we didn't talk about my father. It didn't seem to matter who he was, not to them anyway."

"And Audrey kept only three dresses. When they wore out, she cut them into rags and replaced them. When she died, she owned: one black, one sprinkled with cherries, her summertime dress, and one gray shift for workdays in the local library. She owned two skirts, two blouses, and an interview suit. "

When she came home Audrey would change into blue jeans. Some weekends, she would take out the two burgundy Samsonite suitcases and fit everything they owned into them. "This, Tammy, this is our new rule. Never keep anything more than what we can fit into two generous suitcases. This is all we need, life's essentials and a few good

books.” Her mother sprayed the sheets with lavender, but the heady smells from downstairs could not be masked. Moonlight and sunlight fell in bright bars through the unshaded windows, the giant room’s only extravagance.

And there was one afternoon – a rainy afternoon in early spring – Tammy had believed they were actually leaving this time. Her mother seemed very happy, breathless, shaking the water from her hair, pulling out the suitcases conspiratorily. They couldn’t tell Addy or Grandpa Paul, not yet. This man would leave with them soon. He was mad about Audrey and his wife, his sad wife with her allergies and all his milk-for-blood children. Well, they weren’t the children meant for him, she wasn’t the wife he was meant to have. Audrey explained that these children, it wasn’t their fault. But they were all wet noodles, so was the wife. None of them could even be in the same room with a peanut! “If they so much as get a whiff of peanut dust, they go into anaphylactic shock. Can you believe that? Their noses are constantly running. They have to struggle to make a B plus. They aren’t bad people, but he doesn’t want this life. He wants the life he was meant to have. And doesn’t he deserve it? Don’t we deserve it too?” They were going away, to a place like Paris or New York, some place where...they would wear matching blue velvet dresses to the opera. Their hair would always be worn down! He was meant for a woman like Audrey and a daughter like Tamara. As her mother spoke, weaving her hands in and out, biting her bottom lip in anticipation, Tammy could taste it too, all that fresh baked bread and the languages they’d learn, the adventures they would have. She believed it, utterly, and yet she knew as soon as her mother left the room she would stop believing.

The town was known for its gutted granite quarry, and Audrey took Tammy swimming there before her trysts on weekends that beautiful awful spring. Tammy loved the quarry's cold, clear light. Coming in from a sunlit morning into her grandparents' den, curling up against the itchy sofa with a cup of tomato soup and an afternoon of 70s sitcoms after all that fresh cold air, it was one of her favorite things in the world. Sometimes Addy would sit beside her, knitting Kleenex box cozies or funny little fairy outfits for Barbie doll clothes she'd sell at the flea markets on Saturdays. Often Grandpa was outside, moving around his scrap metal. The house was filled with important things: Audrey's faded ribbons, dolls with teeth in boxes that Addy was constantly repairing with different doll-body parts, balls of string (Grandpa took them from the daily newspaper and was furious when they stopped using twine and began delivering newspapers in plastic bags), empty bottles of long-since discontinued beauty creams. Tammy liked those old bottles. They smelled faintly of honey and had names like *Rose of Sharon* or *Beautymilk*. She liked reading the old copies of *Ladies' Home Journal*. There were old Nancy Drew books and book-of-the-month club books with titles like *So Dear To My Heart*. Everything was in its place, the way it should be, and that was the most delicious part of it all; the waiting, the secret, the possibilities, the things she and her mother would see very soon.

It was only a few weeks later that they dragged Audrey out of the lake.

Addy believed in a spiritual world you could bargain with. She talked about the saints as if they were old friends. She talked about Audrey as if she weren't very far away, and she had done something thoughtless that was certainly forgivable. Like stay out too late or shoplifting.

If something was lost, Addy talked to Saint Anthony of Padua, the patron saint of lost and stolen articles. And as long as it was on her property, it was misplaced but it was not gone. The loveknot Paul had given her decades ago, a prized possession Tammy had never seen, was somewhere not far and as soon as Addy had time to really search she'd find it.

It was Addy who told Tammy that angels lived with them. Audrey was at a night class, studying to become a librarian and would get home after supper on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Those nights, Addy would stay up late talking to Tammy long after Grandpa Paul began snoring. "Hear that hum?" Addy said. The house did hum, she wasn't making it up. Addy and Tammy listened to the whirring. "That's the angels breathing."

"Do you really think it's angels?" Tammy asked her.

"I do," she said.

"I know what it is," Tammy said. "It's ghosts.

"You think so."

"Yeah, and they move really slow, and can't see very well. And they are very dusty."

Addy's fingers did waterfalls along her granddaughter's back until Tammy fell asleep. "It is angels, sloneczko," Addy whispered, "our guardians."

The meaty bones, it turned out, were a bad idea just as the books said they would be.

A few days after introducing meaty bones, one evening Lucy gnawed on a bone obsessively and wouldn't leave her spot by the flower pots or come in to eat her canned supper.

In the morning, Tammy was bold enough to try to take the bone from under the dog's skinny snout and Lucy bore down, biting clean through to the bone on Tammy's index finger. She wouldn't open her jaws at first, she just bore down harder and stared up at Tammy for what seemed like several minutes. "Oh my God Lucy let go. You are hurting me. Stop! Bad dog!" The dog released, and Tammy ran inside.

Blood ran pretty quickly, getting all over the carpet.

"You stupid bitch!" Tammy yelled through the closed doors. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

It had to be treated, she couldn't just bandage this one up. And she couldn't drive herself to the hospital so she called Lynette. All the way there she kept a small towel wrapped tightly around the wound, careful not to drip on Lynette's upholstery. They weren't good enough friends for this.

"Does that dog even have shots?" Lynette asked.

It took an embarrassing three hours. Tammy looked like an irresponsible pet owner in front of the hospital staff. Forget about looked like – she *was* an irresponsible pet owner.

"You need to call someone about that dog," Lynette told her, dropping her off. Tammy felt a gentle wave of self-pity wash over herself as she got out of the car. The old renovated mansion suddenly looked ridiculous to her. When she first moved in it seemed so charming, with its bright candy colored paint and stained glass windows. Now

it looked – just lonely. She was ridiculous, talking to a geriatric dog like it was her soul mate when the dog would probably gnaw her head off for a meaty bone.

She took a couple of pain killers, called Oliver to say she should be in the next day. It would be hard to type, but other than that she should be fine. She read and slept off and on until dusk, then went to the window to check on Lucy. The dog was still out there with her sharp little snout between her legs, guarding the damn bone. It was waiting game. She scratched on the door eventually, asking for entrance.

“I forgive you,” Tammy told her. “It’s my fault anyway. I shouldn’t have gotten you the meaty bones.”

It was a bad idea to mix alcohol and painkillers, but Tammy did anyway. There was some rum leftover from the holidays in the back of the pantry, and she mixed it with some Ovaltine. She realized she was drunk when she began to cry. “My eyes are leaking,” she told Lucy. “Everyone but you is far far away from me. I love you Lucy. Lucy.” That was the name, her favorite name for a baby girl.

She called David. He answered on the second ring. “Tammy?” he said groggily. Tammy hung up and he didn’t call her back.

That night, Lucy slept in her regular spot in the corner of the closet and dreamed about Addy. Tammy had some vague knowledge of the things she’d done to survive before her grandfather had taken her home from the second world war and married her. She’d had to fuck some men and do some unsavory things to get by.

Sweet Delights, Adelajda whispers into Tammy’s ear. They are inside Tata’s wardrobe, and it smells of ginger, tobacco, oranges, mothballs. They crawl to the back corner, falling together, biting tongues so they won’t giggle, like puppies. Addy’s hand

in Tammy's is curling into a little fist. Shutting their eyelids tight they are such small puppies, blind little puppies. *Adelajda, Adelajda!* Tata is calling, she is always hiding. *I think he is getting worried*, Tammy whispers and Addy bites her softly on the fattiest part of her arm. She is fat in all the places where Adelajda is thin. *Shhh shhhh* go to sleep. Addy's voice is flimsy, sweet and behind closed lids Tammy sees small ginger cookies with plum filling piled on a blue glass plate, ginger cookies with apple filling covered in chocolate, the cups of chocolate waiting for them when they are done hiding. *pierniczki alpejskie* Addy whisper, *shhh. Katarzynki*. Who is that? *Who is that* Tammy says but *Shh* Addy is pressing her forehead against the back of Tammy's neck, and now her hair is spilling over, she is leaning over them both making a curtain over them and she is bigger now, soft breasts loose in her nightgown and speaking in words Tammy will never learn. Her hair is a blurred glow, light spilling in from outside through the cracks. *Shhh shhh* and she is making waterfalls with her fingertips across Tammy's back. *Podejez do mnie, kochana wnusiu.*

When she woke up, Tammy was curled up in the back corner of the closet. It was already mid-day. The dog hadn't even tried to wake her, but there was the distinct scent of urine. It was afternoon already. She was very late to work and did not call in; well, she had sixty something thousand dollars now. Addy hoarded more than cat food tins. Tammy could sleep.

You can lose someone in increments, even when you hold on to them in pieces. Time starts playing tricks and eventually you start hoarding memories. They aren't objects, they can't get sticky and soiled, they don't grow mold. Her mother had left her

thoughts little by little, until a week, a month went by and she only thought of her in spurts. If she thought too much about David, she'd lose him.

The next night, Tammy had sex with the media assistant, Trip, in the audio-visual storage closet. It was her first time in a long time. Of course it was a mistake. Her thoughts before: she wanted to feel someone's arms around her. He was tall; he might make her feel enclosed. When she came in that evening from her nightshift, he said she looked like Demeter coming in from the corn. She liked his eyes that night, how they never seemed to leave her even when they did. And when they did, they settled on the nape of her neck, the backs of her knees, her hair swirled back like Grace Kelly in a Hitchcock film. Had she been dressing for him? Maybe she had. She lingered at least a half hour after they shut down the library and finished off his flask of whiskey. He was talking about JRR Tolkien. She wasn't listening, not really. She was watching him trying not to watch her. His eyebrows were ginger colored, bushy, and they moved like caterpillars in and out when he exclaimed.

He was waiting for her as always to say it's time to call it a night and instead she began to cry. He slumped over her, patting her head for a moment, and then when she reached up to embrace him he gathered her up. They did not move well together. She wondered if cruel children ever called him a name, like scarecrow. He pushed into her clumsily, and then took both her tits into his mouth, looking up at her for approval. For some reason, in that moment, his eyes reminded her of Lucy's. She felt a little nauseous.

It had been too long since she touched anyone. Once they started she fully realized her mistake; her eyes were bleeding mascara and he had her pressed against the wall; saying *Tamara Tamara*. She would have liked to say, *this is my mistake, I'm sorry*,

but would you mind stopping now? She couldn't figure out how to move with him. His hands were in her hair, loosening her braid and when she went to stop him and said, "You don't have a condom," he ignored her, pressing her collarbone with those giant hands. When he was done he was solicitous. He wiped her face with a cloth, braided her hair for her. "I braid Nora's hair," he said and for a second she forgot. Oh, yes. Nora. His niece. Weird. That's some weird shit.

The whole fifteen minute act seemed sloppy, indulgent, and she couldn't look at him after. He would not want to let go, after this. *You are my queen*, he kept telling her. She was too drunk to drive herself home. How could she leave her car here? Her solution was to ask Trip to follow her in case she swerved, and he did.

She'd never been this reckless, sexually that is. She would take three pregnancy tests and a batter of STD tests in the next couple of weeks. She had told Trip things she'd never told anyone – not the stranger on the bus, not David, certainly not Dennis. She spewed it all out at him before they had sex and now he would mistake that for intimacy. She told him how Audrey was found in Principal Dunlap's ugly Pacer, submerged in Choctaw Lake, a suburban lake popular with picnickers and bikers. She had been drinking. Mr. Dunlap was separated but the father of three, and his wife was president of the PTO as well as an active volunteer at the Bethesda library. Her name was Matilda, and she was kind to Tammy and her grandparents at the funeral. She sat apart from her husband, although later they were reunited. It was a sober, understated service. Tammy mostly remembered Matilda Dunlap at the wake. Matilda's hair was pale, a forgettable shade of brown, her skin the color of skim milk. She gave Tammy a peppermint to suck

on and told her that if she didn't want to cry, to suck harder on the peppermint. "Thank you Mrs. Dunlap," Tammy had responded.

"Please, call me Matilda," Matilda said. Mr. Dunlap sat with a plateful of little wieners and cheese, staring at the JC Hall door.

Matilda's eyes were a nothing-color, like dirty dishwater, and she smelled like something crumpled pulled out of an old pocket. The funeral was perfunctory, and Grandpa Paul barely spoke after that. He would spend his days with scrap metal, what days were left, and finally his heart failed him "on a cold autumn morning" Tammy told Trip, although it was not a cold morning and it wasn't autumn, either.

Home after the bad sex, Tammy couldn't stop thinking about her grandmother. The same day Paul was buried Addy told Tammy that eunuchs liked to be buried with their private parts. Addy would keep his scrap metal, all of his things, as if he had never left them. But over the years his shirts were yellowed and musty, and rats nested beneath the scrap metal.

Addy herself saved her teeth after they were pulled for dentures, and even her gall stones were in a jar. She insisted that her daughter and her husband have their organs kept inside them, and so they were buried quickly. People were often kind and accommodating to Addy. It was a lot, everyone agreed, to lose both and so close together.

The quarry water was the coolest, deepest green Tammy had ever seen; deeper than the jade she liked to take out of Addy's jewelry box. Addy told her of the things that could be found at the bottom of quarries. Limbs, treasures, the cars of murdered criminals. Swimming in a quarry was risky; the adult Tammy knew this, but the child

Tammy felt safe. Whenever she was there, she was with her mother. They knew to look there when Tammy told them about those mornings. She knew her mother wouldn't have left – not without her. That was their plan.

“Murdered,” Addy whispered to her granddaughter. “Murdered by those demons.” They were sitting together on the scratchy sofa, sipping weak tea and eating fig newtons off of their t.v. dinner trays. Nobody from the funeral was invited into the house. Nobody was ever invited into the house.

Tammy was a teenager now and wise to her grandmother's superstitious paranoia.

“If you think Mom was murdered, report it to the police!” She'd said.

“You are a foolish girl if you think that. Nobody will listen to an old woman and a hysterical girl.”

Tammy wondered if her grandmother was becoming senile.

“You don't have these kinds of boyfriends as your mother had. There is no one hundred percent proven method of birth control, you remember this. Also do not give away your parts to them, some boys will suck your parts like candy.”

“I won't,” Tammy promised. That night she slept in the attic, in the bed she and her mother had shared for years. This had never seemed odd to her, although at some point she'd realized it was not something others did. People would have called it weird, but her mother kept to her side. Tammy lay awake, all night, blinking, wanting her mother. She wanted the shiny brown hair parted straight down the middle, falling over the pillow and getting in Tammy's way. Her breath smelling of peppermint. She seemed younger now she was dead, younger even than Tammy. And far away. It wasn't until

years later Tammy realized her grandmother was talking about a supernatural murder, a ghostly assault.

Trip had come in to the library several weeks before taking the media assistant position, mostly it seemed to stare at Tammy. This should have made her nervous but at the time it hadn't. She was oddly comfortable under his gaze; she almost wanted to say, *I understand.*

He first came in with his niece, a little girl named Nora. If she had a daughter, Tammy would have liked this type of whimsical child, one who didn't smack gum or want to grow up too fast. The two of them were a pair, and the man was tender with the girl, which Tammy found endearing. When Trip took a job as a media assistant, Tammy was pretty sure it was to be near her. *Tamara* he called her, and he said it almost as if she were a queen from a Lord Tennyson poem. She found him attractive; crazy spaghetti-red hair and scarecrow arms and legs. But he unnerved her. He was the sort who lived in elderly parents' basements, masturbated too much, read haphazardly.

When he asked her out after the sex she told him she was engaged to a man named Dick Bandle. Why make up the lie? She wasn't sure, but it became a story that grew, and soon Oliver and everyone believed in a man named Dick, who was going to whisk her away to another state. She told them Dick was an oral surgeon.

Almost like magic, a few days after the mistake with Trip, there was a terrible butterfly migration. At first the migration seemed a beautiful event; they fluttered everywhere, in the streets, in the front lawns of every neighborhood. They were small, rusty-red and yellow, their wings no bigger than the palm of a child's hand. Driving in the mornings, at first, seemed some ridiculous affirmation of life, Addy's angels coming

to visit in droves. But then, countless kamikazed on Tammy's windshield. It felt awful, finding piles of dead butterfly wings under her wipers. If everything that is lost is once returned, is it returned intact? Or in mangled bits and pieces?

And then there was Trip. She came in one Friday to find drawings of butterflies with narrow penises trying their best to penetrate Tammy's nostrils, ears and mouth. Tammy's hair wound like snakes around her neck. *You fucked me*, one of the pictures said in John Hancock penmanship. *I fucked you*.

She'd have to tell Oliver, of course. More embarrassment.

The vet announced that Lucy had many health issues. She was probably ten years old, and she had a rough life. He said her teeth needed to be cleaned, but she was probably too fragile and too old for him to put her under for it. Just getting Lucy into the car took a whole morning. Lucy was suspicious, and Tammy wouldn't tell anyone but she was a little bit nervous about telling the dog what to do. Lucy was a biter.

"A dog this old," the vet explained, "is hard to adopt out. The best thing they can do for her is keep her comfortable for now." He stroked Lucy's ears, gave her shots. The dog liked him, it seemed, more than she liked Tammy. Tammy should be dating men like him, not fucking in the audio/visual closet. Those last few years, after Audrey and Grandpa Paul were gone, the rats came. They were roof rats, nesting in the attic that had once been so clean. The noises came from the attic just after dusk.

"I looked a certain way, a way like you, pretty like you and your mother," Addy told Tammy the week of her high school graduation. Now that Audrey was dead, Addy was talking more about that past. That night, Addy looked Tammy up and down, feet to head, up and down again and again. "I did very horrible things."

“I don’t know Addy. Maybe they weren’t so bad, if you had to do them to survive,” Tammy said. At sixteen, she thought she understood things better than her grandmother did.

Addy began to talk about the past when Tammy was a teenager, back when Tammy would not listen. She spoke of a sister who was so skinny they added butter to her soup! When Addy talked about those days, it was mostly about food. She had a sugar tooth! And the foods, before the war! Even after, they had pork. This sister could eat plates of it and still was made of sticks. The Germans rationed pork but they had a connection. Oh but after the war! The bread tasted more of clay than flour. The tea was made from acorns! The jam was beetroot-based. You forgot, in time, what food was supposed to taste like.

Addy talked more about food, flooring, and clothes than people. *Parquet floors, Tammy, if you had seen.* She remembered dresses, burgundy velvet, eyelit, the matching dresses she and her sister wore. “So she was killed? Is that what happened?” Tammy had asked, weary of all the food and clothing details. “Yes.”

“What happened to her?”

Addy sighed. The night of her indiscretion with Trip, Tammy told him about the two-suitcase rule her mother had. She drank and talked, without looking at him, talking to him the way she talked to the dog, telling him more and more the drunker she became.

“Audrey was about to get her library science degree when she died. The only time we ever got out of there, like she said we would, it was for a little vacation. My mom had saved enough for a long weekend and she took me. You know, she went on vacations with her boyfriends but they paid. This one she paid for, it was just for us.

She took me to New York City, and we couldn't afford the Plaza but we did go for tea, and we ran up and down the stairs after tea. We took a pillowcase from a linen basket outside one of the doors. "We'll give it to Addy," Audrey had giggled, "a piece of the Plaza." We had tea and scones, and then went to look at the stone lions in front of the main branch at the New York Public Library, Patience and Fortitude. And Audrey stuffed one of the linens into a purse she bought me on St. Mark's. And she said, *that's ephemera*. Ephemera: Items of collectible memorabilia, typically written or printed ones, that were originally expected to have only short-term usefulness or popularity. Like the things that Grandma has such a hard time parting with. The things that were only meant to exist or be used for a short time."

Trip watched her and murmured things like, *my sweet girl* and, *that's so sad*. It was all very desperate. They kissed sloppy and then would stop kissing and Tammy would talk some more.

The dog was suffering from flatulence. It was getting to where Lucy had a hard time making it through the afternoon without having an accident so Tammy left her some newspapers in the kitchen. She showed Lucy where they were and the dog used them right away. Probably someone else had already shown her this. She didn't seem to show much interest in life these days, not even during her short walks through the courtyard. She gave a few perfunctory sniffs then turned around to go back inside. It was enough to make Tammy want to buy her another bone. How long did the old girl have left?

After bringing her home from the kind vet, Tammy put some slow-cooked pork in with Lucy's dog food. The dog swallowed it whole, then groaned as if she were in pain.

That night Lucy slept beside Tammy, instead of curled up in her usual corner. Tammy dreamed she was Addy.

She is in a hole, and a man has found her. She is hungry, and she's been sucking dirt from her fingertips, vomiting. He looks into her large eyes. Although she is almost twenty, he thinks she is a child. He has food for her, he tells her to rest her head in his lap and speaks to her as if she is a skittery horse. He gives her bread. That bread! It melts on her tongue, and he gives it to her in rolled up little balls, telling her not to eat too quickly. He lifts her stained blouse, rolls her nipples in between his fingers as if they are the little balls of fresh bread.

"I come from a proud line of sluts," Tammy told Lucy in the morning. "We may be sluts but we know how to act like a lady."

Lucy let out a kind of arrooo howl/grunt that sounded almost pleasant.

"You aren't fixed, the handsome vet told me this. How many litters?"

Trip had stopped coming to work, and that was a relief. But then he started parking in the lot at night, skulking. And before her shift, he'd send in his niece with messages for her, written out in a sixth-grade girl's loopy, neat penmanship on blue-lined paper. The subject headings read *Urgent, Please read*. They were rants, mostly, and she's stopped reading them by now. Sometimes they were poems. Sometimes they were stories about men fucking old women in pantyhose, or old ladies and dwarves having orgies and eating pink frosted cakes.

Sometimes he sent Nora with marbles and trinkets, and this was really Tammy's undoing. The girl looked at her with her uncle's eerie eyes and what was Tammy supposed to tell her? The poor little girl, poor little pitiful. "My uncle brought you this,"

Nora said the last time she visited, handing her a primrose picked from outside the library. The girl was wearing a long puffy skirt and an ill-fitting blouse. There were slight yellow stains around the collar and sleeves. She was a pretty girl, but her hair was pulled too severely back over her ears with a rubber band. It looked painful; didn't Trip know to buy her hairbands? And she should have been wearing a bra.

"Your uncle no longer works here, Nora," Tammy said as flatly as she could. "I can help you find something if you want me too."

After the girl left, shame faced, Tammy formulated a plan. She should move. That would be the most effective way to handle this problem. Trip could be dangerous. Getting rid of her things wouldn't be hard. Oliver would write her a good reference letter. She could move to San Francisco. She had been there once, with David. It's was another quiet day at the reference desk, so she spent the rest of it looking at pictures of cable cars and reading quotes about the city. John Lennon loved the old houses and the strange light; he called Los Angeles a big parking lot where you buy a hamburger for a trip to San Francisco. And Oliver will like this: John Steinbeck called the city a golden handcuff with the key thrown away. Tammy could get a job at a public library there and rent a little place with a claw-foot bathtub. She didn't look up the average librarian's salary in the city, not yet. She wanted to think about the light over the water, Joni Mitchell songs, and flowerbox gardens for awhile before getting realistic about the plan. Could Lucy survive the trip? And if not San Francisco, somewhere else. New York. New York Public liked hiring right out of graduate school, but why not just apply? Lucy probably wouldn't make it even another few months.

She hadn't even made it that far. As soon as Tammy let herself in the apartment, she knew something was off. The dog did not walk over to greet her. Lucy was stretched out in the kitchen, her stiff, fat little body looking much the same as it did when she was sleeping. But her teeth were hanging out over her lips, and she wasn't breathing heavily.

Tammy took off her shoes, put on some tea, all without moving the dog corpse. She sipped orange pekoe with three sugar cubes. What was this awful constricting feeling? Not grief. More like dread.

She called David. Her hands were shaking like a child's.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi this is Tammy."

"I know," he said. "How are you?" She'd thought of that voice so many times it was disconcerting to hear it now. He sounded gruffer than she remembered. But maybe he was sleepy, or sick. Or maybe this was the voice he used for people in general. People who weren't his lovers.

"It's a funny thing, hearing your voice," she said.

"How are you?"

Tammy paused for too long.

"Tammy? Are you still there?" "Yes," she said, "sorry. I was just thinking how nice it is to hear your voice." "I like hearing yours too," he said. "Well, it's a funny thing. My grandmother died and I almost called you. And then my dog died – she just died today – and that's what made me call."

She told him about her grandmother's death, the lists and spools and empty cat tins. He talked to her about his son's Christmas program. His son's name was Henry.

Henry spent the entire recital with his shoes untied, looking straight ahead, trying to spot his parents in the audience. As he spoke Tammy had imagined herself there, in the audience, a few rows down from David's ex wife, maybe sitting by the grandparents. She might have been a good stepmother, the kind who tied shoelaces and calmed nerves. She imagined the friends and teachers gathered knowing her.

“My grandmother left a small safety box at her credit union for me. In it were just a few things: her will, her wedding ring, and a letter for me. But all she wrote in the letter was her maiden name. *Adelajda Michalski*. What do you think it means?”

“Maybe some way of her wanting you to know who she was. You told me how close lipped she was about her past. My parents are the same way.”

“How is your father?”

“They were here for Thanksgiving. Henry too. I made the turkey. You could look her up, find out things about her. You are a librarian, after all,” he says.

“Yeah. Maybe I will.”

They were both quiet for too long, but he didn't seem to want to hang up either. She had shown him a picture of Addy once, and he remembered this, and said she had been very beautiful. “People said I had her hair,” She said. And he said, *only God could love you for yourself alone with that hair* and it made her flush, knowing he still liked her enough to say that and also enough to show he'd remembered the Yeats poem she'd shown him. She said she had to be going, she had a dead dog to tend to. And then they said goodbye, and to take care. Before Tammy left for college, Addy told her to be smart in a city. “Buy a big dog if you do not find a roommate and do not drink more than one glass of beer in public places.”

She gave Tammy a marble, a Tiger's Eye, her favorite kind when she was a girl. "I kept nothing, nobody," she said, spitting the words. Her eyes were filled with hate, it seemed, but her words did not match. "I want you to know that if the town were burning, burning alive and they asked me, all these people will die or your Tammy, I would chose you. And that is a wicked thing."

"It isn't wicked," Tammy told her.

"It is. That kind of love, it will make you weak and make you do wrong. Now you go away from here, and throw away that marble down the toilet drain when you get there. Be a good girl, do what I tell you."

"Throw a marble away?"

"You can't keep anything in this life and I pray we can carry all them things all to heaven when the angels receive us."

"Is that what you think? Do you think Audrey is an angel?"

"You are old enough for me to say it now. She is gone to hell. That is where you are sent when you don't repent."

"Is it?"

"A woman who kills herself is dead before she can repent. This is why I cannot look forward to heaven. Look what she did to us. So selfish. Always the selfish one, taking the biggest piece of cake. Even from you! I made a angel cake for your birthday when you were two years old. And she took the first piece, not even giving the first to you! What mother does this? Now I will never see her again."

Tammy looked at her grandmother, standing there in her shapeless soiled nightgown with her eyes crazed, and promised to throw away the marble. “And do not have babies. Not one baby! That is my instruction to you.”

“Your instruction? That is ludicrous, Addy. Everything you are saying is the opposite of what you’ve always said was true.”

“We lie to protect.”

Her grandmother’s eyes were widened and eerie, the eyes of a prophet or a terrorist. It was ludicrous but Tammy believed. She still believed.

It wasn’t until dark that Tammy got up and went to buy a shovel. Before leaving she covered Lucy with a clean bed sheet.

Digging the grave in Lucy’s favorite corner by the flowerpots, Tammy opened her mouth to speak but said nothing. She had never liked animals, but she liked this one. She was not overly fond of people, either, especially men. But she still loved David. And that, she realized, was probably more than what Addy felt for her sweet Paul after decades of marriage. It was definitely more than Audrey felt for her principal.

Her grandmother had died alone. Fallen, and a concerned neighbor had found her days later. It made Tammy sad that she had not died safe and secure, in a clean closet. Most likely her grandmother had been delirious near the end. Maybe she had seen her pretty angels.

Tammy had never dug a grave before. It wasn’t difficult, just a little awkward with the bandaging on her index finger. She’d plant some flowers over the little grave. Lilies maybe. Patting the dry soil down with the shovel, watering it a bit, her plans to leave seemed too fanciful.

Once inside for the night, there didn't seem anything else to do. Her hands were dirty and she should have taken a shower, heated up some supper, picked out her clothes for the next day, read. Watched the nightly news, maybe. But she did none of these things. She didn't even turn on the lights. If Addy were here, she'd bake some bread for them, the egg bread made with a cup of butter and ten eggs. She would pound it, braid it, and then they'd eat it in front of *Hill Street Blues* with a can of Campbell's Tomato Soup.

It was a stupid reason to stay, not wanting to leave an old dog's grave behind. But maybe as good a reason for staying put as any. Well. Maybe not. But it felt good to have a reason.

AS IF SOMEONE HAD POLISHED THE AIR

When Agatha first heard scratching in the walls, she thought the rats had come back. Last summer they'd invaded after the Health Department cleaned up all the garbage piled up in the parking lot next door. The rats had tunneled through the walls and chewed holes in the kitchen pantry. Every morning her mother put out aluminum trays filled with poisoned cakes up in the attic. Every night the trays were chewed through. Agatha could hear the rodents screaming sometimes inside the walls. The smart ones didn't stick around. For weeks after, there was the stench of rat carcasses. You got used to it but sometimes a whiff of it would just come over you and about knock you over. That was when Agatha wondered. Maybe they all smelled of rotting and didn't notice it themselves.

"Don't worry lambkin," Agatha's mother told her, "they won't come back. That dump is gone and Daddy took care of them." Although he had not; he had not been home for much of the infestation.

Agatha knew it was something alive. In a way, she was glad. She was lonely that summer, especially at night. Sometimes when she heard the scratching, she imagined a rat boy in there. Nazrat was his name. He was like Tarzan, but he was a rat boy, not an ape man. He tunneled through pipes and walls, compressing his bones, and he lived off of dead snakes and bread crumbs under the house. Sometimes Nazrat was her friend, sometimes her enemy. She couldn't decide.

Before the new scratchings, the summer nights seemed to blend into one long, hot night. It was hard to remember what happened from one day to another because everything was pretty much the same. The air conditioner was almost busted, so

Agatha's mother said they had to turn it off after dark. She poured baby powder on the sheets so Agatha's legs wouldn't stick and told her to leave the windows opened. One Saturday, she took Agatha to Service Merchandise and allowed her to spend fifteen dollars on whatever she wanted. Agatha picked a plastic Briar horse and named him Flicker. Flicker was light tan with a white diamond blaze on his muzzle. There was enough money left over for Agatha to get a fan high enough to blow over her bed.

But it was still too hot for sleeping. Agatha put Flicker at the foot of her bed and called him her little doggie. She wanted a puppy, but her Dad said a puppy would crap all over the place. So Flicker was what she had until Nazrat came.

Agatha counted the nights. On the third night, she pressed her hand against the wall. It was almost like touching Nazrat, because all that was between them was sheet rock. The next night, she scratched back.

The scratching stopped. A shock jolted right through her body. It was real, it knew she was there. Agatha scratched again.

It didn't scratch the way the rats had. These scratches were light, like footsteps or raindrops pattering. Agatha tapped her fingernails against the wall. She tapped for hours, and Nazrat tapped back. She fell asleep with her body pressed against the wall to the sound of his tap-tap-tapping.

The next day she looked for the duct-taped rat hole in the back of her closet. She found it behind the clothes. It was just big enough for her to slip her hand through. She went downstairs and pulled a half-empty jar of maraschino cherries from the back of the pantry and placed it in the back of her closet for him.

She thought about Nazrat all day. He only came out at night, so she stayed out of her room because otherwise she would have just stayed waiting by the hole. Until Nazrat, she'd spent most of her time trying to get out of the house. Her Mom was home, and now that she wasn't working, the house was dirtier. Sometimes her mother just sat in the kitchen sipping Scotch from a jelly jar, looking out the window where the dump used to be.

Agatha's father was a painter. During the day, he painted houses. At night, he painted his own work in the garage. He painted murals on the walls of their tumbling-down house. "It's a disgrace," her mother had told him once, pointing to the overgrown Augustine grass in the front lawn, to the tumbling columns, to the peeling paint. "Why don't you paint the goddamn outside of the house instead of the inside?" The house, once eggshell white, had dinged to the color of dirty fingernails. But the walls were brilliant, Agatha thought. When her mother was feeling good about things, that was the word she used for Dad. *Brilliant*. He painted a roiling ocean in the living room and a big red desert in the kitchen. Agatha's walls climbed with sunflowers and a big red monster flower her father told her was called Loveliesbleeding. Sometimes the flowers gave her a headache and it felt as if they were crawling around inside her brain, but other times they looked as if they leaned over her, ready to pop out of the wall and into her hands.

Everything besides those paintings seemed fuzzy and gray, safer than outside, but dimmer. That summer nothing was right. Agatha had fallen into the habit of looking too closely at things, even at the embedded dirt in the grout between tiles and the dead bugs in the light fixtures. She daydreamed about cactus yellow siding, curtains like butterfly wings, for an orange so bright it hurt her eyes to look at it, for a blue she could fly into,

for wall to wall carpet and the kind of house that came with a swimming pool and dishwasher.

They had not always lived in this house. Agatha had vague memories of the place they were before, but it was hard to tell what memories were hers, and what were her mother's stories. They'd lived in Seattle, in front of a forest, and shared a house with a few potters and the women who circulated these potters. The potters, as she remembered them, had blue-black beards and jolly, rumbling laughs. Agatha's father, Peter, believed that children should run free and learn from berries and sticks rather than store-bought toys. Her mother's notions seemed to have changed, and when they moved down to Houston her mother had enrolled her in public school, took Agatha to Stride-Rite to be fitted for shoes, and bought her a Sunshine Family dollhouse. Agatha didn't have much in common with those kids at school. She seemed to have trouble with the things that came easily to them, like tying her shoes – and no trouble at all when it came to things that came harder to them, like reading David Copperfield.

The day that her maraschino jar was waiting for inspection, she just had to get out. "Who knows where your Daddy is," her mother said, "you should ask him to take us out when he gets back." Her mother was happier when Dad was home, even if it meant more fighting. Agatha wasn't sure anymore. It was quiet now with him gone. One night before school was out, he'd caught Agatha crossing the street without looking both ways. It felt good to have him catch her, at first. His eyes were on her, and it felt like what she did mattered. But then he'd looked into her, hard, and punched. Afterwards, she sucked the blood in through her gums and sipped Coke through a straw. Her mother stroked her hair and spoke softly. "That wasn't your father," she said. "You know it

wasn't him. It was another person who took over. He loves us. How could he be so angry, if it isn't love?"

Agatha stopped listening. The Coke mingled with the blood, tasting sweet and achy.

When her father came back the next night, he spun Agatha in circles. He'd brought a bag of rice candies from downtown and he talked into the night about a mural he was going to paint on the east side of town. Then he talked about the house he was working on. Bougsie colors, he said, piss yellow they call Yellow Cake, for a gingerbread house. The woman he was working for was a lush. She wanted to paint the trim blue, and when he'd asked her what shade, she'd told him a "blue blue." He'd spent an hour and a half trying to find the elusive blue blue for her. Yuppy bitch, he'd called her, and Mom had laughed. Mother's eyes were small and mean when he said that. "What's her name?" her mother had asked him, "And how old is she?"

Now he had gone to entertain the rich lush, mother said. Mother had seen her, once, at one of those posh groceries downtown buying sea bass. "Sea bass is a trash fish," her mother said. "She's not that pretty, just skinny. And she goes to spas, you can tell. You know what those women do there, Agatha? They get poop shot out of their bottoms."

"Is he having an affair, Mom?" Agatha asked her directly and her mother sighed. It could have been a sigh of regret or a sigh of nostalgia, Agatha couldn't tell. "If he is," she said, "I suppose I have no real claim to him. There were the potters."

It mad Agatha feel a little sick to know what her mother meant. When had it happened, that this crap her mother said started to make more sense? At school girls used

words like finger-fucked. Agatha had gone to a slumber party once; they'd all camped out on the beach. Her mother bought her a pair of purple jellies especially for the event, and the girls had stayed up until sunrise, whispering about their plans, the boys at school, soft kissing. One unfortunate plump girl fell asleep with her glasses on and they'd pulled her underwear off and thrown it into the sea. "My mom made me invite her," the hostess said.

She preferred it by herself. After her mother's speculation about the lush, Agatha went outside to play in the side yard. It was hot, so she squeezed inside the crawlspace under the house. There were things down there from people who'd lived in the house before. Once, she'd found a glass disc full of colored blue water and pale sand. There were old shoes, baby bottles, rat skeletons, garter snakes. She wasn't supposed to go down there. Her father had seen a coral snake in the yard once. But it felt better down there. It was cool and dark, her own cave. When she closed her eyes, she could feel Nazrat with her. His eyes were the deepest black. She felt his breath on her neck, but when she opened her eyes, he was gone.

When she went to bed, Agatha checked the rat hole. The jar of cherries was empty. "Are you there, Nazrat?" she whispered. She listened for scurrying. After awhile, she heard breathing. "I won't tell," she whispered. She hunkered down and pushed her hand through the hole. She waited. She heard her mother in the kitchen putting away the dishes. "I won't tell," she said again.

It made her flinch, at first, when she felt Nazrat's hand placed in her palm. It was a small hand. She felt its cool fingers and smooth nails. She stayed perfectly still until her hand fell asleep. "I'm going to bed," she said then. She squeezed the hand and let go.

She wondered the next morning if it had been real. How could he survive in there? And had he always been there, or had he only just arrived? And what did he eat? Apple cores? Did he lick the chocolate bar wrappers she brought home and threw under her bed after her Mom took her grocery shopping at the Lewis and Coker? When she thought of him, her heart beat faster and she felt a taste in her mouth, a taste that resembled blood and Coca-Cola and cold metal. Maybe she was in love. But she was too young to be in love. She wanted to bring him things, to pull him out of the hole. She didn't go outside.

"No reason to molder in here just because I am," her mother told her at lunch. Her Mom had made cream cheese and honey sandwiches on special bread from the bakery. She cut the crusts off the sandwiches and served them on the special green glass plates. She even poured a capful of vanilla into Agatha's Coke

"I think we should go to the library and get you some books to read. Doesn't that sound nice? I think they have story hour. Don't they always have story hour in the summertime?"

"I don't know," Agatha said.

"Well, I need to get some things at the store. Do you want to help me shop? You can read the list to me."

"I have a project," Agatha told her.

"What project?"

"I'm building a fort," Agatha said, lying.

"Well, okay. I'll go then and you build your fort. I'll be back in a jiffy."

But she wouldn't; Agatha knew that.

As soon as her mother was gone, Agatha got the hammer from her Dad's toolbox. She found the duct tape and brought it too. Knocking down the closet wall was easier than she thought it would be.

How could it be? There she was, a small girl. She sat hugging her knees and staring at Agatha from out of big water-blue eyes. Her skin was as white as paper, and her long hair was so blonde it would have seemed white if not for the pale skin it fell against. She wore dirty pink corduroys and a tee shirt with yellow daisies on it.

Agatha put the hammer down. "Don't be scared," she said.

The little girl said nothing, stared at Agatha with those big creepy eyes.

"Why are you here?" Agatha asked her.

Once when they'd gone camping, her father had taken her flashlight hunting. That meant looking for animals in the dark with your flashlights. When something scuttled or scurried, you tried to catch the wild animal's eyes in your flashlight beam. She'd seen lots of armadillos and possums that way. That was what this girl's eyes were like.

"Don't be scared," Agatha whispered again. She held her hand out flat for the girl, just the way she would have if she were meeting a strange dog. The little girl dropped her arms from her knees, but she still said nothing.

"What's your name?" Agatha said. After a while, she said, "My name's Aggie." As soon as she said it, she felt it was her true name. It was the name of a different kind of eleven year old girl who had friends, who knew how to blow bubbles, who could throw a ball and flip-flop backwards.

Aggie tried to coax the girl out with toast and honey, but she wouldn't come through the hole. "Aren't you hungry?" she asked her, and finally she just handed her the

toast. The girl ate it in such a pretty way, Aggie thought she looked daintier than a kitten lapping up a bowl of milk.

Where were her parents? Did she live in the walls and under the floorboards? Aggie asked her every question she could think of, but the little girl wouldn't speak.

"When my Mom comes home, you can come out of there," Aggie said. But as soon as she said this the girl crawled away. Aggie went to follow, but then she got scared. What if there were still rats in there? What if she fell in the attic and died under the house, like a poisoned animal?

When her mother came home, the sun was almost down. She had bags and bags of groceries. There were bags of fruit that Aggie didn't even know the names of, although some she recognized. Kiwis, star fruit, mangoes and cherry plums. There was also a bag of liquor.

"I'm going to take a shower, Sweetness," her mother told her, "and then I'm going to make you a lemon chess pie. And we'll read from your Little Golden Book. Won't that be fun? Pour me a little Kahlua and milk, will you honey?"

Her mother had been drinking, but she wasn't drunk. The house smelled of peppermint as she showered because she'd bought a bottle of Dr. Bonner's Peppermint Soap. Agatha put the fruit away. She felt a little ashamed; sometimes her mother liked to read to her from the Golden Book, while cradling Agatha's head in her lap. It felt right to do these things at home, but when she at school and she thought of those moments they seemed all wrong to her now.

That night her mother lit candles and cooked mushroom stroganoff. She looked beautiful in the candlelight. Her hair was copper, like Aggie's, and fell down to a smooth point in the small of her back. It was clean and damp from her shower. She wore a dusty rose slip and a coral necklace. Her freckled skin seemed to glow from inside like the candles. "Isn't this fun," she said, "just we two?"

"Yeah," Aggie said. How could her father stay away when her mother looked like that?

Afterwards, they had milk and lemon chess pie.

"Mom," Aggie said, "I have to tell you something."

Her mother tapped her fork against the china, then leaned back and waited.

"There's a little girl in this house."

Her mother swallowed. "No there isn't," she said.

"There is Mom. She's lost, I think. She has long yellow hair. She's littler than me."

Her mother stood to clear the table, took Aggie's plate of half-eaten pie.

"Don't make up stories, Agatha. It's nasty."

"I'm not. Let me show you. She's scared, but she might come out if we're quiet."

Her mother turned on the lights and started stacking the dishes in the sink.

"We have to help her, Mom," Aggie said. When her mother turned around from the sink, her eyes narrowed.

"Alright, Agatha."

Aggie took her mother's hand and led her into the bedroom. She opened the closet door as softly as she could. Then she turned on the light bulb, fast.

The girl sat there on her knees in the big hole. She was frozen.

"There she is," Aggie said.

"What are you talking about?" her mother said. "There is no one there, Agatha."

"Yes there is," Aggie said. "She's right there, staring at us. Don't you see? She's right there."

Her mother knelt down beside Aggie and looked directly into the little girl's eyes.

"Agatha, there is no little girl. Do you see a girl?" She palmed the back of Aggie's head, keeping her hand there like a hug. "Poor little pitiful," she said. "We've been too indulgent with you haven't we?"

That night her mother kept her beside her. Aggie didn't like it. Her mother kept the banker's light on well past bedtime, reading. Aggie kept her eyes half-closed as her mother flipped through yellowed paper backs pulled out of closets. Sometimes she moved her lips as she read. She read snatches of the books out loud. She stroked Aggie's hair, thinking her asleep, and said, "She took refuge on the firm ground of fiction, through which indeed there curled the blue river of truth." Finally she fell asleep with the book under her cheek. Aggie sat up then, and watched her mother for a long time. Watching her asleep like that, she felt closer to her. The lips moved as if she were speaking, and she was drooling slightly. As she slept, the muscles in her face relaxed and she looked young, as young as a girl, as young as the girl hiding in their house.

After that, Aggie wondered. She knew the girl was real in a way that Nazrat wasn't. But maybe she wasn't as real as Aggie was. She knew if it were the school year,

it would all have been like a movie or daydream. But here, alone in this house with her mother, the possibilities were different. She began to wonder, could belief and faith bring the girl to life? It happened in fairy tales. Belief had brought her father home to them, again and again. Her mother was fond of wishes, and sometimes she treated them as if they were like prayers. Whenever they shared a shake, her mother knotted the straw paper and asked her to pull; whoever got the knot got her wish. She threw pennies in fountains at malls, and even wished on airplanes in the sky as if they were falling stars. The way her mother did this at times seemed funny, a joke on them. But at other times it seemed desperate, true in a way that the Scotch wasn't.

She could bring this phantom to life. Nothing had ever been so exciting before. The little girl only came out at night now, but during the day, Aggie collected things for her. A bird's feather that, when you held it up to the light, looked like a prism. A tiger's eye marble. Flicker. A bag of pop rocks from Lewis and Coker. A plastic necklace that, in the right light, looked like pink pearls. She found most of these treasures under the house; they weren't anything the littler girl couldn't find, but when the girl took them from her, her eyes were grateful. It didn't bother Aggie anymore that she didn't speak. Aggie thought that nobody, not even a dog, could speak so well with eyes.

"Your name is Daisy," Aggie told her. She told Daisy stories about Nazrat. He could crawl through the city's pipelines and he knew how to rescue dying animals. He could cause some serious damage to the bad guys if he wanted to - he could start fires by gnawing on wiring, he could enter buildings by enlarging gaps in the walls and foundation, around plumbing pipes or through other holes in the structure. He had been

raised by rats, and he had rat superpowers. If he wanted to, he could come up from the sewer through the toilet and bite bad guys' butts.

Daisy blinked and listened. After a while, she came out of the hole, but she wouldn't go very far. Aggie brushed her long hair and wiped her face with a washcloth. Daisy smelled sour, like spoiled milk, and there was a lot of dirt under her fingernails. But even so, she was prettier than any girl Aggie had seen in real life. "I'm going to pinch you," Aggie told her once, "and I am not doing this out of malice. I am doing this because I want to see how close to real you are becoming. So forgive me if this hurts?"

She pressed her fingernail into Daisy's arm; her skin was so fair that it left a little pink half-moon mark. "Did you feel that? Did that hurt?" But Daisy just looked at her, holding her arm out for more.

She did it again, and again, until there were pink marks up and down the white arm. Daisy blinked and then an ugly squeal, like something from a dirty rodent or cheap squeak toy, came out.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Aggie asked her, "Why didn't you ask me to stop? Do you like to get hurt or something? Weirdo."

But Daisy still trusted. When Aggie's mother left during the day, Daisy came out from her hiding place and into Aggie's room. Aggie had never liked dolls, but Daisy did, so they pulled Aggie's old Barbie Dream House out of the closet and dressed Barbie in all of her outfits. Once, Aggie raided her Mom's closet, and they tried on her old prom dresses, Chinese slippers, and Chanel No. 5. They ate peanut butter and chocolate frosting sandwiches and drank some of the stuff in the liquor cabinet. They also ate all

the fruit. Aggie knew they had to eat it quickly or it would rot. Daisy wouldn't leave the bedroom. Aggie wasn't sure where she went to the bathroom. Probably under the house.

It started to feel normal, having a little girl inside the walls. Even nice. Daisy was all Aggie's and nobody else's. She was better than a dog, better than a friend. She was better than a sister, too, because nobody else knew about her.

When Aggie's Mom was home it was hard, because Daisy wouldn't come out or even tap on the walls. And Aggie's mother was depressed. Sometimes she spent the day in her ratty bathrobe, sitting at the table, sipping Scotch.

Sometimes she called Aggie to the table and made her sit in her lap. She ran her fingers through Aggie's hair and talked about life.

Time for me to be maudlin, Agatha, she'd say. She talked about love, said it tasted like blood. That's the good thing about Scotch, she said, it makes you poetic. She talked about how, when she was a student, she'd felt sharp and quick. Why, she asked, was she so good at being a student, but so bad at keeping a job? *Don't follow in your mother's footsteps, she said. Don't be a lover.*

“Your father never finished school, did you know that? He was a terrible student. Oh, the things I'd do for him. Those potters, like weird little hobbits. I cooked for them like some kind of slave. It was horrible but wonderful, our little house in the woods. You can't remember. I carried you everywhere, like a squaw. I hung you up in the tree, and you would gaze out of your bunting. The things you saw! My beautiful little girl. It was hard to see where you started and I ended. We fucked up. We fucked up, Agatha.”

This used to be the moment where Aggie would say no, no you didn't. I want to hear more about the forest and the birds and the things we did back then. But she had stopped saying it.

She stopped saying it after one of those long nights before Daisy came. That night, her mother had been going on about the potters. And then she opened the robe and told Aggie to touch her breasts. Aggie cupped one of them in her hands. It was heavy, like a melon. The nipple was almost as dark as lips, and little blue veins ran through the pale skin. It was like seeing blue through a hard-boiled egg.

When your father met me, she said, they were small and perky and stood up. More than a mouthful is too much, he said. Can you believe that, Agatha? More than a mouthful.

That night, Agatha felt sick. Her mother had been dead-drunk, she wouldn't remember what she'd said or done. Her mother, she now knew, was kind of a loon. Even in the dark, the flowers on her walls were scary. They looked as if they might grow right into the room and strangle the dolls, the furniture, and her.

She pressed her hand against the wall. "Daisy?" she said "Daisy? I'm scared."

When she went to the closet, Daisy was out of her hole. She came out into the bedroom and crawled into bed with Aggie. Aggie held onto her the way she used to hang on to Flicker. Daisy was stinky, but it was a good stink. She loved the way Daisy smelled, the way a cowboy probably loved the way cow paddies smelled. Aggie breathed deep, and fell asleep fast. When she woke up, Daisy was gone.

Her mother was up and dressed already, brewing coffee. She looked happy. "Your father called," she told Aggie. "He's coming home tonight with a big fat

check. Did you hear me? He's coming home, and we're going to go to Astroworld this weekend. Then we'll have a picnic with strawberries and champagne."

But when he didn't come by nightfall, her mother changed into her nightshirt and told Aggie to go to sleep.

"I'm sorry Mom. But we shouldn't give up, should we?"

She followed her mother into her parent's bedroom. It was a mess; change all over the dresser, and too many little dusty boxes and baubles. The rats, or mice, or tree roaches, they would come back. This place was a haven for such creatures. Her mother's body began to shake, tremble all over. Then she sat up and dry-heaved for awhile, as if there were something inside her she couldn't get out. Aggie lay down beside her and gazed up at the ceiling, at its dim cracks. Her mother leaned over her so that her long hair fell like a curtain around Aggie.

"I love you," her mother whispered.

"I love you too," Aggie said. "I'm going to bed, Mom."

Aggie ate some old fruit and went to her closet. But Daisy wasn't there. She knew because the room was dead quiet. She waited for a long time and then went to bed.

She woke with a thick taste in her mouth. Her sheets were wet with sweat. She heard her father's voice. She couldn't hear what he was saying, but it was rich and low. There was the sound of ice clinking and a chair pulling back.

Aggie tiptoed into the hallway. Candles flickered. The light was warm and bright and unlike any light she had seen before. The table was set with the green glass plates. Everything seemed softer, burnished, as if someone had polished the air. Even the rickety old table looked varnished. Her father was there, leaning back in his chair,

white shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows. And across from him was Daisy. Her hair was brushed clean and pulled back off her neck with a black velvet ribbon. She wore a red dress, white lace tights, and patent leather Mary Janes. She nibbled a big slice of white cake and swung her stockinged legs under the table.

They were more beautiful than any two people Aggie had ever seen. She rubbed the crust from her eyes and watched. Her father laughed, and he looked at Daisy as if she were his girl. Daisy kicked the table leg and looked right back at him.

Watching them together was almost like looking into one of those little plastic snow globes her mother put out at Christmas time. Another world, lovelier and smaller than this one. If it could come outside and into this world, it wouldn't be so magical. But Agatha wanted to get inside it just the same.

She'd seen her parents like this when she was a little kid. They would dance together even though there was no music playing. Her mother would rest her head against her father's shoulder and they'd waltz through the rooms. Sometimes her father would sing. "Loving her was easier than anything I'll ever do again," he'd sing, or, "Love is like a dying ember, and only memories remain..."

She shivered a little. Her throat was scratchy, she had the chills. She'd had strep throat many times and this felt like strep again. She didn't want them to see her, so she went back to bed.

When she woke up, her mother was sitting beside her.

"He was here," Aggie said. It felt as if little shards of glass were stuck in her throat.

"Shh," her mother said. "You have to get better soon, or else I'll have to take you to the pediatrician."

"He was here last night, with Daisy," Aggie said.

"I know," her mother said. She laughed. It was a hard, brittle laughter. Aggie didn't want to hear anymore.

"My head hurts," she said. "Can I please go back to sleep?"

The sickness stayed with her for a few days. If she'd been well, she would have thought it was worth it because her mother wasn't drunk. She brought Aggie medicine and checked on her every few hours. She brought her cherry popsicles. When she did, she felt her head and kissed her hairline. She made sure Aggie drank even when it hurt her throat, and she pressed cold washcloths against Aggie's forehead. She read to her from books not for children, with plots Aggie couldn't follow. She sang to her and brought out the little Golden Books.

When her fever was gone and she felt like eating more than popsicles, Aggie noticed that the sounds inside the walls were gone. She went into the closet. The hole was still there, but Daisy wasn't inside.

The house was clean. The kitchen looked different. There was a microwave on top of the refrigerator. Plastic drop sheets covered the floors, and buckets and brushes blocked the doorway to the living room. Half the foamy sea was painted over in a glossy bright white.

"Look who's come out of her lair," her mother said. There was juice and toast on the table. Her mother's eyes were hard bits of glitter. "I want to promise you something, Agatha. I am not going to drink anymore. That is my solemn vow. I don't expect you to

believe me, but in time I hope you will come to understand and to forgive me. This is a new start for us. For you and me. A brave new beginning!"

Soon the murals were gone.

"I've started on the inside, and when I'm done, the outside will be painted too.

What do you think of Cake Yellow, huh? Or maybe Arctic Blue?"

Aggie didn't answer. The toast was almost burned, and ice was already melting in the glass.

"Can I go outside?" she asked.

Her mother shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, go on," she said.

Aggie had to find Daisy. Could she have left? Had she left with her father? Or was she all alone, hurt somewhere? If she had to, Aggie would climb through the hole and search inside the walls. She could go up into the attic, even though there were mummified rats up there. But first she would check the crawlspace under the house.

Her arms and legs tingled. It was not the excitement she'd felt down here in the beginning of the summer, when she'd closed her eyes and felt Nazrat behind her. She knew she had to find Daisy, but she was also afraid. She was beginning to think maybe Daisy had never been there.

She'd crawled farther than she ever had before when she saw the lump. Something bigger than a cat or a dog was wrapped inside an old flowered sheet, wrapped inside of one of the plastic floor drops. It was difficult to unravel. But the hard work was good; it meant she could concentrate on what she was doing and not what was inside.

Daisy's yellow hair was matted. There were little hatch marks up and down her arms. She was whiter than paper, heavier than she'd ever felt in life. Aggie brushed the hair from her blue blue eyes. She was naked. The weight of her was real. The smell, the rot smell, it was real too.

Aggie wanted to stay inside that moment under the crawlspace forever. She lifted Daisy's broken body up as much as she could manage and held her tight. It wasn't Daisy though. It was hollow, just a body, just a skeleton with flesh on it.

Aggie closed the eyes and tucked the dirty sheet around it

She went into the house. Her mother was there at the table with an empty jelly jar in front of her.

"She's dead," Aggie said flatly.

Her mother just sat there.

"Daisy is dead. Under the house." Aggie's voice rose from her throat. She started to cry. "She's scratched up and her hair is dirty."

Her mother came to her and pulled her close. Aggie felt the floppy breasts against her face.

"She got killed," Aggie cried.

"Hush now," her mother said. "It's all right now."

"She's naked!" Aggie's body was stiff, but her mother held on anyway. She ran her fingers through Aggie's hair. Her voice was close, but seemed to come from a long way away.

"Shhh, Agatha. I know, I know. It had to happen. She couldn't stay." Her voice was sweet and low, the voice she used when she was singing. She tried to pull Aggie

down into the chair, but Aggie stood straight. She rocked back and forth, and as she rocked she pressed Aggie's face against her breastbone.

“All the world old is queer save thee and me, and even thou art a little queer,” her mother whispered. “Everything dies, Agatha.”

Aggie made her body go stiff, just like the body down there. Her mother smelled right, like soap and perfume and make up. It didn't seem right that her mother smelled normal and Daisy was dead.

In the months that followed, Aggie didn't want to leave the house. Her mother found a job as a library assistant, and her father stopped calling. When school started, she sat next to a girl who painted her fingernails with liquid paper and wore a monogrammed anklet. She said she had a boyfriend named Charlie at her old school. Her name was Trina, and she lived in an apartment that smelled of new carpet and pine air freshener. Aggie spent weekends with her sometimes, and they rented scary movies. It was right that Aggie make friends, real friends.

Her Mom of course had painted over the flowers, and now Aggie's bedroom was purple and yellow. She also fixed the wall in the closet. Aggie told Trina Nazrat stories. They scared the hell out of her, and she asked for more. She asked if Nazrat slept with women and Aggie told her of course. He crept into their beds when they were sleeping and smeared them with his dirty little hands, leaving rat dropping in their beds. The women would wake up wet and feeling bad, like they had just gotten over a bad headache or a fever. They believed his visitations were sex dreams.

But even though Trina loved the stories, they were just stories to Aggie now. She couldn't make it feel as if Nazrat was there with her when she closed her eyes. And she

would never love Trina the way she loved Daisy. She preferred Trina's house, its clean swimming pool and built-in laundry room, to Trina herself. She slept well in that house. There were no rats.

She cried at night when she thought of Daisy. But she did it quietly, and she never said anything about Daisy aloud. She knew she was down there, wrapped in the soiled sheet. She wanted to cover her with velvet, to write her name in letters across her notebooks. But she was beginning to believe a person could think different thoughts about a thing at the same time, and they might be all true. But the truest was the thing that went unspoken. A little girl lived under the floorboards. Her eyes were cartwheels, her skin was like milk, her hair was long and bright. She wore pink corduroys and a flowered tee shirt.

HIS LOVELY HANDS

Marnie and Gavin worked for a textbook company. She was a temp, he an assistant editor, more or less her boss. He'd been asking her out for a few weeks and when she finally agreed they went to lunch at a place called Hutt's Burgers. The waitress, who seemed to know Gavin, brought him a pint of Guinness almost immediately. Marnie ordered vegetable soup, which arrived watery, like from a can. His burger looked good though—he ordered it medium rare, the way she liked it, the meat a rich red in the center. Marnie kept her eyes on his hands around the juicy burger; they were handsome hands, well-proportioned, the nails pink and shiny. In the booth they were quiet while Marnie watched him take big chunks, filling his cheeks, chewing each bite completely. She wondered if he was nervous. She wasn't.

He put the hamburger down and looked at her.

“I want you to know I admire you for what you are doing,” he said.

She was confused, and must have looked it.

“With the baby. My own mother was a single mother, you know.”

Marnie hadn't noticed before, but he was a little drunk. He swept one of his lovely hands in front of his face, pointing to his eyes with his two middle fingers. She liked him more for that. His eyes were like emeralds. The Hutt's Burger Ladies bathroom had a picture of a Dale Evans cowgirl on its orange door. Marnie sat on the toilet for a while; the baby felt heavy, and a part of her wanted to stay in there forever.

Hutt's was ten blocks from the Best Western. On the way Gavin stopped for Miller Lights at the Tigermart, and he kept putting his hand on her leg as he drove. But

once they were in the room, he seemed embarrassed. They kept starting and stopping. Eventually all he wanted was to rest his head on her pregnant belly.

“The baby’s fine,” she said.

“I think we’re too fast,” he said.

“I don’t think so,” she said. But now Marnie was wondering about the baby. She was glad she hadn’t had sex with Gavin, though that was what she had intended to do. She did these things without thinking much, but with the baby she should have been more careful. At least she’d asked Gavin to buy condoms.

“You are a strange girl,” he said. He had put on his underwear, and Marnie leaned down to kiss his fragile shoulders. He trembled when she kissed them more.

Later, when they were back at work, they settled down quietly. They were proofing a series of history textbooks, and the section Gavin gave her was about Lewis and Clark. Marnie hadn’t remembered reading, when she was in junior high, that Lewis had shot himself.

“Should they be mentioning that Lewis committed suicide?” she asked.

“Yes,” Gavin said, “They should. It’s good to mention it. I don’t think my history textbook did. But it’s also good not to emphasize it, either, because it isn’t the whole story, is it? His whole life wasn’t summed up in that one moment when he blew his brains out. I wonder what kind of gun he used. That’s something a real historian would know.”

“Uh-huh,” she said.

“You’re not even going to say it, are you?” Gavin asked her. She looked at her hands, the bitten down nails. She felt her face warming “I don’t have boyfriends, Gavin. I’m sorry,” she said.

That evening, as she waited for the bus to take her home, she thought about the explorers. Maybe it was okay to leave out the suicide. Let the children have their Cowboys and Indians. When she glanced at the people on the bench at the bus stop two of them moved so the pregnant girl could sit down. “Thank you,” she whispered. People were nice. They opened doors for her. Neighbors smiled. The boys who lived across the hall from her were graduate students, mathematicians. One of the guys, David, reminded her a bit of the only boy she’d gone out with in school, Travis. David and Travis wore their hair in the same wispy style. It was summertime. Her baby would be here in the fall. Going back to school with a baby would be a problem. When William Clark read of Lewis’s suicide in the public newspapers he wrote to his brother, “I fear this report has too much truth. I fear O’ I fear the wait of his mind has overcome him, what will be the Consequence.”

She liked her apartment. There were lots of windows, and outside there was a pond with koi, pretty mallards, and a small red bridge. Maybe her baby girl would like

feeding the ducks. Everything about the apartment was new and clean, but there was nothing much for the baby yet.

That evening she called her mother to report that the baby would be a girl, something she had known for a week or two, but had been keeping for herself.

“Oh,” her mother said. “A girl. Well, I have to tell you, I was hoping for a boy. But never mind--you need to give me your account number so I can wire a little something, all right? Katie?”

“I already emailed it.”

“Oh did you? E-mail is not really secure, you know, but I suppose it’s fine this time. Now, Sid—”

“I don’t want to hear about Sid, please.”

“Now stop. Katie, he’s right here. He’s watching a television show about fly fishing.”

“I’m not sure about any of this anymore.”

“Well this isn’t the best time to talk about it,” her mother said. “We’ve got news, too. Hold on--Sid wants to get on the phone.”

“Are we on speaker? Mom?”

“Hello there Katie,” Sid said. Marnie had almost forgotten his voice. She pictured him in his track suit, the one with glossy silver stripes, talking into the phone while turned to watch the flat screen TV. “Honey we just both wanted to be on the phone to tell you. Sid, let’s say it at the same time. Okay? All right, deep breath. One, two, three--”

Sid did not participate.

“Destination wedding!” her mother said.

The phone seemed dead.

“Katie?” Her mother said. “Well, you know, it’s not Sid’s first wedding. I’ve never eloped before, either. It’s sort of fun for us. We’re going to go somewhere nice and quiet, just us. A wedding package.”

Marnie waited a second for Sid to say something. He didn’t, so she said, “Congratulations, Sid.”

“I’ll let you two chat,” her mother said, and there was shuffling, the rattle of her handset re-cradled, and then Sid was on alone.

“I hope you are enjoying your internship,” Sid said.

“I am. But it’s just a temp job. It’s not a real internship.”

“We’re very proud of you. Your blessing means a lot to all of us, you know. It will solve a lot of problems all around.”

“You think that?” Marnie said, “Well, maybe. Good for you, anyway. Listen, I’m pretty tired. Tell Mom I’ll call her again later, okay?”

She had not seen her mother, Jeannie, in six months. Three days after Christmas Katie had left San Francisco on a clear day. All week long it had been foggy and that day everything was bright; too bright really. She looked out the window of the Super Shuttle at the sparkling water. "You might as well just take the shuttle," her mother had said. "I

can't see you off at the gate anyway these days. We wouldn't be able to hang out. The shuttle will be fine."

That winter break had not gone as Marnie had hoped.

All during college when her mother saw Marnie off at the airport she'd cried. Once she gave Marnie a charm bracelet made from old Monopoly game pieces. "Daddy's the top hat, and I'm the cannon, remember?" she said. "And you're the cutest little dog." She kissed Marnie on the tip of her nose and called her baby girl. Marnie wasn't that far away, but she wasn't encouraged to come home except for the big holidays. Sid had been paying for Marnie's college education. It meant tuition, monthly checks for books and clothes and food. Incidentals. The arrangement worked out well, but Jeannie was still nervous about Sid. She'd never had a boyfriend like him. He was older and wealthier than anyone either of them had known for more than perfunctory social or business exchanges. A wedding would mean security for both of them, she'd said to Marnie.

Sid was gone for most of this Christmas visit. Sid and Jeannie were officially live-in partners now, and Jeannie looked different. She smelled of fresh flowers instead of perfume. Her body had changed, too. Her breasts seemed smaller, higher. She wore less makeup. Her skin glowed. Sid's house in Russian Hill was the color of lemon drops, and shimmered with stained glass windows. "Don't you just want to eat it up," her mother said when she and Marnie pulled up to it the first time.

Jeannie had been going to a clinic so she and Sid could have a baby boy. She showed Marnie the little tower room that would serve as a nursery. They window-shopped baby boutiques. They shopped for clothes in the cute stores. She bought Marnie

a pink mohair skull cap. "Oh my God," her mother said. "A skull cap, and it is so adorable. I love it!"

They took a boat tour of the city. Her mother carried a guide book, but she didn't need it. They stood at the railing together and shrieked when the waves splashed. Her Mom knew everything about the city. She pointed to where Kim Novak fell into the water in *Vertigo*, to China Beach, to the ruins of the family homes in Alcatraz. "Children lived there," she said. "They took the Ferry to school, the same boat that carried prisoners. Can you imagine?" The Golden Gate bridge was painted its special color. "They paint it eternally," Jeannie said, "when they finish one side, they turn around and start painting it all over again." The sun was setting as they went under the bridge. Marnie thought she'd never seen anything more gorgeous. Sea birds soared overhead, and the International Orange was sharp against dull clouds.

Every day they had dessert someplace new. They checked the guidebook for the highest rated restaurants. Christmas day Sid took her mother to a party, but Marnie bowed out saying she wanted to stay home, that she felt a little woozy. This wasn't true, but she wanted to say it in case she wasn't invited, thinking that if she assumed she were invited and she wasn't, well, that would embarrass Jeannie. Her mother trimmed Sid's silver beard before they left. He was nice enough. Marnie tried to talk to him, to think of him as a real person. But she kept thinking of Monopoly, and of the man who wore the top hat in the game's logo. Even now, when she closed her eyes and tried to picture Sid, she saw that man in the top hat.

They spent the next day in the Castro. "Do you think they think we're lesbians?" her mother asked.

"Absolutely, mom. Lesbian tourists," Marnie said.

They ate crepes in a little coffee shop to wait out the rain. Her mother looked very pretty that day, holding a big cup of au lait up to her face so that the steam warmed her nose and cheeks. Marnie felt her eyes well up. She wanted to stay with her mother. She wanted to put on pajamas, watch Alfred Hitchcock movies, eat microwaved popcorn with brown sugar and butter. Somewhere, they had Grace Kelly's wedding on video. Much classier than Princess Di's, they always liked to say.

"I was talking about this with Sid," her mother said, "He thinks you have too strong an attachment to me, for a young woman. It's not necessarily healthy. You don't need to cry, honey. You're an adult now. When I was your age I was on my own with a baby and a mortgage."

"I'm not crying."

"What about that boy you told me about? Rusty?"

"Travis."

"Yes, Travis. Sounds like a townie."

"He's cute. And he's an artist. He carved me a flower, a rosebud, out of balsam. Sometimes he makes things out of the napkins, in the diner. "

"What's his job? Did you tell me?"

"He's working for his uncle right now."

"Doing what? Boys like that are the ones that want to be taken care of. Did you sleep with him?"

"No."

"Good. Because we talked about this."

"I'm not a nymphomaniac, Mother."

"That's an outdated word," Jeannie said.

"Oh, is it really? Well, I don't have any sexual disorder. Maybe I was a little slutty for awhile, that's all."

"You're being so ugly, Katie. "

They were both quiet. Marnie picked at her plate--pastry with a special cheese inside.

"Well, I'll change the subject," he mother said. "What do you think of my new highlights? You never said."

"They look nice. Maybe a little too Jennifer Aniston," Marnie said

"You had a nice visit, didn't you? We did everything on the list," her mother said.

"We never went to Citizen Cake for cake. I wanted to try that place. Maybe next time," Marnie said. "Did I tell you my idea? I was thinking this summer I could get a job at one of the bookstores here. "

"That's not such a good idea," her mother said.

"Yeah, you're right. Maybe I should try to get an internship instead."

"No, that's not what I meant, honey," Jeannie said, "I think it's a good idea for you to stay up at school. Just easier, you know? You can get a job on campus, get a roommate, have yourself a nice summer. Sid is being very generous and we can't really expect him to do more."

"Oh," Marnie said.

"This one wants a child, Marnie... Just do this for me, for us. He's a little bit uncomfortable already, he needs time. With you around he remembers how old I am,

maybe too old to have a child. And he knows it has been hard for us. He knows about the bad things that happened to us, and to you, the rape, all the awful things after that. The way things worked out. It'll be better if it's just me and Sid for the moment."

That night, Marnie sat in a window seat in the empty nursery and looked out at the neighborhood of lit-up gingerbread houses. Her mother was sleeping, and Marnie felt as if something was happening, she didn't know what. Sid came out and sat beside her. "I hope you had a nice visit," he said.

Marnie felt like hitting him, but instead, she took one of his hands, and held it towards her, palm up. She kissed the fingertips. She thought, her heart should be beating fast but it wasn't. She didn't know him all that well, and didn't know how he might react. She wondered what he would do if she kissed him on the mouth, so she did. He kissed back. It was sloppy and soft. He stuck his tongue deep into her mouth. She didn't feel bad at all. She felt kind of good, actually. "It's all right," was what he said. "I'll take care of you," he said. And later, he took her to a house, a nice house much like his own. It might have been his friend's, she didn't ask. Do you like this, and this? And here, and here? But he seemed not to be talking to her.

Jeannie and Marnie, they were everything to one another, she'd thought. They'd been many places together, moving every couple of years, for as long as Marnie could

remember. They were tourists of the world, Jeannie liked to say. Once, when they were living in Odessa, a girl had been kidnapped beside the creek Marnie walked by every week on her way to drill practice. They'd found the girl's body a week later. All the news showed was the girl's pink bicycle. Jeannie had dreamed of the bicycle, of its banana seat smeared with blood, of little hands grasping its purple streamers. "Promise me never, never to go down to that creek alone," Jeannie begged. "Be my good girl."

But there was something giddy, something false about her mother's preoccupation with the creek. She was like Kim Novak, falling into the water. Kim Novak knew Jimmy Stewart would save her. Marnie's mother was beautiful in that same way, floating on everyone else's belief.

A month later she grew tired of driving Marnie to practice, and didn't seem to remember the lost girl. Marnie was still afraid. Before she approached the creek, she held her life tightly until her fingers turned blue. If someone tried to grab her she would use the life as a weapon. Mud slurped, sucked at her drill boots. For those few moments, she was certain the bicycle was there, leaning against the big rock, behind her. If she turned around it would disappear.

When Marnie left San Francisco after the holiday break, Jeannie helped her roll her clothes, military-style, into her bag. She gave her a packet of gum and a Cosmo for the trip. She kissed her on the tip of her nose. "Still my button-nose," she said.

Marnie made the trip back to school in record time, and now, this summer night almost six months later, after her first and probably only "date" with Gavin, she sat alone in her apartment, with the windows opened wide, and let her mind settle on what her mother had said. *The bad things that happened to us*. Jeannie often used those words when talking to Marnie, but now she had told Sid everything just to gain his sympathy. Or maybe to get him to feel protective, or maybe for more immediate reasons.

Marnie would be a mother soon. Her mother always had a reason for everything. Marnie was doing too many things without reason. Almost having sex with Gavin. That was careless. Mothers shouldn't be careless. And Sid. Good old Sid.

She stir-fried bok-choy, broccoli, some kind of watercress, all from the organic section of the grocery store. She sang to the baby a song about raisins and almonds and a little white goat. Are you hungry, she asked? I have some mangoes. When the baby started kicking again, Marnie turned the flame down, and sat. *You're okay*, she whispered. *Settle down now. You're okay*.

She thought she'd break all her bad habits for the baby. She didn't smoke anymore, didn't touch coffee or beer, and she drank lots of fluids. She'd tried to cut out the random sex. Gavin had been a slip up.

Her mother called the good looking men without means she dated her indulgences. The last indulgence had been a guy named Rich. He was always around when Marnie was 13 years old.

Rich had been Jeannie's favorite of them all, in the beginning. He was always nice to her, but he would boss Marnie around, tell her about how her mother worked too hard. At that time, Jeannie bleached her hair to baby blonde and he liked to pat her head. He said Jeannie's hair was like a fluffy bunny. He seemed to love her. He was the best looking boyfriend Marnie could remember; he had shaggy, sandy hair falling into his eyes and his voice was gruff and sweet, especially when he talked to Jeannie.

Marnie didn't like being alone with Rich. The worst thing he'd done was this match trick and it didn't seem so bad, but it bothered her. Her mother was late coming home, and it was just the two of them. Rich had a matchbook in his hands and he said, "Do you know how to light a match with your fingertips?"

He said it as if he were talking to himself. Before Marnie could answer, he opened the matchbook with his thumb, flipped the cover open, and lit it in one smooth motion.

"That's cool," she said. She stood there, not wanting to sit down, wanting someone else to come into the room.

He kept lighting matches, blowing them out, and then he said, "Hey, come over here."

So she did.

"Watch this," he said, and he unfolded Marnie's hand, stretching it palm out. It was the first time he'd touched her, and she was aware that her hands were clammy. He pressed a warm, burnt-out match against her palm and she flinched.

"Ouch," she said. "Why did you do that?"

He chuckled. It felt like some kind of secret between them.

Rich was her babysitter. At least that's what her mother called it, babysitting, but it seemed to be mostly him taking Marnie around while he hung out with his friends. Sometimes he would leave her in video arcades. Sometimes he took her to his mother's house, a duplex that smelled of kitty litter and lavender. His mother was sweet. She kept spearmint gum for Marnie, and her pretty cats had whimsical names. Marnie couldn't remember the names, now.

One day Jeannie had some kind of catering job, and she told Marnie to stay with Rich. She was about ready to break up with him, she told Marnie. It seemed all he was good for was watching her while Jeannie worked her butt off. He was just a whole lot of work, Jeannie said. The cute ones usually are.

The house Rich took Marnie to had cactus yellow vinyl siding, and two sleepy dogs who were chained to low steel posts driven into the front lawn. There was a plastic slide, the kind for toddlers, but Marnie didn't see any children. It was off a graveled road. There weren't any other houses within walking distance. Everything was dusty and dry; Marnie imagined in the rainy season whole place was sloshy with mud, because there wasn't anything you'd call grass around. She almost stepped in a fire ant mound on the way to the front door.

There were some men in there, no women. Rich left with one of the men, and Marnie just stood there waiting for one of the other men to say something. Rich hadn't bothered with introductions. There was a white guy and a Mexican American guy. The Mexican looking guy wore a Metallica tee shirt and his hair was pulled back in long ponytail. The white guy wore a Madras shirt. They never said anything so Marnie smiled

at them, but they still didn't speak, and she sat down on their ugly crushed-velvet sofa. She knew the color from catalogs: Harvest Gold.

Marnie had breasts, but they were what her mother called tiddlywinks. A few months ago, she'd asked her to get a training bra and Jeannie had said, "For what? For those tiddlywinks?" But the white guy was looking right through the side of her sleeveless shirt at them. She sat up straight.

"Okay," the white guy said and that was it. The other man came over and pulled off her shorts. The white man had her wrists, and then he sort of grunted, changing his mind, and wrapped his hand around her neck. She was being choked. She tried to come up for air, but there was a yellow light growing and blossoming over her head. Her body was splitting. They would stop and start again. The white man grunted, and said, "This is so tight." Then the Mexican guy said "Are you done." Marnie don't know how much time passed, but there was no sunlight. They flipped her over on her stomach. His boots kicked her ankles. "Be still," he said. Her body wouldn't hold. He flipped her over again. She vomited and the vomit spilled over her hair, all over her face. It smelled and tasted sweet. He jumped off of her and the white man wiped her down with a wet cloth. They would stop and she'd think they were done, but then it would happen again. The white one twisted her nipples, and smiled. That was when she bit her lip, and that helped. She bit her lip harder, but she couldn't feel it. The white man was saying, "Oh, yeah, oh yeah." His eyes were rolled up into the back of his head. Marnie blinked. She closed her eyes and they opened. They opened and closed, opened and closed. His eyes were filmy blue. Then her mouth was full and she was choking again. The Mexican guy kept doing things

until he finally said, "I'm all fucked out for the time being." Then he said other things, but she couldn't hear the words anymore.

Then there were lights on and they were eating. One of them was cooking and the other one was saying "Hamburger Helper. Put it with the macaroni." Their voices were the same.

A chirping sound came out of Marnie's throat. She felt warmth and wetness all over. She tried to curl her body into itself but her body would not fold. She was in a corner, her face against the spot where the carpet hit the wall. The carpet was new; her fingers twisted inside the pile. There were little fragments, and sharp staples underneath. They were done. The television came on to a Hee Haw re-run. It felt better, with the television on, as if someone else had come into the room. She passed out again.

She woke to another voice. "Shit." It was Rich. He didn't sound angry. "This is Jean's kid. This is my girlfriend's kid."

The white guy had gone. It was just the Mexican guy. Rich lifted her chin. "Hey, Katherine. Open your eyes."

The light hurt. They had not beaten her, but her eyes were crusted over. She had been crying.

"Can you stand up?" It wasn't a question. She wanted to speak but when she tried to there was no sound. Her parts, all her body parts, were bits and pieces stuck onto her insides. Her thighs spasmed, the muscles inside moving, little rodents.

The body folded into itself. Rich lifted her and rolled her into a bed sheet. Doing that might have been a sort of kindness, but the velour seats in his car were probably what made him think of it. He lay her down in the backseat and went back inside. Her hands

worked back and forth, weaving in and out, and she watched them fluttering. All her working parts. All her parts were working parts.

Then she was in the car, her mother's face outside the window, floating, and then waking up on another sofa, this one at home. "Hospital?" Marnie said.

"We can't do that," her mother said. She bathed Marnie, squeezing the washcloth gently over Marnie's face, her hands, and her torso. When she tried to part Marnie's legs they clamped together, and she said, "It's okay," but Marnie couldn't open them. Then she dried Marnie, and walked her, naked, to her bedroom. She pulled the sheets up to her neck, folding them back like an envelope. She leaned over the bed, and she said softly, "You're okay now, okay, you're okay now, okay." Her hair spilled over Marnie's face, smelling of the tropics.

Thinking about it now made her want to do something. Drive fast, although she had no car. Go and kiss someone hard, on the lips. She had not thought about it in a very long time. *You don't need to know*, she whispered to her baby. She thought about Gavin this afternoon, head on her belly, looking up at her, smiling. As if she should be grateful he looked at her. She'd noticed his teeth were unnaturally large, like a gopher. It made her feel sad.

She picked up the phone, and called her mother again. There was no answer. She wanted to say, I don't know why I slept with him, with your Sid. I'm sorry. But then she pictured her mom and Sid, having sex in that house, maybe in front of the fishing show, and it made her sick and it made her mad. He had an unappealing way of opening his mouth so that it looked almost like a baby bird.

I won't let them have you, she told her baby.

The baby seemed to be restless, wanting to get out too soon. Every labor was different, she'd been told. At the first appointment, the nurse had asked her about a partner, and when Marnie explained, every word the honest truth, the one nurse said, "It happens more than you'd think." The nurses seemed very capable when they smoothed the clear jelly on her and when they talked to her about what she was eating, how the baby was moving.

Marnie was hungry. She could think about that. Food. She went to the freezer and tore open a bag of frozen peaches, eating them cold.

There were a few little fucked up things she did and she believed they were the normal fucked up things, like reading a few bad books and watching daytime television. She liked to sleep in closets. But, now, she stayed on top of her daisy-print comforter. The baby kept her up, pushing against her ribs, at night.

The guys next door were cooking tacos. It smelled good. They were laughing, talking. She thought she might stop over to say hi. They'd asked her to a couple of days ago, said they were having a party.

She walked outside. There were people on the mathematicians' balcony, spillover from their little party, legs hanging over, kicking back and forth. A man was

talking to a woman, and Thomas Dolby was singing “She blinded me with science.”
A woman in a yellow dress with a Peter Pan collar looked over.

“Very nice,” Marnie called over the music, “Very nice dress.” They made her think of Travis, those kids. He had an old Chevette, and he’d pick her up sometimes when he delivered pizzas. The defroster was broken so she would wipe the windshield for him with a rag. They would kiss for hours. She tried to remember more than that, but even the color of his eyes was gone.

BOX CITY

Harvest Moon

For awhile, Uncle Trip told Nora they would live by the lunar calendar. This was back in the early 1980s, when Nora was in junior high. He planted bulbs at night, and they took a long time to bloom. During this moon period, he'd wake Nora long before sunrise, pulling thick mans-wool socks over her ankles, and they'd go outside to feel the frost crunch under their toes.

He told Nora there was a different name for the full moon for each month. January was the wolf moon. February, the ice moon. November, that was the snow moon, although it never really did snow for Nora and Trip. They lived in Houston, Texas, or its outskirts.

There were also names for the Harvest Moon. *Wine Moon*. *The Singing Moon*.

When the moon shone golden, a deeper, richer gold than the sun, Trip said that the night was particularly polluted.

They were standing out under the sky, looking up, when he told Nora he'd give her a nickel if she kissed the inside of his palm.

"That's not very much," she said.

"A nickel? That's more than the tooth fairy ever brought me," he said. His childhood, unlike hers, had been marked by neglectful tooth fairies and sporadic visits from Santa. Santa came to visit Trip and his sister when well meaning relatives remembered the twins, so he brought crayons or calendars from the five and dime. Telling her this, he seemed to forget that Nora would now know the secret that Santa was not real.

That day, Nora took his hand, unfolding the fingers, and kissed. It felt sort of silly and sort of important, like taking a Communion wafer under her tongue.

Uncle Trip closed his eyes. “What are you going to do with that nickel? You can flatten it on the tracks,” he said.

“I’m cold, Trip,” Nora said. These moments were beginning to feel more staged to her than they had when she was little. “Mom is going to get up soon.”

But he was looking up at the sky, pondering. He touched the tips of his fingers together.

There were still moments, at that time, when Nora would gaze at her Uncle Trip and believe he was a sorcerer who lived in the garage but had secret knowledge; a hidden treasure box, an ancient book of spells, something like that. There was a bright edge, a promise of adventure, if she could only show him she was worthy. Other times, he seemed like her frequently unemployed pothead uncle who needed a haircut and his sister Judy or he’d be crunching Ramon noodles in a flophouse somewhere. On this particular morning, Nora couldn’t decide. His hair was standing up like a rooster’s in the breeze and she knew without looking his eyes were gleaming. He wore a pleather jacket over long underwear, and it flapped in the wind.

“Stay gold. Little girls know the secrets of the moon,” he told her, “There’s a man up there, did you know that?”

“The man in the moon is a symbol,” Nora said. “From Victorian storybooks.”

Trip’s hair was like a doll’s plastic hair that’s been brushed so often it frizzes out. When Nora was small, he built her a dollhouse out of shoeboxes. He used Pez candies for tiles and postage stamps as family portraits on the walls. His watch was the wall clock.

A piece of white paper blotted with peach lipstick was art over the mantle. All the furniture had to start out as something else; Nora colored a matchbox to use as a bed. Soon the shoebox became a compound of boxes. Box City, they called it. When Nora couldn't sleep she would close her eyes and imagine some new piece of the box city.

Not long before the city was abandoned for her new blue bike, Trip asked if Nora wouldn't like to live in that shoebox house. Nora said yes. "Dolls have a sort of immortality. We could be dolls with souls," Trip said. But he lost interest in their city, it seemed to trail off when he started working the nightshift unloading boxes at Gerland's Groceries. Nora wondered if the site of all those boxes made him weary.

The fall of his moon interest, one of those early mornings, he was wistful over Nora's childhood. "Don't give in to vanity," he said. His voice was rough, as if he'd been coughing. "Girls turn thirteen now and then they smell like a ladies bathroom. They stink and then they cover up the stink."

2010

For years, Nora has been telling herself that her uncle was probably dead. After her mother married the medical supplies salesman and moved to Denver, when Nora was still in college, her uncle took off by foot. He'd mailed her postcards – that was back before email, when you could seem to get lost in this country on Greyhounds and what still counted as flophouses. Come to think of it, what is email other than some kind of virtual tether? Still, even homeless people are given track phones now. Nora knows this because her best friend, Carmel, was a social worker for a few years before she drank herself out of that job.

Uncle Trip was her mother's brother, her Irish twin. When Nora was small, she'd thought this meant they were Irish, and twins. Only later did she learn this meant they were not quite a year apart. Everything that was striking and beautiful in her mother seemed odd and ungainly in her uncle – long limbs, bright eyes dark as black buttons, fire-engine red hair.

Nora's recent life has been on the upswing, while Carmel has been having some bumps. Two years ago when Nora met her husband Ray she almost immediately stopped drinking and taking up with sloppy people. Well, she didn't dump Carmel. Carmel is her best friend; when it comes down to it, her only real girlfriend. And once men are gone, they are gone for good, at least for Nora they are. So why, now, why is it that she is thinking of Trip more than ever?

She and Carmel both turned forty this year. "This will be the decade of our enlightenment," Carmel announced on the evening they decided to celebrate together. Nora's husband was working all night at the hospital, which was the way Carmel liked to visit. They baked an angel food cake and watched 80s teen movies. Carmel got drunk watching James Spader harrass Molly Ringwald. "Don't you love it?" Carmel asked Nora, "I mean, there he is. Twenty-seven years old portraying a seventeen year old. Wearing a leisure suit and smoking in the hallway." She sat with her fingers in the cake, one leg tucked under the other, like a kid. She still dressed like a kid; Nora had graduated to catalog clothing long ago but Carmel still squeezed herself in to vintage lace dresses from their college years, wearing them with worn-out Converse or lace-up Doc Martins.

"Ducky is the one I love," Nora said, "Ducky is the strongest teenager in the world." A few years ago they'd have gone out, gotten sloppy. This movie marathon was

more like something they'd done when they were shy, eighteen, living in the girls' floor of Fiddler Hall together.

Watching this with Carmel really wasn't the same without drinking, and Nora was pregnant. That evening though, watching Molly Ringwald kissing her true love by the light of— was it a BMW? She's seen this movie countless times with Carmel. "I've seen this a million times, she said out loud, "and I've never really noticed but, do you realize every single guy in that movie is obsessed with Molly Ringwald? Except for the father, who is obsessed with the mother, who abandoned them? It depresses me. For some reason, tonight, it depresses me."

"Molly ends up with the right guy."

"But Ducky loves her more."

"Oh will you stop it. Nobody wants that geek with the bump on his nose. Even Ducky doesn't want a pity fuck. Stop ruining this great film for me. Stop it right now."

But Carmel passed out long before the final kiss, and Nora left early. She had a husband to go home to.

When she got home Ray was up studying. "I know it's late," she said.

"Are you hungry?" He asked, annoyed, and when she nodded they went to the kitchen.

"I'm always hungry," she said. She stood quietly beside him, watching him cook, roughing his hair up a bit in back shyly. When he was done, he spooned the rice into a bowl for her and rested his hand lightly on her shoulder. He went out of his way more now that she was so pregnant. It feel nice. It felt like home.

They were married a summer ago at the courthouse.

Ray wore khakis and a nice shirt; Nora wore a pink and brown sundress and a big floppy hat. Carmel was a bit territorial, jealous. She said his name in full, Raymundo, with a flourish. At times she called him Ricardo. Ray acted like he didn't notice. "What makes you think you really know this one?" She asked, and Nora didn't know how to answer. "Tall, dark, and Latin, no?"

"I wish you would stop. You sound like a racist asshole. He doesn't talk like that."

Until Ray, Carmel had been almost like family. When Nora's own small family had disbanded Carmel's family had taken Nora in as one of their own. Her parents owned a little diner in a little Texas town. Summers, Carmel and Nora wore candy pink waitress uniforms and helped Nan MacMillan, Carmel's mom, wait tables and work the register. Carmel's uncle was the chef. It felt good, rooming with her best friend and eating pot roast at the MacMillan's big nicked table. They treated Nora like an extended family member, and when she graduated gave her the same kind of Waterford Fountain pen they gave Carmel. They saw Nora as a stabilizing influence on their daughter, and she was happy to fill that role.

"If only you had a brother," she would say to Carmel. "Shit," Carmel answered. "If I had a brother you'd probably be stuck in this place forever, having babies and serving thawed out cherry pie, passing it off as homemade." Carmel was fascinated by Trip's postcards; to her they were cryptic, beautiful. Sometimes he included bad poetry. "The hair on the trees are bending their knees" – stuff like that. "Esoterica," Carmel called it. He also sketched. Nora saw nothing terribly remarkable about the sketches, but Carmel asked to keep some of them. Her favorites were of the trees he walked past. The

trees served as a kind of key to a map – they changed according to what state he was passing through. “Is he walking all this way?” Carmel asked.

“I don’t know,” Nora said, trying not to cry. “Maybe he is pandhandling. I’m sure he is taking the Greyhound sometimes. Or getting rides.” She wondered if he had a bad cough. But she didn’t want to find him, when it came down to it. She was 18, 19, 20 for Christ sakes! Shouldn’t she get a start of her own? Shouldn’t she?

So she did. She went to graduate school, and then taught history at boarding schools for a few years, traveling before she settled back down in Houston. She had some ideas right out of graduate school; her focus had been American history, but she had this idea to teach a class called **Explorers Across The Centuries and Across The World**. In this class, students would read about great explorers from different time periods and continents, and she included space exploration in the course description. She wrote lectures in longhand, all about how Ernest Shackleton as part of the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration came back from exploration in the midst of World War 1; too old to be conscripted, suffering from a heart condition made worse by his arduous journeys, he nevertheless volunteered for the army. She loved explorers like Shackleton, the men who become public heroes but lived through ruined schemes. She looked at pictures of the sled dogs, imagined the man and his big dream, his endurance, his failures. His dead dogs, his weary lectures. His frozen beard. She never taught the class. She stuck to the curriculum, modeled the syllabi after what came before her, and her notes became something private.

Carmel went to graduate school also, then worked for homeless shelters, then for WIC, before drinking seemed to take over everything else. Nora drifted in and out of

different people, but the only one who really seemed to stick was Carmel. Neither one of them was any good at romantic relationships, and they both seemed to fail at all friendships but their own. Nora dated seldom and when she dated, it was never how Carmel did – with sparks and events that made for a trail of beautiful, sometimes harrowing stories. She called the men, always, by their first and last names and professions. Somehow they seemed more interesting once they were gone, in the stories Carmel told, then they did when they were around.

They graduated from college boyfriends to men they met through grown up, graduate school parties, to eHarmony.

And then, when she was old enough to believe it would never happen, Nora met Ray. Her husband, like her, had moved around a lot -- he was an immigrant -- and he looked upon her and the baby the way she looked at the two of them; with amazement and not a little bit of trepidation, as if they were a dream he was afraid to wake up from.

For all her dreams of exploration, now, when she sits in their small backyard with her daughter Elizabeth in her lap, listening to birds or rain on the patio rooftop, it surprises her that she has no desire to go to Peru with him, or anywhere else but here. She likes the day-to- dayness of life with her daughter and husband.

The night of her birthday, he comes home with a frozen key lime pie from the grocery store, his eyes red-rimmed from lack of sleep. “I know you like this,” he says and they eat it right out of the box, crunching the ice, falling asleep with their clothes on after the baby is nursed and her diaper changed. Nora leans over the bassinet sometimes to check on her daughter, making sure she is still there, still breathing. “Elizabeth,” she whispers, “Eliza. Beth. Lizzy Loo. Lisbeth.”

The solitary – can they be called solitary when a baby is accompanying you? Well, the baby still feels very much a part of her. The solitary days blend together, so it is hard for her to remember what day of the week it is.

This lull is interrupted in a short conversation on morning as she is driving him to work. She drives him every morning, and this is his Ward rotation, so he has to be there at five. He drives there, she drives back, and on the way she helps him study for the citizenship exam. She'd made it a point to show Carmel that he was a legal resident before they married.

“Is it so implausible that someone like him really just wants to marry me?” She'd asked. But it comforted her, too.

“What is the name of the national anthem?” She asks him.

“Well, I know the tune but not the name for sure. Star Bangled Banner,” he says.

“Close. Spangled.”

“Spangled? What does that mean?” He asks.

She is bad at this, these impromptu definitions. “Well, like – decorated with, but glitzy. Shining, I guess.”

She remembers the costume Trip had made her years ago, out of a bolt of dark blue velvet, with cutouts of stars and a moon. She had been the Halloween Night Sky. Spangled, that costume was spangled.

“Ray,” she says, “I need to find my uncle.”

He nods, pulling onto the freeway. “I can help you with this,” he says.

“It may seem strange, after all this time. I should have looked for him. I don't know.”

“Perhaps he didn’t want to be found.”

“We have a lot right now. But I should do this,” she says.

“The baby is getting awake,” he says.

The baby is crying hard now, and Nora’s breasts fill up, start leaking.

“I guess I’ll nurse her in the parking lot after we get there.”

After adjusting the blankets and finding a quiet corner to park in, Ray says, “We will start looking.” That’s how he is. It is her uncle, and that is enough for him.

His lab coat is in the back, and he opens the trunk, takes out his stethoscope, walks to the ER door, glancing back once to wave.

It doesn’t take long for Ray to find Trip in a database that night, but these days, you can go online and find anyone, even someone who moves around a lot working minimum wage jobs, pretty easily. When she sees his name, and that he is still in Houston she stares at the computer screen for a long time. Thomas Kipling Brown. It has not ever occurred to her that after searching, she might not want to find.

Back in Time

Until Nora left home and it all came unraveled, the three of them were a family. Her mother, her Uncle Trip, and Nora. Nora was the one who looked unrelated. She took after her father, a man she didn’t remember. She had Trip’s hazel eyes. That was about it. Her mother and uncle were lanky, milky-skinned, their red hair turning orange in the sun. Nora was small and tan. They were Trip, Judy, and Katie Brown. He and Nora didn’t have much use for outsiders. Judy, every now and then, would chase after a man. Once she left for months and although Trip took her back just like he always did, Nora had a hard time with it. She just called Judy by name and dropped the “mom” after

that. In spite of Judy's ways, she'd managed to get a BA and work as a teacher at the Parochial school down the street. She didn't have to try as hard as Trip for the ordinary day- to-day things that helped them get by.

But there was something absent there; it was hard for her to make connections. Nora did have one fierce memory she never could get rid of...it was of an evening, out on the porch, with Trip inside cooking up a stew. Nora and her mother sat outside on the stoop. Judy took up some of her hair and braided it with Nora's, copper against brown. She smiled, running her hand around the back of Nora's head and letting it rest there for a bit.

When their heads were bent together, red hair spilling over their shoulders, the same look of intense concentration falling over their pale faces, they looked like twins. Like the man and woman versions of the same person. But Trip really was the baby. Her mother was a grown up; Trip was some other version of adult, something between a teenager and an adult. He liked to put his head in Judy's lap. "I'm a wee wittle babe," he'd say, turning his Ls into Ws. It had once made Nora laugh, but when she entered junior high, it began to bother her. It didn't seem right, him looking up, his lips shiny with spittle, his shoelaces undone. Nora felt like leaving the room.

It wasn't that Trip was a misogynist, exactly. Or was he? He was, Nora could acknowledge now, her true parent, the one who stayed up rubbing Vics-Vapo-Rub on her chest when her allergies kept her up, the one who made banana pancakes and taught her how to tie her shoes, one lace over the other. It took her so long to learn that, way past the age of her classmates. Nora had the sneaking suspicion she mostly stayed because of Trip. There was very little discussion about Nora's absent father. Trip used to say, "You

sprang from your mother's forehead." He once told her that she had her long Audrey Hepburn neck because she was part swan.

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The restaurant where he works now is small, and she can't tell if it was made to look old or actually is a refurbished old diner. There it is, in the same city she has grown up in and come back to, and maybe he'd been here all this time. She walks in and orders a coffee, steak and eggs. When she called the number they'd found online a woman had answered, "Red Barn diner, how may I help you?"

Her daughter is still small but she isn't a newborn anymore, Nora can take her out places; she's just had her first shots. So she takes her, kind of hoping this is just a lead and she won't see him yet. She does not know what to prepare for. But if he is working, he must be in decent condition.

"Your baby is so cute," the waitress says, "What's her name?"

"Elizabeth," Nora says. "Thank you. I think so too." She holds Elizabeth in her lap and the baby rests her head against her mother's shoulder, smiling sleepily. Ray named her; at first Nora had resisted but the name has grown on her; Ray called it elegant, and he was right. It is the name of queens and international movie stars.

"Does a man named Thomas work here? Goes by Trip?" She asks.

"Yes," the waitress says.

"Is he here by any chance?"

"He starts work in about an hour. Would you like me to give him a message, or come back?"

“No, that’s okay,” she says. She will come back, of course. The eggs are over easy, just the way she likes them. The steak is cheap, tough.

She texts her husband on the way home. *I love you*, she types. When she gets home, if Elizabeth isn’t too fussy, she will do a load in the new washer and hang the clothes out to dry. They don’t have a dryer yet, and she likes this – likes watching their clothes blow in the hot breeze. She might read a little. She’ll sit out in their enclosed yard, reading, or maybe nursing. After she has finished her meal the baby will look up at Nora. It is funny, this baby, she seems so wise. It will be strange when she starts talking; right now it is hard to imagine this girl with the wise-baby gaze saying goo-ga, Mama. She looks like Ray, same shape of the head, same clear brown eyes.

Back In Time: Trip and Women

Trip’s girlfriends were different shapes and never alike. Nora’s favorite was fat and very pretty. She wore brown lipstick and her hair dyed a dim chalkboard black to set off her pale eyes and skin. When Nora first was introduced to her, the girlfriend said her name was Evilette. But after Nora got to know her, she was Sheila. She had a boyfriend who rode a motorcycle and owned his own garage. “Garage” meant a repair shop, not just a place to park the motorcycle. Trip was just her friend, she said. But she stayed over sometimes on Friday nights. Saturday morning, Trip would cook big bowls of steaming Irish millet oatmeal with raisins and shreds of apricots and clumps of brown sugar. He loved to feed Sheila. They all gained weight when Sheila was his friend. Even Judy, Nora’s mother, liked her.

Sheila liked clove cigarettes; she smelled of old silk and petuli. Sometimes she would call Nora into Trip’s room and Nora would sit on the floor with her, watching her

blow smoke rings. Sometimes she'd come over to the house when Trip wasn't home and hang out. She said his room was a good place to mellow out. She didn't care if Nora saw her in various stages of undress. She'd take off her skirt and tee shirts and wear just a slip when she was hanging out. Her slips were always white cotton or silk. Most had belonged to her grandmother, she said, but some came from thrift stores. "I feel like Liz Taylor in that Tennessee William's movie when I wear it," she said. Nora's favorite was a slip that smelled of tea rose perfume. It was the lightest pink, so light it was almost white. As if white were blushing, Trip said. He liked the slip as well.

Sheila gave Nora an Alice Cooper shirt that fell all the way to her ankles; Nora wore it as a dress with a leather belt. When she drew up enough courage to ask Sheila if she was Trip's girlfriend once, Sheila just hugged her. Nora sank into her as if she were a deep sofa cushion. Trip was not a boyfriend, but he and Nora both drew what comfort they could from her, which was a considerable amount.

After Sheila there was Beth Ann. Beth Ann was terribly young, so young Nora's mother told Trip he'd better watch out. She wore roach clips in her hair and didn't talk much to Nora or Judy. Her giant pink glasses perched on a nose so tiny Nora could hardly believe it held up the thick lenses. She liked to wear Trip's clothes, and she was even skinnier than he was, so she could walk around in his jeans if she belted them. All they ever seemed to do was hold hands and go to the laser shows at the Planetarium. He stayed away on nights he visited Beth Ann and came home looking tired.

There were women who only came by once or twice. Trip lied to them. He told one that his name was Tripoli. He told another that Nora was his daughter, and another that he worked on an oilrig and was only here visiting for the season. Judy never

challenged this, and, in fact, she liked to join in, telling them even more stories. She once told a pretty cashier that Trip taught philosophy at the community college.

The year Trip fell in love with the moon, he fell in love with a woman. It happened during the Singing moon, September. Trip and Nora were in the library, reading about Colonial moon names. Nora saw her first. She was the new reference librarian. Nora went to ask her about moon food recipes. She said it was for a school project, but, really, it was because Trip had nudged her. “Butterfly,” he whispered. “Not a monarch.”

The librarian’s name was Tamara, and they loved her first for her bright, crisp voice. “I don’t believe we have anything like that on the shelves, but we do have some books on moon mythology.” Later, on the drive home, Nora and Trip repeated that word to one another again and again, trying to recapture the lilting way the librarian had said “mythology.” It was a song, that word, in her mouth. “Mythology,” Nora said quickly and clearly. “Nope,” Trip said. “Not even close.”

Nora thought it the voice of someone who had grown up going to prep schools in New England. Nora like to imagine her in a uniform, the kind with a little tie at her neck and a plaid skirt, knee socks that never fell, walking to school with her navy blue

cardigans drawn against the fall breeze. Her true-gold hair was untouched by dyes and sprays, parted straight down the middle.

Trip wrote poems for her and wouldn't show them to Nora.

"I can't explain it, Nor, how tender I feel when I see her leaning her head down, her flaxen hair falling forward. But I also like it when she wears it in a French braid down her back. And her eyes! The color of Lime LifeSavers. No, iceberg lettuce. Those jade green eyes."

Trip applied for a library assistant job and, just like that, he got it. He was the audio-visual guy, and his job seemed to mostly be him unlocking and locking the audiovisual room and dusting slides. Trip and Nora made plans about how he would court Tamara. He had to wait until she was used to him, and then a friendship would build. They would go to a coffee shop in the museum district, and he would tell her about his plans for becoming a history teacher once he had enough credits at the school where he would apply.

They didn't tell Nora's mother, but she knew. "Don't let him get carried away," she told Nora one night. She was heating up frozen dinners for them in the microwave; suppers were bland and really not enough now that Trip wasn't cooking as often. Trip worked evenings now, helping Tamara close the library.

"He isn't," Nora said, "You underestimate him." Her mother had no idea what Trip could accomplish. Nora imagined Uncle Trip and Tamara and Judy in New England, sipping mugs of steaming hot chocolate, looking out at the swirling red and gold leaves outside windows made up of many small panes. He would be Professor Jones, Medievalist. Or whatever they called historical experts. He'd wear a corduroy

jacket with patches at the elbows, and he would take up smoking tobacco. They would have their own library – a room devoted to gold-leafed books. Paintings made by people they new would hang on the walls. There would be a flokati rug on the living room floor, and a chocolate brown sofa, the kind pictured in modern furniture catalogs. Oh and the rug would be the color of brown rice, to go with the sofa without being too matchy-matchy. Judy and Tamara would wear clothes out of the L.L. Bean catalog, their hair pulled back in smooth buns. Judy would go by Judith, in their new life. Nora would go to the same schools Tamara had once attended. Trip would take care of them all.

At night, Nora closed her eyes and saw a big paper moon dangling from a silver string. If you looked carefully at its frosted surface, you could just make out a man inside an old-fashioned window made out of little panes. *Isinglass*, she thought, not knowing exactly what the word meant but thinking it sounded right. Out came a stepladder. The man was Trip, only paler, with ruby-red hair. He was wearing tails and a top hat. He climbed down and polished the moon's surface with a little rag. Beneath, Tamara slumbered. Her soft hair fanned over the pillow and her sweet lashes fluttered over closed green green eyes, as she dreamed of the man in the moon. ***

Nora always had high hopes during the first month of school. She decided that this year there would be a best friend waiting for her, a kindred spirit. She might have red hair and freckles, like Pippi Longstocking or Anne of Green Gables. She might like to read mysteries. She might even have a pony. A pony with creamy blonde hair and a whimsical name like – Dandelion. Or Candlelight.

During recess, Nora watched the girls hopping, throwing jacks, and brushing one another's hair. But she made her first mistake when the teacher, Sr. Giovanni, asked

everyone to write a page about best friends or pets. Nora didn't have a pet, so she wrote about her uncle instead. It went something like, *My best friend is my uncle. He is tall he has to duck sometimes when he goes through doorways. I have eyes like his, like a tiger marble, green with gold inside. He knows how to use a bow and also he used to belong to the Society of Creative Anachronism so he can sword fight*. After Nora read it aloud, a girl named Laura came up to her line and smiled. It was the kind of smile she gave the teachers when they asked her not to whisper.

“Your best friend is your uncle? I saw him driving you and your mother to school one time.”

“I just wrote that to make him feel good. My real best friend is at my old school.”

“Oh,” Laura asked. She was standing behind Daria, with her arms folded in front of her. She wasn't smiling. “What's her name?”

“Tamara,” Nora said. “She had to move to Minnesota, unfortunately.”

She told them Tamara was in the seventh grade. Tamara had two boyfriends, and a pink bike with a banana seat. The more Nora talked about her, the less like Anne of Green Gables she became. She kept her red hair, but that was all.

Trip had once told Nora that as long as you have something to yearn for, you have a shot at happiness. Trip's something was Tamara Weathers. Nora had yearnings but she couldn't say exactly what they were. They had nothing to do with rainbows or unicorns, or boys. Her yearnings had something to do with the view of the field from her tree in the backyard. Sometimes, when she sat up in that tree, she imagined Tamara in her clean apartment. Nora was certain it had that new-carpet, new-car smell. She used Strawberry-scented shampoo and Jergens Lotion, wholesome products that kept her

pretty but not frivolous. She had bookshelves, and her books were organized according to the Dewey-Decimal system, the right system for a private collection. At night, she listened to classical music and sipped chamomile tea. She washed dishes that were too delicate for the dishwasher in her shining sink and looked out the window at a small courtyard made smeary and dreamy with steam from the hot water.

When Nora looks out her window now, closing her eyes against the sun and trying to recall, she can't see Tamara's face. The world is red and bright, and all she can come up with is the smell of Ivory dishwashing liquid and a woman with a lilting voice who could recite Yeats. For a moment, Nora thinks she can see her but no, that's probably a photo of Gwyneth Paltrow in some 1990's shampoo or perfume advertisement.

If Tamara had ever loved Trip, he'd have despised her for it.

Nora's craving for Tamara came from something else. It probably had something to do with her mom, that's what television shows and self-help books tell her. Judy was okay. She was not a terrible mother, but mothering did not come naturally to her. She tried. She saved a box of Nora's baby things: there was a pale yellow dress, with orange bric-a-brac, and white leather baby shoes. And a stuffed chick. Sometimes she would take this box out and show it to Nora. She kept dryer sheets in it, so that the three items smelled of Downy. "You were big as a breadbox," was what she'd say. "You used to worry that chick with your fingers. You had to have it every night, and you would stroke it three times and stick the beak in your mouth."

Trip was the one who read to her, who hugged and kissed. But Judy did some mothering. She once sewed mother and daughter peasant dresses from a Butterick pattern. They were matching brown and cream colored, with empire waists and puffed sleeves.

Now and then, Nora would look up and her mother would be there, on the stoop or in the doorway, giving her a look. When this happened, Nora look right back, and then she'd turn away. Hanging from the clothesline, walking on the top of the lattice fence, somersaulting, breaking off honeysuckles from the neighbor's lattice and sucking out the juice. "Look at me, look what I can do...." Nora wanted her mother to know.

Judy smoked and drank occasionally with Trip. That was when she would pull Nora into her lap and ask for kisses. That was when it felt okay to touch her. Nora liked to make a curtain of her hair over her face.

Once, when she and Trip shared a couple of bottles of red wine, she asked if Nora wanted for anything. "Do you want for anything." She said it flatly, more to herself than to anyone else. Nora remembers, probably it was that night, she remembers now, braiding her hair with Judy's and tying the bottom with a ribbon. Brown against the copper. She remembers this happening several times, in different moments, but maybe it only happened once – Elizabeth, well. She intends to drown Elizabeth in so many happy memories she won't distinguish them all from another. Almost every day, there will be another hair-braiding play-dough baking dress-up-like-a-fairy memory. And when she grows up, she'll say, *My mother loved me too well.*

She didn't tell her mother, but Nora wanted friends.

For her birthday, Trip gave Nora a diary filled with blank pink paper as thin and smooth as expensive wrapping tissue. The diary was small enough to fit into a purse and it came with a latch and a little brass colored key, light as a coin. Nora turned on her desk lamp and picked up her favorite pen. She ran her fingers over the cover. It was like a doll's book. She thought she would never be able to cram all her thoughts onto those tiny pages. But after she told Daria and her gaggle of girls about Tamara, Nora started to write her Tamara down. Tamara had deep auburn hair and violet eyes. She liked riding her pink bike along the bayou as fast as she could so the streamers fanned out. She wore metal-framed glasses. She was also popular and graceful, but did not date boys and would not until she was sixteen, at which time she would have a cake with strawberry frosting and lose her virginity to her first boyfriend, who would drive a red sports car.

Nora told Trip how the other girls said her hair was too long, and how they wore their hair in stiff wings framing their faces. They liked to gather around her, talking about how she could be fixed. "You don't worry about them," Trip said, "You need to read a lot and watch PBS documentaries. And when you're older, you'll never see Daria again. If you do it'll be in the grocery store and you won't even recognize her." And he drew a picture of Daria for her, a woman with loose arms and big fat curlers in her hair. "You have to keep in mind," he told her, "that those rollers, life-size, will be as big as soup cans. And she'll probably have more chins than I depicted in this illustration."

Trip had a lot to say on the subject of women, but Nora noticed his choices did not seem to follow these opinions. Women, he said, were taught tricks and you couldn't hold them accountable, it was how our society molded them. Women wore make-up to hide their true selves. Even Tamara wore gloss and a bit of blush, if you looked carefully. *She is like freshly fallen snow about to blush*, he said.

"Eat your Capn' Crunch," Judy told him. She put on her old sneakers and went into the backyard to bring in the clothes.

Uncle Trip collected more moon folklore, moon poetry, and moon recipes. He kept them in calfskin leather journals bought at the Museum of Fine Arts gift shop. There was a recipe for moon cake, and he made the moon cakes with brown sugar, sesame seeds, and rice flour. There was a recipe for moon biscuits, made with whole hazelnuts, which represented the full moon. And there was Nora's favorite and his, a recipe Tamara had helped him find from an eighteenth-century cookbook. Trip said that if he and Tamara were ever to wed, he would find the necessary ingredients and make the Moonshine for his wedding meal. The shine was to be baked in a large tin mold in the shape of a half-moon, in one large star shaped tin. It required two calf's feet.

Tamara had a boyfriend named Dick Bandle.

"What a name," Trip said the day he came home with this discovery. "Dick. Bandle."

Dick Bandle was a salesman. A salesman of what? Trip wasn't sure, and he didn't want to ask. He had only been told of Dick Bandle a couple of times but it was enough to see how beneath Tamara the man was. Dick Bandle wore wrap-around

sunglasses and was tanned by artificial means. He was the sort of guy who looked you directly in the eye but gave you the impression he wasn't looking at you at all.

“How many times have you seen him?” Nora asked.

“I haven't. I don't have to see him to know.”

When she came to work with a diamond chipping her lovely ring finger, Trip was worried but still hopeful. In a few years after marriage to Dick Bandle, Tamara would whiten her teeth, spend weekends at the mall, abandon her books and become an Aerobics instructor. She would, Trip said, be Bandlized.

Dick and Daria, Trip told Nora, were nemeses. Nemesis was the spirit of divine retribution against those who gave in to hubris. She was a remorseless, vengeful goddess. A nemesis was their worst enemy, someone who was the opposite of their true selves and yet, similar. Sherlock Holmes' nemesis was Professor Moriarity. A worthy nemesis was smart, as smart as its good counterpart. Daria, Trip thought, was a worthy opponent. She was shrewd, capable of great cruelty. Take the yellowish ice cubes she melted in Tina Oslow's locker. Daria said they were made from dog urine. It sounded even worse than piss, the way she hissed the word “urine”. Nora felt sorry for Tina but grateful she was not the one.

They made lists. Daria Sweet. *Wears a rainbow shirt under her uniform and laces her saddle shoes with rainbow shoelaces. Paints her fingernails with liquid paper (tacky) and “goes” with boys although she is only eleven years old. Weaknesses: Vanity.*

Dick Bandle. *Slick, a man who spends his money on amenities, such as hair care products and stereo speakers. A sycophant who boosts his bloated ego by bullying his*

morally superior girlfriend. (i.e., telling her how to dress, criticizing her posture, controlling her purchases on undergarments, forcing her to follow a fad grapefruit diet).

In fifth grade, some of the girls could transform themselves with liquids out of little bottles kept in their pencil cases. They moved their hips when they walked and they smelled pretty and feminine, like pink bathrooms and bubble gum. Even though Nora bathed often, sometimes even twice a day, her own smell was musky, an anxious hormonal scent she couldn't seem to scrub off, even with Lava soap. When she came home one day with bloody underwear, her mother took me into the bathroom and showed her how to insert a junior stick Tampax, putting Vaseline on the tip.

“Just stick it in,” Judy told her, “It’s not hard.”

“Could you stick it in for me? Just this one time?” Nora asked her.

“No,” she said. “You can take care of it.”

Nora locked the door and took a hot bath.

That evening, Trip knocked on her bedroom door and came in without asking. “She told you,” Nora said. She was lying on her back, looking up at the fairies flying around her ceiling. Trip had painted them. They had streaming red hair, and Vulcan eyebrows. He’d spent a lot of time on those wings; he even painted faint grayish-pink veins through them. The wings were tiny, looking more decorative than functional.

“Hey, it’s a natural thing, Nora,” he said, standing in the doorway with his arms hanging awkwardly by his sides. He never seemed to know what to do with his body at times like this.

“It wasn’t supposed to happen yet,” Nora said, “You said. I’m twelve. You said to stay gold.”

“I said what? You shouldn’t listen to everything I say.”

He closed the door softly. Nora looked for a long time at the prettiest fairy, the one meant to look like her. Her hair was longer, and her eyes were greener than the other fairies. She was dancing with a primrose.

When she wrote in her diary that night, Nora was her Tamara. Tamara had a boyfriend, a seventh grader who played football and served as an altar boy. His hair was sandy brown and his name was Joshua. Joshua had given Tamara a little gold anklet dangling her initials, and she wore it tucked into her anklets so that Sr. Giovanni wouldn’t see it. Daria and Nora and Tamara were friends, wearing matching Eyezod barrettes in their winged hair, exchanging friendship bracelets, riding bikes down the trail by the bayou until the sun began to set and their mothers wanted them home.

Nora knelt before her bed, bowing her head, picturing the real Tamara as a child, with a long blonde braid down her back, saying “Now I lay me down to sleep.”

Pensacola is beautiful, Carmel texts. But this guy – beware these petuli smelling twenty something kids. They seem to get their philosophy from alternative music, not out of books. This guy is like someone you’d have dated ten years ago. His car is like something you’d have driven ten years ago.

What are you up to? She asks.

Nora holds the baby up to burp. Elizabeth's eyes go wide. "La!" she says.

With a free hand Nora texts, "feeding the baby."

Well, good luck with that, Carmel texts.

Nora considers telling her about the diner, about the search for Trip. She rubs the baby's back, gently. The baby pauses, looks up, furrows her brow.

Back In Time

October. According to the Colonial Americans, this was the Hunter's moon. Trip found a big swath of velvet tucked away in Judy's closet. It was midnight blue. "This is what the guy meant when he sang about blue velvet," Trip told Nora. They cut stars from cardboard and wrapped them in tinfoil, attaching them to the cloth, and sang *By the Light of the Silvery Moon* as he cut the crescent moon. He could never sing on key, but his voice was ragged like an old outlaw country singer's, and it made Nora laugh. "Just hold your arms out," he said, "when you want the full effect." She was to be the Halloween Night Sky. They weren't going to the festival at school. Nora knew without being told what the other girls would wear; if they wore costumes at all it would be something ordinary or bordering on sexy. They'd be pop stars and princesses.

Their plans were to go trick-or-treating across the city. They might even go to the beach; last Halloween, Trip drove through the shallow waters and let Nora stand in

the back of the pick-up. Sea foam glowed in the moonlight. Trip drove all night, windows down, full of coffee and cigarettes and sticky donuts from the gas stations. Nora had fallen asleep somewhere along the journey, and woke up the next morning, feet hot under the blasting heater, taste of chalky candy bars in her mouth, the elastic band of her Casper mask itching her chin. They'd had pie and black coffee in a diner and called Judy from the road.

There was a sparkle to everything that fall. Trip said you could feel it, a crackle when you reached up into the cold night air.

And then it happened. Not a date, exactly, but perhaps something better than a date. Trip and Nora had dinner with Tamara. Dick couldn't pick her up, the details were fuzzy, and Tamara said she felt glum. That was her word, *glum*. She sat behind the reference desk with a pretend scowl on her face, cupping her pointy chin in the palm of her hand. Her hair was so shiny that night Nora could swear it was laminated, and she wore it caught up in a loose bun at the nape of her Audrey Hepburn neck. Trip was putting away equipment and he said, *how about some moon food*. And she laughed. *Okay*, she said.

To begin with, they were just going to a Stop and Go. Tamara said she had never had a Moon Pie. "Aren't they like L'il Debbies?" She asked.

"Never, never mistake the moon pie for anything else. It is not a Twinkie, L'il Debbie, or any other pretender. It is mythical, legendary, and it is, above all, delicious. You must have it with an R.C. Cola."

"Is this true, Nora?" she asked with one perfectly arched eyebrow raised.

“Yes,” Nora said, “it’s true. Just like you should have barbeque with Big Red, white bread, and beans.”

Trip was handsome that night, saying all the right things and never going too far. The three ate their Moonpies, and Tamara laughed and said she’d never had anything so satisfying, and then they *said, wait, wait, you need to try fried ice cream.*

They ended up at a restaurant clear across town, one Trip and Nora had never been to but they didn’t tell her that. They sat outside next to an orange heat lamp. There was an umbrella and floating candle for every table. The waiter brought chips and salsa and green glasses of iced water. Tamara drank two beers and Trip, four. They talked about moon cakes, NASA, and coffee. Coffee was their word of the day.

“Coffee should be black as hell, strong as death, and as sweet as love,” Trip said.. It was one of their games.

"Turkish proverb," Trip said, "Thank you for your coffee, seignior. I shall miss that when we leave Casablanca."

"Ingrid Bergman," Tamara said. She leaned back a little to sip her dark coffee, leaving a red imprint on the rim of her cup. Trip and Nora had watched Casablanca on the late-night movie marathons more than a few times. That’s who Tamara was that night, Ingrid Bergman, with her intelligent eyes, her crisp white shirt under a navy blue sweater.

On the drive back, she sang to them. Her voice was a fragile soprano. “*I see the moon, the moon sees me, under the shade of the apple tree. Oh let the moon that shines on me, shine on the one I love.*”

“That was lovely,” Trip said.

“Thank you. My Grandpa Paul used to sing that. My Paw-paw.”

Which seemed like the perfect thing for her to say, almost. Nora didn't like to think of Tamara with a paw-paw. Tamara should have a grandfather.

They walked her to her condo door and she said, “I'd ask you in for more strong coffee but it must be past Nora's bedtime,” and blew them kisses from her kitchen window.

“Did you notice,” Trip said, as they drove away, “how she doesn't smell like perfume? She smells like fresh flowers.”

“Her nails are shiny but not polished,” Nora said.

“She buffs them,” he said.

Carmel calls at midnight, drunk. After a text *Can u talk?*

“Where are you calling from?” Nora asks. Her husband is up, studying. She can hear him downstairs, naming symptoms.

“Fuck,” Carmel says.

“Are you okay?”

“I'm fine. Can you come down here?”

“Where is here?”

“Pensacola. I told you, Pensacola.”

“I can't. I have a baby now.”

“So? Bring her. You aren't working right now, it's summer. The husband is working all the time, no?”

“Are you hurt? Do you need something bad?”

“I need help. This guy, oh my God Nor this guy.”

The baby starts to cry. “Tell me later. Elizabeth is up.”

“So? So what can’t the baby wait five minutes while I tell you this story about this guy?”

“She needs me now.”

“It’s five minutes.”

“Carmel, if I don’t nurse her now and she cries my breasts are going to fill up with milk and they are going to hurt. Can’t you text me about the guy?”

Back In Time

Trip began locking the garage door on Nora. Nora came home from school one day and waited for him to come out, but he never did. The door to the garage opened into their kitchen, so Nora and Judy could hear him in there as they ate a tuna casserole. It was almost nine already; Judy had messed up with the casserole. She wasn’t used to cooking, but Trip was taking less interest in domestic tasks.

Nora sipped her sun tea. Trip was moaning.

“Pipe down in there,” Judy said, and then it was quiet.

“I forgot to put the Ragu with the casserole,” Judy said.

“It tastes okay Mom.”

Judy smiled, close-lipped. She tapped her fork against the plate. “Do you mind doing the dishes?”

“No.”

Judy stood up and walked to her room. After clearing the table Nora followed her. She was lying on her back in bed, still in her heels, staring at the ceiling.

“I’m just tired, Nora.”

The next Saturday he missed work. The library was within walking distance, so he sent Nora to tell Tamara he wouldn’t make it that day.

“Bring her this,” he instructed, handing Nora a chain necklace made out of primrose petals.

“Am I supposed to tell her anything?”

Trip was sitting Indian-style on his sofa, and his eyes weren’t on her.

“No. No message. Just the jewelry.”

Tamara smiled when she saw Nora but seemed annoyed when she handed her the daisy chain. “He should call in if he’s sick, Nora,” she said, “tell him not to send you in like this again. I guess this once is okay.”

Nora couldn’t look at her. She gazed at the paper mache worms hanging from the ceiling instead. One of the bookworms was wearing horn-rimmed glasses and reading a book about the planets. She grabbed something off the shelf without looking at its cover and went to one of the reading carrels. They were the only two people in the library. She sat there for about ten minutes, but her eyes couldn’t focus on the words.

“Bye, Tamara,” she said. “I’ll tell Trip what you said. I think he might have food poisoning or something. He really is too sick to call, you know.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said, “I hope he gets over it soon.” She looked down at her hands. The tips of her middle fingers were ink-stained.

“In fact, he has a migraine. A crippling migraine. Probably exacerbated by food poisoning.”

Nora thought, *she doesn’t believe me. Or, she does and she really doesn’t care that Trip might have been poisoned.* It struck her that sending your twelve-year-old niece to tell your supervisor that you can’t come to work was not the sexiest move on his part.

“What did she say?” Trip asked when she returned.

“I told her you had food poisoning.”

“Did she say anything about the flowers?”

“No.”

Trip nodded. He was still in the same spot of the sofa. He hadn’t changed his clothes from the day before.

“I don’t think she really understood,” Nora told him.

Trip looked at her, finally. He smiled. “Oh, she did, Nora. Some things just go unspoken. You see, we had sexual relations. And when a woman of Tamara’s breeding and elegance has sexual relations, it means something different than it would to you or to me. She did.”

But Tamara was leaving, moving to California, with Dick Bandle. Nora and Judy came home to find the wall in between the living room and the kitchen sledge hammered, sheetrock in crumbles at the foot of the hole.

“What is this?” Her mother asked.

“I thought it would give us more space, create an open family dining area,” Trip said. “But now, I’m thinking, I like this effect. How about a mural, ruins, or a rocky cliff?” Trip was lying on his back, looking up with beseeching eyes. Sweat trickled down his forehead and he started rubbing his face. His arms and hands were dusted with plaster.

“I knew it.”

“Knew what.”

“Don’t test me, Trip.”

“I want to know, what did you know? I’m talking about home improvement, Judith. We can go to Handy Dan’s and for a few bucks, and some Sherwin William’s paint, I can make this look like the moon. A moonscape.”

That was when Judy bent down and spit on him. He wiped the spittle as if he were rubbing it into his skin.

“Trip, you make me want to hit you,” she said.

Nora went to her bedroom to look up at fairies. Tonight their wings seemed obscene, ugly – blood-tinged. They looked like something girls should cover up, like titties.

With Trip spending most of his days on the fold out sofa in front of his black and white television set, Nora could stay at school with her mother until five or she could

walk home. She walked. After about ten blocks, there were fewer gardens, more burglar bars. A small apartment with punched out windows seemed empty, but obviously wasn't, because there were a few bicycles parked outside and an overflowing dumpster. That was something else about Nora's neighborhood; there was a lot of furniture piled behind lots and apartments. There were more dogs tied out and more chain link fences. She would later tell her husband this, and watch him nod in the dark.

The dog across the street didn't growl, just lunged. "He don't like white people," the girl who lived there told Nora. She said her name was Jackie. Nora walked on by and thought about the t.v. screen.

Trip's screen. It was smudged, blurred with fingerprints and gunky deposits.

"It's nice outside," she lied, interrupting Trip's television program when she got home. Their lawn was overgrown with mushrooms, fire ants, and primrose.

"Yes," Trip said, "everything is blooming most recklessly; if it were voices instead of colors, there would be an unbelievable shrieking into the heart of the night!"

2010

Nora calls Carmel in the morning.

"Oh Shit," Carmel says.

"Did you have a good time last night?" Nora asks.

"God, it feels like someone took an ice pick to my brain. I'm too old for this."

Nora doesn't respond to that.

"Oh, you don't have to say anything. Just stay there with your baby being all smug and superior."

"I'm not smug. I'm not superior."

“I bet I could tell Ray a thing or two about you he doesn’t know.”

“I bet you could. I don’t think it would matter. What’s wrong?”

“It is so easy for you now, isn’t it, you with your doctor.”

“He just got his medical degree.”

“What is he going into?”

“Cardiology. I told you already.”

“Your cardiologist, then.” And then, after awhile, “I wish you were here. It’s like you’re this, other person.”

“I’m me. It’s just, now – I have a family.”

Carmel starts to cry. Nora imagines her long hair skimming her waist in tangles. When she vomits, unless someone holds the hair back for her, it falls forward into the toilet.

“They took my money.”

“What were you thinking, getting on a bus with those guys?”

“I don’t know. But I can’t call my parents. I’m almost forty for God’s sake.”

“You are forty. Of course not. I’ll send you something.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“No, I mean it. Thank God for you.”

When her husband comes up to bed he asks if that was Carmel. “It was. She had some trouble.”

He turns on the light, sits on the edge of the bed. He kisses her, lightly, and she kisses him back. Her face is wet.

“Were you crying?” He asks.

“Yes. I didn’t notice, but I guess I was.”

The baby is still in a bassinet, right beside her. She turns around to her side, and Ray adjusts the covers, throws a leg over her waist. She lets her finger dangle over the bassinet; the baby is asleep, but it should be time for her to wake and nurse soon. Her lips nurse in her sleep. Nora has never enjoyed looking at anyone so much. The baby’s lashes are long and straight. One lash in the middle is at least twice as long as the rest.

In the morning, after she has nursed Elizabeth, she’ll hear Ray downstairs, going over patient cases, practicing his pronunciation of words she doesn’t know the meanings of – atherosclerosis. Infarction.

The first time he’d delivered a baby, before they’d conceived Elizabeth, he came home and ate three bowls of spaghetti and drank all the wine she offered. They sat outside, watching the sun go down, swatting mosquitoes from one another’s legs. He told her everything, the girl, who was a teenager, her mother and how she offered the girl ice cubes, and the baby, its full head of hair...the young father, how he was there, too, how he surprised the grandmother by cutting the umbilical cord and holding the girl’s hand. “I can’t think of the word.”

“Sounds like *Jubilant*,” she’d said.

“Elation,” he said, “that is the word I am thinking.”

Now, every day he comes home, if he gets a ride home, they are both tired. She’ll tell him about Elizabeth and the new things she’s done. How she coos now, how she smiles. And sometimes, lying in the dark, he asks her to talk to him and she can tell he just likes the sound of her voice, he can’t really listen. He is too tired to listen.

She'll scratch his back, or sing to the baby, but she is singing to them both really. She'll talk about Ernest Shackleton and Lewis and Clark, about recipes she's read for feeding babies...she is teaching herself to cook...and child rearing theories. She'll talk even after he has fallen asleep, and watch Elizabeth listening to the sound of her voice. The baby blinks, stares at her, sometimes makes her baby noises; she sounds the way Nora imagines a tiny dove might sound.

She trusts Ray more than anyone. But she wonders, about the things that will happen to them, about how those things might change them.

She closes her eyes and thinks about her friend, about that house she'd loved so well when they were younger. The fake wood paneling on the walls, the mother's hash browns and black coffee in the mornings, Carmel's dad, Bix, and his John Wayne plates hanging over the sofa. Tack-y Carmel would say and roll her eyes. But she wasn't ashamed in front of Nora. She commiserated with Nora.

Now, Carmel's parents live in the same home as they did then. They worked hard most of their lives, and saved their money. They were good parents. Carmel, their only daughter, is destroying her liver. Her bloated face is stuck like a lollipop on a stick white body, hair every which way, hair she used to brush and kept virginal in spite of the fact that hairspray and waves, banana clips, were the style. The old thrift store finds that shimmered with glamour before now make her look a little like a bag lady.

"Carmel's a hot mess," she says in the dark.

What sickens Nora is not that she has lost her; it's that the loss doesn't hurt as much as it should. She turns to face her sleeping husband and his breathing changes as he holds her tighter.

Back In Time

Nora spent as much time as she could in the Rexall's drugstore down the street on weekends. The clerk, Madge, didn't seem to mind at all. They had just remodeled the place. It had the frosty dry smell of central air conditioning, newly painted walls and fresh carpet. She sucked coke through a straw and sat cross legged in the magazine section.

They had magazines for everything. There was a cat fancy magazine, a hair stylist's magazine, a boating magazine, there was even one for people who smoked cigars, *Cigar Aficionado*. She liked the sleek ones with glossy pictures, *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*. There were articles about new cosmetics, chatty sections about clothes, art, and news.

She lost all sense of time. A few hours could pass without her noticing. She always bought something so that Madge wouldn't think she was a shoplifter. A bottle of clear nail polish. A box of mints. She never told Judy where she was going, not anymore. Trip was usually sleeping when she left.

And sometimes she walked next door to the Baskin Robbins and ordered a double scoop. Or wandered in and out of the other stores at the strip mall, Winnie's Flower Shop, the Hallmark. But the Rexall's was the most comfortable. Madge didn't bother her, didn't ask if she needed help. When she got bored Nora wandered the aisles, studying the Sundries section and the cosmetic section, the hair section as well. She read the backs of shampoo bottles, hair dyes, the bottoms of lipsticks. She wondered who came up with the titles of lipsticks. Maybe she could have a job like that someday, she thought, and imagined myself herself in a business suit, like Kathy Whitmire, a woman mayor, sitting behind a desk with pane of glass placed over it. Let's see. *Marvelous Melon. Divine Wine. Undine.* Alliteration and rhyming were common among the lipstick names. But she couldn't come up with anything as good as the real names. *Wine on Ice. Passionfruit.* She could spend half an hour just reading the bottoms of lipsticks and the backs of hair dye boxes. It soothed her better than a lullaby, those names, and it got to where she could empty her brain and think of nothing but *Rich Raspberry. Clairol's Redwood and Dark Honey.* She wasn't waiting for anything to happen, in fact she liked the static feeling of the Rexall's. All her days could blend together into one long one. No one but Madge ever worked the counter, because it wasn't a busy time of day. There were never more than a few customers there, if there were any at all. And she liked it that way, it gave her the feeling that the Rexall's was her territory. Hers and Madge's. But then of course something did happen.

She met him a couple of weeks into vacation. She was aware of the man before she could see him. Felt him, really, and knew right away how he was thinking of her.

He was behind her, in the hair section. She didn't turn around. She picked up a bottle of shampoo and read the label on the back. Thought about what he was looking at, because he was watching her, and he was a man, she could tell. His view of her from the back - a small girl, in short pleated skirt, cotton blouse, penny loafers without socks that revealed nice ankles, thin legs, a long braid revealing a white part and slender neck. She knew what he wanted, too, and that it was probably only a passing thought.

Hook a man, that was what Trip called it. Like spearing bait onto a fishhook.

She kept pretending to read, leaning into her foot, then stood crookedly, one loafer on its side. Like a kid.

She put the shampoo bottle back, then rose on tiptoe, reaching for something on the top shelf.

He cleared his throat.

"Need a little help?" he asked.

She fell back on her heels.

"Oh, thank you," she said.

"Which one do you want?"

"That one," she said, pointing to a bottle of hair spray.

"That one?" he asked incredulously.

"For my mom," she said, "not me."

He handed her the bottle. She looked up at him and smiled. He was tall, taller than Uncle Trip, even. He swallowed and she watched the lump in his throat wobble.

He was in his early thirties, maybe even late twenties, she decided. His hair was dark brown, almost black, very curly, streaked with gray at the temples. He was skinny, without the kind of wiry strength that would have made his lankiness attractive. Bony, that was the word, she decided. He was bony. She liked his eyes, though. They were green and distorted behind chunky black glasses.

"Oh, this isn't what I thought it was," she said, "It's banana scented. She doesn't like that kind. But thanks anyway."

"Here, I'll put it back," he said, taking it.

"Do you live around here?" she asked, looking at him sideways through her crook's eye.

"What?"

"Oh, sorry. I was just wondering. For my Mom, you know. I just thought you seemed nice."

"Well, thank you. I like to think so."

"My Mom is single," she added, "so I like to help her out with dates."

She had never been so forward before. She wondered if speaking in such a direct way made her seem tomboyish. He probably liked that.

He followed her out of the aisle.

"Do you know anything about perfume?" She asked him.

"Why?"

"Well, I want to buy my Mom a birthday present. I don't have a lot of money, though. Do you think drugstore perfume is a cheap gift?"

He touched his crumpled hair, considering.

"Not at all. But you know your mother, I don't."

"She doesn't wear perfume. Or makeup. But I thought it would be nice to give her something impractical. She always buys practical things."

"Well, that sounds like a very sweet idea to me," he said.

"This looks good," Nora said, picking up a bottle of apple blossom perfume, "but it seems a little young, doesn't it?"

"I don't know anything about perfume," he said, and smiled. His teeth were big and white.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" Nora asked him.

"Yes."

"Well, what does she smell like?"

"I don't know."

"Does she wear perfume?"

"I think so."

"Does she smell spicy, or fruity, or like flowers?"

He laughed, then shrugged his shoulders.

"Spicy, I'd have to say."

"I think my mother should have something flowery. Maybe this one would be good," she said, lifting up a sample bottle and spritzing it.

"What do you think?" Nora asked him, holding her wrist up for him. He sniffed.

"Smells pretty," he said.

She pressed her wrist to her nose, breathing in its cloying scent.

"Ugh," she said, "too sweet. I'll have to get her something else."

She sprayed another atomizer onto her wrist and held it up to him again. His hands shook as he held her hand, palm open to his face. He took it into his own and pressed, wrist against lips.

"This is lighter," he said.

Nora jerked her hand back, smelling.

"Nahh," she said, "I think it's because they're too cheap. I'll have to get her something else."

"You said you wanted to get her something flowery," he said, following me out of the perfume section, "does she like flowers?"

"She loves them," Nora said.

"Why don't you order her a bunch of roses," he said, "can you afford that?"

"Hey, that's a great idea," Nora said, "why didn't I think of that?"

She watched as he bought some antihistamines and shaving cream.

"Do you have allergies?" She asked him. Looking at his bumpy red nose, she already knew the answer.

"Yes."

He looked down at her, smiling. He didn't want her to go.

"Well, are you allergic to ice cream?" She asked. Hoping that dumb joke would charm him.

"No."

"I was going to get some ice cream after this. I have enough for both of us. Do you want some?"

He glanced at his watch, then looked around the empty aisles. He seemed flustered.

"Why not?" he said, "I have time. My treat," he added.

"Thanks," Nora said, watching Madge ring up the sale. Focusing on her red and gold badge.

When they stepped outside his glasses steamed. He paused, wiped them off with the tail of his shirt, squinted, readjusted them. Then took a white, crumpled tissue from his pocket, and blew his nose. He looked down at Nora, bemused. Wondering what to do with her.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Fifteen," she lied. Knowing he knew she lied, but also knowing he didn't know she knew. She crossed her arms over her breasts.

She ordered a double scoop, Rum Raisin and Mocha. He watched her as she ate, and she was careful, neat, licking the tips of her fingers, wiping the corners of her mouth, taking little bites so the ice cream would last. She sat on one foot, and let the other one swing back and forth. The chairs in the Baskin Robbins were shaped like little school desks.

He licked his chocolate cone quickly, eyes fixed on Nora's mouth. He was Hooked. She knew this completely, but still hoped she might be wrong. That she was imagining things, and he was just a regular guy buying a lonely kid some ice cream.

"So you have a girlfriend," Nora said.

"Yes. Her name's Sally."

"So I guess you wouldn't be interested in a blind date with my Mom."

"No. But I'm honored you'd think me suitable," he said, in a formal, artificially chivalrous way. His voice seemed to come from somewhere behind him.

"That's O.K. To be honest, she wouldn't go out with you anyway. She's dating a real jerk right now." The lies were coming so easily.

"He is, is he?"

"Yeah."

"That can be rough."

"I can't stand him," she added.

After they had finished, Nora walked him to his car.

"Do you need a ride anywhere?" He asked her as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"A ride home would be nice," she said.

He held the car door open. Nora's legs stuck to the hot vinyl seats.

"Where do you live?" he asked, pulling out of the parking lot. He was a nervous driver. Or maybe she made him nervous.

"Just take me to the park," she said, "I don't want to go home."

"You mean the one behind the schoolyard?"

"Yeah, that one."

And then it happened so effortlessly. As he pulled into a residential neighborhood, she brushed his leg with the tips of her fingers, as softly as she could, so that he could ignore it if he wanted to. But he didn't.

He circled her hand with his, and his grasp was light, supplicating. She didn't resist.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I need money."

She felt his hand shake, and wondered if she had said the wrong thing, if he had ever done anything like this before. She didn't look at him, but stared at the back of the hand covering her. It was hairy, even the knuckles were hairy, and very white. The fingers were bony and tapered.

"How much?" he asked, his voice rising an octave.

She bit her lip, waiting. There was still time to pretend she hadn't said anything, to get out of the car. She knew he would let her out, that he wouldn't make her do anything.

"I don't know," she said, "a lot. I'm sorry. We need it, though. My Mom and me."

He swallowed audibly.

"Two hundred," she said, "two hundred dollars."

"I can take that much out," he said.

She didn't know what he meant.

"Of the bank. I can get that much out of the bank. You'll have to wait, though. Do you mind waiting in the car? There's a branch only a few miles away."

"Yes," She said, "I can wait."

His back straightened, and they drove the rest of the way in silence. It felt safer now, probably for him as well, knowing they had made a decision.

He pulled into the bank. There were only a few cars in the lot.

"I won't be long," he said, "I'll leave the car on for you, so you can have air conditioning. You can listen to the radio if you want."

"O.K."

She turned on the radio after he left. It was tuned into the easy listening station, playing *A Summer Place*. She watched his back as he entered the building. He was too tall for his jacket; the sleeves didn't meet his wrists. Neck hairs curled into the collar of his shirt. His gait was loose and fluid. It gave his skinny body a kind of grace. He looked better when he was moving.

When he came out, he wasn't smiling. He handed her the money as soon as he jumped into the car.

They didn't speak for several minutes.

"I can't take you home with me," he said.

"I know."

She rested her hand against his thigh, then felt another shiver pass over his body.

They drove for awhile. He pulled onto the freeway. She closed her eyes, not wanting to know how they were getting to wherever they were going.

When she felt the car slow she opened them and saw that they were passing a strip of motels. He pulled into one that seemed abandoned. She scanned the buildings. Sandy colored cinder block boxes. A huge cement parrot perched on the entrance sign. In front of the buildings, a swimming pool filled with dirty water.

"Jesus," he whispered, "Jesus Christ."

They pulled into the circular driveway.

"Wait in the car," he said.

She ducked her head down and waited for him to come back. It seemed to take a long time. They drove to the back row of buildings. There were no other cars.

She followed him into the room. It smelled of mildew. The room had its own air conditioning unit and he switched it onto full blast. The carpet was deep, an ugly brown-orange, like old rust. The walls were puce. There were two twin beds; one was missing a head board.

She sat down on one of the beds, pushing her shoes off with the soles of her feet.

He sat down next to her. Then cracked his knuckles. She almost jumped at the sound they made, a popping noise. Like a pop gun.

He didn't move. Finally she reached up and lifted the glasses off his face.

She rested his glasses on the bed table, then sat on his lap and wrapped her legs around his waist. Closed her eyes.

His hands shook against her back, and he pressed them into her shoulders. His breath was shallow, whispery against her neck.

"What is your name," he said, so softly he sounded as if he were speaking to himself.

"Jennifer," she answered, without stopping to think.

"Jennifer," he whispered, "Jenny."

He didn't take her clothes off, and he kept his pants on. All he did was rub against her panties until she felt her underwear slightly dampen. Then his whole body shook, and he began kissing her, her throat, her eyes, her braid. He pressed his face into her chest.

"God! God!" She felt the huge Adam's apple convulsing against her fingers.

"Jenny!"

When he was finished, he started to whimper.

"Please," Nora said, "don't feel bad." She rolled off of him, touched his curly hair. It felt rough.

"God, Jennifer," he said, "how old are you?"

"I'm not a little girl," she said, "I'm a teenager. Don't feel bad."

"God."

"I told you. And this isn't the first time, either. So don't feel bad," she repeated. And pulled his sad face into her lap. She felt something open and shut inside. A physical opening and closing, like a valve in her heart. It wasn't love that she felt, of course it couldn't have been. But it was something like love, a mixture of gratefulness and yearning. Also relief. She had been afraid,

He dropped her off within a few blocks of the house. Looked down at her with eyes that seemed desperate.

"I'll see you again, if you want," she said.

"When?"

"Not on the weekend. But the weekdays are O.K."

"Lunch time?" he asked, "is lunch time alright?"

Of course, she thought. His lunch break.

"Yes," she said, "on Wednesday."

She thought, as they passed the Rexall's, Dot's Coffee Shop, and the English Aires apartments, that everything might look different, but each building was the same. She told him to stop at Dot's parking lot; there were a few parked cars and a delivery truck. The three scattered palm trees at the edge of the lot were yellowed and dried-up looking. She wondered if they always looked that way; she couldn't remember. It had been rainy, and those dead looking trees didn't make sense to her, but she didn't know much about the lives of palm trees.

She didn't look back or wave as she walked away from his car. And didn't think about what had just happened. She was only thinking of the bare fact, the real, true, fact that there were two one hundred dollar bills tucked in the heel of her loafers. Better not step in any puddles, she thought.

In the morning Nora gives the baby a bath; just a few baths ago, Elizabeth was slippery, arms and legs startling under the running warm water. Now she leans her head back for the cups of water and coos. She keeps her eyes opened wide throughout the bath and does not cry. Nora isn't sure if this means she enjoys it, or if she is simply stunned. Nora tells her what she is going to do right before she does it. "Now I am rinsing your hair baby. And now I am wrapping you up like a little burrito. I know I know it's cold. Let's put your diaper on." Afterwards, wrapped in a fluffy blanket, Elizabeth shivers and sleeps. Her hair – she has a lot of it for a newborn – fluffs out in several directions.

Ray will get home in the afternoon after working all night. What day is it? He'll ask her and she'll have to stop and think before telling him, or she'll check the calendar on her phone. Already? Friday already?

Back in Time

Halloween was a warm day turning chilly at night. Trip and Judy waited in the car as Nora ran up to ring doorbells. Before getting candy tossed into a plastic pumpkin, Nora stretched her arms out to expand stars and the moon. She wore shorts and a tee shirt under the velvet, and no socks with her tennis shoes. "Hey, Nor. I should have noticed that," Trip said when he caught a glimpse of her mottled legs. They didn't howl at the moon. Trip drove until late in the night, past refineries lit up like burning castles, past all-night truck stops that made Nora think of space stations glowing white in the darkness. "Do you have any idea how much gas you guzzle, Mister?" Her mother said but she smiled when she said it. They listened to the Crystal Gale tape, and Nora asked them to rewind the song about the beautiful woman who could put her makeup on and take anyone home, but dreams of someone she hopes will come true.

Nora was hungry. All she'd had to eat was packaged candy. That was something her mother wouldn't think about but Trip usually noticed. "Let's go home," she said but they didn't answer. Maybe Trip was liking his heartbreak, the songs about love, the hole in the wall, driving through wet streets with a radio blasting. How was this so different from being happy? Nora pressed her front teeth against the cold window and felt them vibrate. Nobody said anything. They passed a billboard with a picture of a woman in a milky evening gown. For a second, she looked like Tamara, and Nora closed her eyes to fall asleep.

That year was hard for all three of them. They were ready for a new one.

Trip spent months in the garage, coming out for Frosted Flakes and coffee. The hole stayed there, they couldn't afford to fix it, but he cleared out the debris. School felt regular now, something to be gotten through but not much more. Daria and her friends wore bunny-fur coats, and then winter heated up, and patches of fur fell out of their little coats and jackets. There were parties in class, cookies with brilliant green, gold, and red sugar, with red hot buttons and raisin eyes, lopsided Christmas trees with hard silver bells that crunched. The cookies left crumbs on the floor and desktops, so Sr. Cecilia handed each student a small napkin printed with Santa's faces complete with cherried cheeks and Rudolph nose.

Judy's students gave her paperweights, soaps, candy dishes, and their tree came from the auditorium. It was the tallest tree they'd ever had, frosted white, and smelled like pine air freshener. It was a prize, and Nora was sure Trip would think so, too. But he came out for hot chocolate, blinked, and then went back to the garage. They heard the

stereo come on and then Merl Haggard. Nora knew he was lying on the sofa or the floor, with his boots propped up, scuffing the wall.

That holiday they didn't waste their time with clocks. Nora had no desire to go anywhere or do anything but stay near her mother, reading by the window or playing alone in the field beyond their yard. Trip didn't go back to the library, not to tell them he'd quit and not even to return overdue books.

2010

She calls the Red Barn diner first, asks if he is there. "This is he," a man says.

"This is who?"

"Trip. This is Trip. Nora?"

She hangs up. It is such a hot day, so maybe that accounts for it a bit, but her palms begin to sweat and so do her underarms. She takes a sleeping Elizabeth from her bassinet and dresses her in a yellow onsie. She puts a sunhat on her head. She drives out there, before she can change her mind.

Back in Time

A butterfly is an insect of the order Lepidoptera Trip said. Like all Lepidoptera, butterflies begin as larval caterpillars, then an inactive pupae stage, and, finally, a spectacular metamorphosis into a bright winged creature. There was no creature more beautiful than the butterfly. Those make-believe creatures, fairies and pixies, they couldn't compare. When Trip read *Charlotte's Web* to Nora, he asked her about miracles. She knew the answer he wanted. Spinning, that was the miracle. A spider is born with the knowledge to spin; nobody teaches it to her. In the springtime, they were butterfly watchers.

One spring, they planned a butterfly garden, and talked about it for hours. But it never came to be. The year he lost Tamara, he seemed to have forgotten. Nora kept thinking back to the year before, when they had gone to the hill country to see the wildflowers. Early one morning, they drove out of McKinney Falls and then into the Greenbelt. He brought her to the monarchs, dropping like leaves. There were thousands of them piling together. Trip held her fingertips and they stayed there, watching, until Nora's stomach growled and the sun began to set.

A larvae, or caterpillar, is a multi-legged gorgier. When they aren't eating, they are searching for food. Nora's uncle did not need to search. That spring, she watched his skinny body stretch to grand proportions. His hair and fingernails grew. "See how shiny my hair is," he said. "How thick my nails. They are rich with nutrients." He ate steaks, eggs, vegetables, beans, rice, and drank gelatin shakes Nora made especially for him. He stuffed himself with Moonpies. Ants invaded the garage, and he told Nora and Judy not to touch them. He said *we should not hurt any living thing*.

Some larvae, especially those of the Lycaenidae, live with ants. They communicate with the ants using vibrations as well as using chemical signals. The ants protect these larvae and they in turn gather honeydew secretions. Nora once asked Trip if this meant they were like cows were to humans. "No! No!" he said. "They live in symbiosis. They nurture one another, they grow together in the colony."

Judy told him to eat in the garage. She didn't want to talk to him, she said he was ruining himself. She stopped telling Nora when to go to bed, when to brush her teeth, and scowled at her when she joined him in the garage. He'd painted an ant colony on the ceiling; the ants' bodies were chubby and cartoonish. Trip's flesh hung over the

waistband of his banged-up jeans, and he smelled like something curdled. Sometimes Nora would pinch his roll of fat and that could make him laugh. He said such things as, “What day is today? And how many legs does a spider have? I can’t remember, Katydid. I can’t remember. “ He kept calling her Katydid.

When Judy came home, she’d put a frozen Stouffer’s meal in the microwave for Nora. As Trip grew fat, she shrank. She lived on tuna fish and salads. Nora thought Trip was the one in trouble, but Judy was the one she wanted to punish. It seemed as if this were her fault, though Nora couldn’t say why. They ate together most nights without talking. She graded her papers, and Nora went to Trip’s garage to read and do homework. Some nights he didn’t turn to say hello to her. Often, his eyes were closed. Nora asked him why.

“I feel too tired to open,” he said. The ants gave him a headache now but he said he was too tired to cover them. Occasionally, he’d get up to eat or to go to the bathroom. *Sanford and Son, All in the Family, Laverne and Shirley, M*A*S*H, P.M. Magazine, Real People* flickered and talked to them. Sometimes Nora dreamed about the people on television. She thought Hawkeye was smart, maybe smarter than Trip, even, although she couldn’t understand most of his jokes. While the shows ran Nora would lie next to Trip on the smelly sofa, and sometimes he’d play with her hair distractedly. One night, she went into his room. She wanted to see him sleeping. He looked the same way, though, eyes flat, big arms dangling between his legs.

She brought him food every morning. In the evenings she would carry the garbage out for him. It made her think of pet gerbils, how you were supposed to change their paper every few days and bring them fresh shavings. His eyes, she decided, were

like a gerbil's too now. She lay down beside him, burying her head in his soft lap. She felt her face turn soggy, clammy with tears. She was crying. "I must be crying," she told him, but he didn't look down. She pushed herself up, climbing him. She pushed her forehead into his forehead and stared into his eyes. "Wake up wake up wake up wake up," She said.

He groaned, and the sofa creaked.

"Some caterpillars have special structures called osmeteria which produce smelly chemicals. These are used in defense." She told him. "You stink, Trip." She stood up and turned the television to a nothing channel. They watched the snowy screen.

During school assemblies, Nora watched her mother sitting with her class. She seemed taller, straighter, someone Nora only knew from a distance. On days the whole school went to mass, she pretended they were in an orphanage, and her mother was a beautiful nun. There were only a few nuns left at the school since they'd shut the convent down. In Nora's daydream, she called her mother Sister Julia. Her Sr. Julia would care for all the orphans, but Nora would be her secret favorite. Nora imagined the old convent filled with metal beds lined up in neat rows. Sister Julia would stand at the door as the girls said nighttime prayers. She had cut off her wild red hair years ago, and it grew in little tendrils beneath her habit. After saying lights out she would say whisper goodnight to Nora and think, what a beautiful, what a stunningly good little child. Nora would be the favorite orphan, the one she never lined up in front of prospective parents. In her mind's eye, these parents were from another era, the men with monocles and gold-plated watches, the women in bustles. *They would say, where is the little girl with the shiny hair we saw playing by the statues?* And Sr. Julia would say, *she's spoken for.*

It was Trip's fat that finally got to Judy. That, and Nora's hair. She had stopped brushing regularly.

They were driving home, and Judy drumming her nails on the dashboard, singing along to the Muzak on the radio. Nora started singing with her. An electronic voice told them about all the lonely people, Father MacEnzie, and Eleanor Rigby.

"What does it mean," Nora asked her, "she keeps a face in a jar by the door? She wears too much make-up?"

"Yes, that's what it means," she said.

"I think it sounds lonelier in this version. I like the A.M. version more," Nora said. "It sounds like a robot is singing it. Like, no feeling at all."

"I hate this goddamn song," Judy said. She pulled over to a Diamond Shamrock. "Stay here."

"Are we getting gas?" Nora asked.

"Just stay in the goddamn car, Nora." She got out and kicked the tires. Nora thought maybe she was testing the tire pressure. She looked beautiful and angry. Her dark red hair was pulled in loose, low ponytails past her shoulders and the ponytails shook each time she kicked. When she came back, she folded her arms and sighed.

"Your hair is full of rats' nests. Sr. Giovanni said something to me today. You know, that doesn't make me look good. It makes it look like I don't care for you the way I should. We need this job, Katy. They need to at least think I'm a decent person, even if we don't go to Mass every Sunday."

"I know."

"It's going to be combed and washed and conditioned, or it's getting cut."

They drove to Safeway and loaded the car up with: bleach, brooms, scouring brushes, Comet, Tilex, which was supposed to rid your bathroom of mold and mildew, Lyesol and Lava soap. They also bought bags of crushed ice. Judy piled her hair on top of her head and said, "It's time to scour." She was as lustrous, Nora thought, as any Breck shampoo girl.

She opened front door with such force it hit the door guard and bounced back, bumping Nora on the nose. "Look at this place. It smells like cat piss and we don't even have a cat. It must be coming from the Dragon's Lair," she shouted, so Trip could hear. There were no sounds coming from the garage.

The windows were stuck closed. She rolled up her sleeves and tried to open them. She grunted, growled, and then gave up.

"Get rid of these," she instructed, pointing to the bug carcasses in the windowsill. She went into the kitchen, clanging the pots and pans, scraping, scrubbing. She sprayed the bathroom with Tilex, ran the shower, and shut the door. She came out with a hairbrush. The brush was matted with long red hairs.

"Sit down," she said, biting her lip. "Sit down."

She started at the bottom, pulling Nora's hair straight out in sections, combing out the split ends, then working her way up to the crown.

Finally, the bathtub. After Tilexing they bleached, and after bleaching, they Cometed. Then Judy sprayed the whole room with Lyesol. Nora felt dizzy. She started to sing. She sprayed pine forest air freshener in the closets and cupboards, belting out Dolly Parton, "Love is Like a Butterfly, flutters like soft wings inside..." and Judy said, "Fine, now it's time. Let's wake that butterfly up. Let's slice open that cocoon."

She smiled and Nora thought how perfectly white her teeth were, how she wanted to have that smile someday, to look like that. To be grown-up, clean, pretty.

Trip was on his sofa, the television blasting the theme from *Little House On The Prairie*. Nora didn't want to see him. She did not want to press her head against his belly and watch the Ingalls' girls running through the prairie, Laura's arms opened wide, Carrie tumbling into the grass. Her mother turned on the light, looking up at the ants. "This is sick," she said, "this is diseased thinking."

Trip looked up, rubbing sleepy-dirt from his eyes. What happened next, in her memory: her mother's arm stretched out, a claw, pulling him by the scalp, and he grunted she pulled him to his feet. Still, he didn't move. She pulled and pulled, until she clutched a hank of hair. Then she held the hank up for inspection, out and away, like a specimen.

"If you don't get up and out of this sofa, right now, I'm going to bug-bomb this whole house. Don't think I won't."

Trip stood up, and, when he did, his tee shirt rose over his belly. Judy and Nora took his hands in theirs and led him to the bathroom. He sat on the toilet seat.

Nora's mother ran cold water. "Stay here," she said, "I'll get the ice."

Nora was almost eye-level with him sitting on that toilet. She took his chin in her hand, tilting his Moonpie face, and looked into him. All she saw was the swirl of color, the gold flecks in the center of the iris. Maybe she had seen something that wasn't there, the way she sometimes saw thought in her Holly Hobby doll's painted-on eyes. Nora stroked his messy hair. They'd never had pets, but she talked to him the way she might talk to a shy horse; she said, "It will be okay."

Judy poured bags of ice and they listened to the running water. He raised his arms for her and she pulled off the stained tee-shirt. Nora rolled off his holey socks. He walked to the bathtub himself, and then he was shivering, purple-and-white, naked. His penis was shrunken, flopping like something that wasn't part of his body, like a stuck-on wilting flower. Nora had never seen him naked that way. Her mother poured the ice, splashed the water around his shoulders, using an old tumbler to soak his head. She sang as she did this, a song Nora had never heard, about a little white goat visiting her baby's cradle in the night, a goat snowy and white, bringing raisins and almonds.

Nora can't remember how long they did this. It seemed all night, and the bags kept coming, more than she remembered bringing back from the store, it was as if they came from some magic bowl that never emptied. Judy kept singing that same song over and over and then he was singing it too, his voice cracked and off-key, because he was not beautiful the way she was and he could never sing. Nora started to cry and she said, "Stop it, now" so she did. When Trip's song ended he began to scream. It was a tea kettle whistle, a scream that ended when Judy turned off the flame by saying "Stop now. Just stop."

When he did, he was there with them again. He sat up and looked at Nora and said, "Katydid." Her mother wrapped him in towels, pink and lavender, and he started to laugh, and Nora laughed with him.

"He needs something warm in him," Judy said. So Nora went to the kitchen and made coffee. She couldn't find the filters, so she used a paper towel instead. She poured three mugs, and when he came out, wrapped in her fuzzy pink bathrobe, she said "Hello."

He said, "Hello, how do you like this prettiest?"

They all sat there until morning came, drinking their coffees. They didn't talk much. Nora sat by the window, looking out and away. The day, Nora saw, would be gray. The sky looked like a big bruised banana. Trip looked to her like one of those funny-faced baboons, the kind that blow their cheeks out.

“Hey,” Nora said, “you have a monkey-face.”

He puffed up his cheeks.

2010

Carmel lost her daughter almost ten years ago, to an ex who refused to give his address out. Jubilee was the child's name. She was sticky-fingered, with luxuriant bunches of toffee colored hair. She had lived with Carmel's parents while Carmel got herself together. Nora had thought it sad, had seen it as insurmountable, had thought it was something so difficult, so hard for her friend that she couldn't bring herself to talk about it. But not now.

Nora couldn't have let go, not of Elizabeth, not ever.

“Is it common for someone to die of alcohol withdrawal?” Nora asks Ray.

“Not common,” he said, “but it can happen.” He waited for her to ask more, but she didn't. She imagined Carmel at a karaoke night, drinking pink ladylike cocktails, singing Juice Newton songs, wandering in on some office happy hour night. Eating jalepeno poppers off some guy's plate. “I lost my daughter,” she'd tell him, weepy.

She woke up one morning from a dream that she was beside Carmel, hung over, craving an iced Pepsi. When she woke she was sweaty, clammy hands, nauseous. Ray was downstairs, studying. “A 32 year old Caucasian male with – “ she interrupted him,

came down with the baby over her shoulder in burp position. “What’s wrong with me?” She asked.

“Hormonal changes,” Ray said.

The baby started to cry.

When someone gets lost like this, they want you to find them, and then they run away, and then you find them. They run away. You find them. They run away again.

Back in Time - Performing Arts (1984)

Trip decided that if Nora were to have a bright future, she would need to be around artistic circles. These were not people you could just go up to and befriend, he said. The art world and its benefactors was not an easy world to penetrate, but Trip believed Nora was young enough, pretty enough, and smart enough to find her way in a couple of years, providing she got the right start. These people ate small food off of big plates and were invited into buildings made out of frosted glass cubes. These arty people, most of them were smart people.

Trip read a book all about Andy Warhol and a girl who was his best friend named Edie Sedgwick. Edie died young, but not before Bob Dylan wrote songs about her and many beautiful photographs were taken of her. He showed Nora some of the pictures. Nora didn’t see what was so striking about her, although she liked the way the model stood in her bra and underwear with a cigarette dangling in her fingers, her arm on a suited man’s shoulder as casually as if she were dressed. Edie was from money. Her world was fast and fun and glamorous. In Nora’s favorite picture of her she wore a brown tee shirt as a dress with tights and ballet shoes. Her eyes were enormous.

“People like poor little rich girls and rich little poor girls,” Trip said. “You will have to be the rich little poor girl.”

“Have you ever seen any of these Andy Warhol movies?” Nora asked him.

He had not, but the book they read about them and described them in detail. The one that sounded most poignant to them was *Poor Little Rich Girl*. In this film, Edie woke up, ordered orange juice and coffee, and then put on her make up while an Everly Brothers record played. Then she smoked cigarettes, tried on clothes, and talked about how she spent an entire inheritance in six months. When Nora tried to imagine Edie in a soft negligee, on a pink telephone, she wanted to see Edie’s face but she only saw her mother’s. Judy wearing a faded wine-stained nightie, her hands shaking slightly as she sipped black coffee. Judy crying, mascara dripping down her gaunt cheeks. Judy with her hair cut short, chandelier earrings hanging to her slight shoulders.

“I don’t want to become Edie Sedgewick,” Nora told him.

“I don’t want you to either,” he said, “but that’s an example of what I mean. You get yourself with the right people in the right moment, and you can make an impact. You can be the princess who worked in the cinders. The beautiful starlet discovered by the soda fountain.”

“Edie Sedgewick was a drug addict,” Nora told him.

Years later Nora would watch the film, and found it disappointed her. She wished she’d left it untouched, left it all up to imagination.

With the right school, and the right presentation, she could get a scholarship in a few short years. She could go to New England and live in stone row dorm houses. Trip didn’t seem to have a plan much beyond the stone dorms climbing with ivy. There would

be a library, too, and classes held in towers. She would call her professors by their first names because that was how they did things up there. They could not afford private school, but Nora could apply to a magnet high school and take the bus across town. The performing and visual arts school was Trip's choice.

He drove past it at least once a week, watching free-spirited teenagers milling around the big gray-brick building. They looked like down town kids, with punked-out hair or flowy dresses and skirts. Girls in legwarmers and mini-skirts sat outside a little courtyard, smoking. Those, Trip said, were the dancers.

They only had to decide what kind of artist Nora was to become. She wanted to be one of those dancers. She liked the way they sat with their legs bent under, graceful and easy. They had Edie Sedgewick tiddly-wink breasts. But Nora couldn't dance; She couldn't even twirl a baton.

Trip wanted her to apply for the art department. They decided that she would also try out for vocal, because they needed a back-up department. Nora couldn't read notes, and had no musical training other than when her class took music once a week with Sr. Veronica, who used to bring out triangles and play Jesus Christ Superstar for the class. But Nora could carry a tune.

They bought a sketchbook, watercolors, oils and acrylics at the art supply store. Trip sat Nora down in front of his easel and asked her to paint something. She painted a tree. She made a thick brown trunk, and then smushed the paintbrush into some burnt umber to make soft Impressionistic looking leaves.

"What the hell is that?" Trip asked.

"What do you mean? It's a tree. Can't you tell it's a tree?"

“You aren’t even trying,” he said.

But she was. Trip holed himself up in his garage for a couple of days, working on the portfolio. When he emerged, there were dozens of illustrations and paintings of Nora. The drawings were charcoal, pen-and-ink. There she was, flying a bi-plane, her hair flowing behind her in the wind, and there she was topless, with long snaky hair curving over her breasts, rising out of a giant piece of carved soap. The colors were muted grays and sickly mauves.

“I look dead,” she said.

“It’s a take on a famous painting, *The Birth of Venus*,” he said.

“I think it’s creepy. Don’t you think it will look like I’m vain? Like all I want to do is paint pretty pictures of myself?”

“Teen-age girls are obsessed with their body images,” he told her, “this is self-portraiture. They’ll love it. You just talk about the materials and how you decided the themes, etc.”

“Trip. I can’t draw. I can’t paint. If I get in, they are going to figure that out.”

Well, Trip saw her point. She could take photographs. They bought a Pentax and a used tripod, as well as a book all about apertures and shutter speeds. Nora took some pictures of herself eating an apple in front of a window; she smeared Vaseline on the lens to get a softened effect. They had the negatives developed and also ordered contact prints.

“That’s maudlin,” Trip told her.

“I think it’s nice. It’s like the cover of my book, *A Tree Grows In Brooklyn*.”

“You have to look at things in a fresh way,” he explained, “from different angles. Photograph a rainbow like it is a carcass or a bird skeleton like it is a beautiful flower. That’s art!”

Nora lay on her stomach and took pictures of old soup cans in the grass. The grass was blurred and grainy, looking more like a jungle than a lawn.

“That’s more like it,” he told her.

Nora photographed her mother’s Avon products in the windowsill, light spilling over them. She took a lot of pictures of her dirty sheets piled into disarray.

“To look like wadded up Kleenex,” she said. “Like, these sheets are used up.”

“That implies something else,” Trip said. “Don’t take those anymore.”

Trip wasn’t interested in the vocal part so Nora practiced by herself. She sang two songs, *You Are My Sunshine* and *Like a Bridge Over Troubled Water*. When she sang “Sail on Silver Girl, Sail on by....” she imagined Trip inside a luminous moon, his light spilling down. Then he was the moon, a crooked face on the moon. His acne scars were the craters. She imagined her lungs were big white sails unfurled.

The day of the try-outs for HSPVA (the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts) Nora wore a skirt Trip had sewn out of scarves in imitation of a costume he’d seen in a Cindi Lauper video. She also wore a clinging scoop-neck tee shirt. He pulled her hair back in a black velvet ribbon.

“Perfect,” he said.

“I feel stupid,” Nora said. She was also wearing make-up, which he believed would showcase her rebellious, artistic, free spirit. He’d smeared banana yellow shadow on her brow bone and lined her eyes with kohl. Her lips were bare.

During the drive there, Nora sang “You Are My Sunshine” softly.

“I forgot you were going to sing that song,” Trip said.

“Do you like it?”

“It’s a hillbilly song.”

“I like it. It’s a classic.”

“What else are you singing?”

“*Bridge Over Troubled Water*. They asked me the application about singing songs in other languages and in the classical style. I don’t know what that means.”

“Simon and Garfunkel. Do you want to sing it too?”

But Nora couldn’t sing it for him.

“Aw, don’t worry. That’s a cheesy song, Nor. You’re going to be a photographer, anyway.”

“Well I don’t want to look stupid,” Nora said.

He took the long route, through wide beautiful streets lined with old trees, past the fountain park.

“What kind of trees are these?” She asked.

“Oak,” he said.

It was just the right amount of sunshine, and Nora looked over at the light dappling the sidewalks through the leaves and wondered if some of the kids at HSPVA lived in this neighborhood. They were running early, so Trip drove around a bit, passed the Museum of Fine Arts, through Herman Park and then through Rice University. The streets in this part of town were wider and smoother.

After awhile he pulled into a gas station and got out.

“Trip, where are you going?” I asked.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” he said.

“Don’t take too long, or we’ll be late.”

When he came back he was pouring down sweat. The sleeves of his shirt were yellowish at the armpits. He leaned against the car and clutched his chest.

“Give me a break,” Nora said.

“I think I should drop you off around the corner,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because the Gremlin is a crummy looking car.”

“They aren’t going to see the car.”

“I look like a miscreant.”

“Well, okay,” Nora agreed.

She carried the big portfolio filled with photographs of grass and soup cans about four blocks. As soon as she stepped into the school building, she felt a blast of cool air. She checked the clock on the wall and saw she’d have enough time for her sweat to dry.

She went and gave her name at a window. She sat in a red chair and looked down at the black and white checked floor. On the wall behind her was a mural featuring the faces of Marilyn Monroe, James Dean and someone she didn’t recognize in a top hat. She wondered if students had painted it. The other students waiting with her looked pretty normal. They wore jeans and tee shirts and sneakers. She went to the bathroom and washed the makeup off her face.

Two men wearing jeans and tennis shoes looked at her pictures and she told them she was interested in photographing the soup cans as if they were alive, and that her work

was influenced by Andy Warhol. They nodded their heads and asked her what interested her in photography.

“Ever since I can remember,” she told them, “I have liked looking at things and imagining them in frames. I am constantly noticing light and shadows. I like looking at the way the light filters through our sun tea as it brews in the morning, for example. I’d like to figure out how to photograph that effectively.” Afterwards she felt foolish for bringing up the sun tea, and wondered if I had used the word “effectively” properly.

Then she had a vocal audition. Two women and an old man sat behind a long table.

“Hello Nora,” the woman at the end of the table said, “you may begin with two songs or arias. I see from your application you don’t have an accompanist.” The woman speaking wore her thin hair in a French twist, and chunky gold bracelets down to her elbows. She looked elegant and artistic.

Nora sang “You Are My Sunshine” first and felt her voice whispery, the words too thick, too sweet on her tongue. Her mouth filled with saliva. When she was finished she started in on the second song right away. She closed her eyes and rested her hand against her stomach, imagining sails unfurled.

When she was done the woman in the green dress with all the bracelets said, “Well, you have talent.” She seemed to be their leader.

“That was a nice performance,” the other woman said. “Simple and lovely, not overwrought. You have a good feel for what works with your voice.” There was nodding.

“You have no training,” The woman in the green dress said. “It shows. Nice tone. You seem to have a gift for phrasing.”

Nora nodded her head.

The man said nothing, just jotted down notes and looked up every so often.

“If you are to join this program,” Woman number two said, “You are going to have a lot of catching up to do. Can you read notes?”

“No.”

“Why do you want to sing?”

“I want to be an artist,” Nora said.

“I see.”

Nora filled herself up with water from the fountain before walking back to the gas station. Trip was pacing around the payphone when she got there. He didn't see her at first. She watched him walking around the payphone in circles, making waves with his hands. His shirt was half-tucked in, tucked out and soaked through with sweat.

Nora came up behind him.

“Trip,” she said.

He turned around. When he saw her he cracked his knuckles.

“Well?”

“I don't know yet,” she said. “I think I did okay.”

They went to Dot's Coffee Shop and ordered the brownie fudge sundae. Trip drank cup after cup of coffee. “I can see you making art with twigs and leaves and shit, all earth tones, maybe some old testament shit with a feminine twist to it,” he said and

went on to describe the big paintings they could display, and the long gypsy skirt she would wear to her art opening. His hands waved and shook as he spoke.

“You should grow your hair even longer,” he said, “till it reaches your waist. Then you can wear it loose down your back for your shows. The first one, we could call, Lilith’s Garden.”

“Why Lilith?”

“I think she was Adam’s first wife. Apocryphal. We’d have to read up on it.”

The school sent a notice five days later. Nora had made it into both departments. She didn’t go to the vocal department, of course. Trip and Nora couldn’t even read notes.

Anna

Nora’s first day of high school was the first time she saw the little gray headstone. It stood in a corner out in the courtyard, where all the smokers went for lunch. She thought it looked pathetic, surrounded by cigarette butts and candy wrappers. There were no dates, no terms of endearment, just a name, "Anna." It was a child's grave.

"Isn't that cool? I heard it was there when they built the school, so they kept it. Now it's like part of the landscape." Trina parked her butt on the edge of the grave and popped open her diet coke. She was the kind of girl Nora wanted to be friends with but she didn’t know the first thing about how to go about befriending her. She was a dancer and all of her gestures, small and large, were graceful.

"Hey," Trina said to Liam Stanford. He was a drama major with a shock of punch red hair. They looked very sophisticated to Nora, those two. He leaned over and lit Trina’s cigarette, and she accepted it as if she were some old time film star. Then he walked away without saying anything.

That night Nora thought about Anna. She imagined her, there in the dark, with kids screwing around on top of her. Trip had once shown her pictures of dead Victorian babies. Sometimes, the only record a family had of the lost baby was the portrait taken after death. The babies were dressed in christening gowns or long robes, and their curls, if they had any, were meticulously groomed. Nora remembered one child in particular, a girl past infancy. Her skin was like heavy cream, and her eyes were shadowed. She lay propped up against piles of white cloth whipped into stiff clouds. When you first saw the picture, you couldn't see that she was dead - she simply seemed wiser, more poised, than other babies.

That was how Nora envisioned Anna. What if her mother had buried her under a beautiful willow tree, and meant her to stay peaceful and still, forever. She certainly couldn't have expected them to build a high school around her daughter's grave.

At lunch nobody was sitting on Anna so Nora claimed a spot there. The ledge was covered with a fine powder of Cheeto dust. She wiped it clean with her napkin. Then she collected the cigarette butts around the stone and put them in a pile together.

"Somebody's a good citizen," a squat girl wearing black overalls said.

Nora murmured something she hoped sounded agreeable.

"Hey, can I bum a cigarette?" The girl asked.

"I don't smoke," Nora told her.

"Huh," the girl said. She wrinkled her forehead, looked perplexed for a second, then walked away.

Nora opened her sack lunch. Trip had packed a cream cheese and honey sandwich, a green apple, and half a Ziplocked avocado. Inside he'd written a note, *Don't let the bastards get you down.*

She tried to take a bite of the sandwich, but her throat felt as if it was closing in on the hunk of bread. She gagged. The mushy bite came up and she caught it in the palm of her hand.

"Hey, you okay?" The boy sitting across from her asked. He sat with a sketchpad propped against his knees.

"I'm fine," Nora said. And then, just to say something, "What are you drawing?"

"I'm trying feet."

"Can I see?" Nora asked. *Talk to at least one new person a day*, Trip had told her *Then it will get easier.* She recognized the boy from her world history class; his name was Hector Ramirez.

Hector held a page up for her. It was covered with feet - small feet with high arches, long feet with veiny bumps and grooves, big feet that looked as if they belonged to basketball players, and little delicate feet encircled with anklets.

"Looks like you have it down," she said.

He grunted

"My father is a medical illustrator," Nora lied.

"Cool," he said. "You draw."

"No. My father wants me to. He thinks it's in my blood. But I like taking photographs."

The pause that followed felt weird, as if somehow she'd lose a battle if she didn't get him to say something else.

"He took me to an anatomy class once. You know, with dead bodies. A class for the doctors."

Hector was interested.

"Man. I wish I could do that."

"It made me sick. All I could do was watch and try not to throw up. But I can see how, you know, an artist would want to see that."

He went back to drawing, but it wasn't like he was tuning her out. Nora noticed a light moustache over his upper lip. His hair was the color of dark plums. He wore an army surplus jacket, even though it was still too hot for sweaters and coats.

When Nora came home, Judy didn't look up from the table. She sat with her shoulders hunched into a sad curve over a pile of bills. It was as if an invisible mold had been cast above her chair and she was pressed into it every time she sat down.

"Judy? I'm home. Stouffer's for dinner?" Nora asked.

Trip came into the kitchen; he was spiffed up, wearing a clean pair of pants and shirt.

"I'm taking you out tonight," he said, "to celebrate."

"To celebrate what?"

"Your second day of school. I bought you an outfit."

"You mean, out out? You're going to drive?"

"I've been driving all over town lately. I drove to Deer Park just the other day just for the hell of it. My driving skills are improving. Why I can make it all the way to fifty miles per hour in our cool little Gremlin."

The bodysuit laid out on Nora's bed was made out of some kind of thin, glossy sateen. It wrapped around her boobs and snapped in front. One half was a ludicrous emerald green, the other half ivory. It looked like something you'd wear with skinny heels, which she didn't own, if you were twenty-two and were going out to a club.

Nora looked at herself in the mirror.

"That looks perfect," he said.

"All I need is one of those long cigarette holders," Nora said.

Trip sped out of the driveway and rolled down all the windows. He blasted the stereo and started singing at the top of his lungs.

"So you don't love me, and I'll always be cryyyyyying. Over you."

"Sing with me."

Nora looked out the window. "Can we roll up the windows? I just braided my hair and it's going to get all messed up."

He patted the stirring wheel in time to the beat.

"Don't be a stick-in-the-mud. I thought you would like to go out. I'm proud of you, you know."

His hair swirled up in the back. That must truly be why they call it a cowlick, Nora thought. It looked as if a heifer had licked the back of his head with her giant tongue.

"Do you know who this is?"

"Who is it?"

"Roy Orbison."

"Where are we going? Are we going to eat?" Nora asked him.

"It's a surprise."

He sped through residential neighborhoods, then drove downtown past the big fountain and Rice Stadium.

"Where are we going?"

"Where's your sense of adventure?" He said. "Okay. I was going to take you to a pie house in the gay part of town. It's close to your new school. It's the part of town where there are cafes and bakeries. Wherever homosexuals live, art is sure to follow. I wanted to see what it would be like there."

He turned off the radio and they drove in silence. He drummed his right fist against the dashboard, and slammed on the brakes too hard at a stoplight.

"I also wanted to explain something to you. As an artist, you are going to be around a lot of people who say they are bisexual. Do not sleep with a man who says he is bisexual. That means he has had sex with men, and he could give you AIDS."

Nora looked down at her hands.

"Hell," he said, "aren't you going to say anything?"

"I'm not sexually active."

"But you will be."

"I am not going to have sex until I am married, Trip."

She looked out the window at the skyscrapers catching the sunset, chewing at the hangnail on her thumb. Her nails were a mess, they even bled sometimes.

“Nora why are you being a bitch?”

“I’m not a bitch. I’m a whore.”

Trip pulled over.

“I don’t want to hear you say that about yourself,” he said, “Do you hear me?”

“I will say it if it’s true. And you want me to act like a whore.”

Trip pressed his forehead against the steering wheel.

"I care about Anna," Nora said.

"Anna? Who is that?"

“A dead baby girl.”

Before he grabbed her hand she balled it into a fist, but he took it anyway and pressed it into his own. His skin was soft and malleable, like warm wax. He pulled her so close she could see the small beads of sweat on top of his lip.

"Let me go!" Nora said, "I just want to go home now. Can't we go home?"

They sat there, in the hot car, with the windows rolled up. Trip kept his head pressed against the steering wheel. Nora started banging her head, hard, against the dashboard.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Stop it.”

“No.”

"I want to get out," Nora said, "let me out of the car."

“Nora, I’m on your side,” he said, “You’re going to make friends with kids from University Place at this school. With kids whose parents are doctors and lawyers and business people and ballerinas. You should be happy, happy. Happy! Aren’t you happy right now?”

“It would be safer for me to get out here, wouldn’t it? Safer than if we were at home with all the wetbacks and white trash. Like you think we’re so much better.”

“Fine,” he said. He looked very angry, his punched-up face screwed up into a fierce grimace, “Just get out then. Go ahead.”

Nora got out fast, before he could change his mind. He pulled away slowly and she watched him turn the corner.

She stood there for a few minutes, waiting.

She felt the soft spot on her forehead throbbing. In a few hours it would be a lovely multicolored lump. She knew her way around this area, a bit. She walked to her new school.

She found herself at the smoking courtyard. Streetlight, bone white and brighter than moonlight, spilled onto Anna's headstone. The leaves of an oak tree cast nighttime shadows on the cement patio. It was somber and dark, as a graveyard should be.

Hector was there. Propped against the headstone, sipping something from a paper bag, wearing the green army jacket. What was he doing there? She wanted to kick him.

He didn’t notice her until she was almost on top of him. He looked up, squinting, although there was enough light to see her clearly.

“Who are you supposed to be?” he asked.

“I’m Nora.”

“You don’t look like Nora.”

She felt the back of her head. The elastic band had fallen loose, and her braid hung half undone down her back. The single snap at the front of the new cat suit had popped, and her bra was showing. She closed it quickly.

“What happened to your head? Did somebody conk you?”

“What are you doing?” she answered, “practicing for your future as a wino?”

“Have some,” he said, holding the paper bag up.

Nora sipped smacked her lips.

“I’ve got peppermint,” he told her, pulling another bottle from his pocket. She settled down next to him and rested her head against the stone slab. She did not feel shy.

They drank quietly. She watched the black pattern of leaves shudder over the pavement and closed her eyes.

“I wish I only came here at night,” she whispered.

“I know what you mean,” he said.

“The Invisible Man poured Ripple over his ice cream,” she told him.

“Pretty weird for a superhero.”

“Not that Invisible Man,” she said, “Ralph Ellison.”

She took another sip.

Their shoulders were touching. Nora had never been so close to a boy. Hector smelled like Schnapps, but there was a deeper, cleaner smell underneath. Wind blew and a little whirlpool of dry leaves spun in a circle before them.

They listened to the whir of the leaves, the creaking of a swinging stoplight.

When the leaves settled, Nora spoke.

“I like haiku, do you like haiku?”

“If you do.”

“It’s usually, in English, a pattern of syllables, in three parts, and there’s a break at the last part. I know the rules are pretty steep in Japanese, but I don’t know Japanese.

And it's like, a fresh way of looking at something you might see every day. I like the way there is a sign of the season – like, a firefly could mean summer. A cherry blossom might mean spring. I think water means something, too, but I forget.”

“You write them?”

“I don't write. I just read.”

“Write one for me,” he said, “now.”

“I can't do it like that. It takes time.”

“Just think about it,” he said.

She hugged her knees to her chest. She felt bright, light, full of fizz and the taste in her mouth was dry but bubbly.

“It's usually five, seven, five. Syllables. Okay.”

She leaned into him.

“Under the lamplight

Leaves blow on the child's grave

Above her, life stirs.”

“Hector, when I told you my father was a medical illustrator, I was making that up.”

“You were? Why would you do that?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes my uncle and I like to make up stories. He works in a grocery store. My uncle does.”

“My Dad’s a lawyer,” Hector said.

“I had a fight with my uncle. He’s probably really worried about me.”

“There’s a pay phone at the corner store. Want me to walk you there?”

“I’m so tired,” Nora said. “I just want to go to sleep.”

He opened his jacket for her and she leaned against him.

She closed her eyes and thought of lots of things. She saw Anna against the meringue white; saw her uncle, and his eyes were clouded over with hate, and she saw herself, inside this boys’ jacket. She fell asleep.

When she woke, Hector was still there. He was awake, and his arms were around her. She yawned and stretched. The sky was bright indigo, the same color it was when she caught her bus.

“Are you hungry? Want some breakfast?” He asked.

“I don’t have any money,” Nora told him.

“I do,” he said.

“Did you sleep any?”

He grunted. “You did. You were in a coma.”

“Yeah, I was tired.” Her head hurt a little.

“Let’s get some Betsy’s Donuts,” he said.

“Where’s that?”

“You’ve never had Betsy’s donuts? You’ve been missing out. They’re so good it will make you sick.”

He was right. The donut shop's windows were completely fogged.

"It's the best when you get them hot off the press," Hector said.

"Is that what they call it? A press?"

"Press, conveyer belt. Watch."

They watched the donut man pick off the donuts as they spilled off the belt. He gave them an extra bear claw along with a dozen glazed.

"It's always that same guy," Hector told her, "it's like he never leaves."

They ate the donuts right there on the curb, warming their hands with small Styrofoam cups of black coffee. He told her to eat quickly, before the glaze hardened. They dissolved in her mouth and all over her fingers.

"I'd like to have his job," Hector said, "make donuts all day."

"Yeah, and we could live over the donut shop," she said.

"We'd make the donuts together," he said, "and then go upstairs to sleep with the windows opened..."

"So we could smell the donuts," she added.

"When I was a kid," he said, "we lived in Vermont. And in the winter, which was practically the whole year, we'd have sugar on snow. That's maple syrup with snow. And we'd have it with pickles and plain donuts."

"Yech!"

"It was great. The maple syrup caramelized, and it was too sweet without the pickles."

When they finished he asked her if she wanted to go back to school. She looked down at her cheap lace ups. In the early morning light, her clothes were a costume.

“I can’t. Not like this,” I said.

“Where do you live?”

“Out by Hobby airport. Really far.”

“You can take the bus.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what bus to take. I always take the school bus,” she said.

“I’ll go with you,” he told her.

She kept her hand in his pocket for warmth as they walked to the bus stop. He wanted to go with her but she told him no. He handed her a wad of dollar bills and watched as the bus pulled away. It felt like an important goodbye.

She watched the sun rise through the bus window. She was the only one riding. The coffee made her feel sharp, and her hands were still sticky from the hot sugar. She thought about Hector, and could see him more clearly in her mind’s eye than she could when she was beside him. His eyes were deep brown black, like his hair. He was quiet but not shy.

All the lights were on at home, even though the sun was up. The door was unlocked and the windows were opened. Trip’s old girlfriend Sheila’s lace curtains billowed in the breeze. They made Nora think of bridal veils.

Trip came to her and hugged her, then pushed her back and held me at arm’s length.

“I thought you’d be mad.”

“Don’t do it again,” he said.

“I didn’t think you’d drive away,” Nora said.

Judy walked into the room. Her hair hung in her face, and her skin looked pale, unwholesome, as if it had soaked up all the fluorescent light at her telemarketing day job.

“What did you think you were doing, running off like that?”

“I’m sorry,” Nora said.

“Well I don’t know. I can have you taken out of that school. I might have to do that, if you keep this up.”

Nora tucked her hair behind her ears so that Judy could see the egg shaped bump.

“I have to go to school. I have a test.”

“You missed the bus.”

“I’ll take the city bus. That’s how I came back. It doesn’t take long.”

“We can’t afford that bus,” Trip said. How ridiculous, Nora thought.

Nora went to her room and changed into a clean dress. She splashed cold water onto her face and smeared on Cherry Chapstick. She fixed her hair, pulling a wave forward to cover the bruise.

“I can drive you to school, Katy,” Trip said, looking solicitous now but she was already out the door.

They were the first to arrive in World History. Hector sat down beside her.

“That’s my desk,” Samantha Peterson said to him when the room started to fill.

When he didn’t answer she sat across the room and glowered.

Hector wrote something down and then held his notebook up for Nora to see. It said:

“Pretty Nora Brown,

In the dotted yellow dress

Arriving early.”

Nora traced the pencil holder burned into her desktop. She smiled close-lipped and glanced over at his notebook.

In the margins were dozens of lips. Pretty puckered lips, pursed lips, still lips. All the same, rosebud lips. They smiled in a shy curve. They were hers. She shivered a little when she recognized them. She traced them with her index finger, felt them gummy with Cherry Chapstick. Her lips. Hers.

Red Barn, 2010

After a few weeks of silence, Carmel’s texts begin again, and they are out of control. The words seem closer than a voice, snaking inside Nora’s head. *Whre Are You. Plse send money. Whre. Whre.*

As she drives to the Red Barn, the texts keep popping up again. She picks up to read at the red lights. *You Fucking bitch. whre. Where are you. Whre the fuck are you?*

When she gets to the Red Barn Trip is standing behind the counter. He seems even taller, skinnier. His red hair is all gone. When he sees her, he blinks hard. Then he smiles. And, it’s a beautiful smile...in spite of the teeth, which are dull yellow to brown. And he is missing some. But it’s Trip alright.

“Hey there,” he says, nodding at Elizabeth. “Who is the little daffodil?”

“This is Elizabeth,” she says. “Elizabeth, this is your Uncle Trip.”

It's a hot bright day but inside the Red Barn everything is cool and muted. The walls are painted turquoise, and a bright gold mirror hangs beside their booth. Trip pours her some lemonade, on the house, and sits across from them.

"Does she need a booster?" he asks.

"Trip, are you kidding? She's too young for a high chair, even."

They are quiet for a few minutes, and she asks him how he is.

"They love me here," he tells her, "Ever since I started making my famous buttermilk biscuits. Remember those?" But she doesn't. Trip cooked so many good things, but the buttermilk biscuits must have occurred after his wanderings.

"I do," she says, "I sure do."

"I've been here two years," he says.

She tells him about Ray, about the little wedding at the courthouse, how they wanted a child and were afraid it might be too late. But it wasn't, and here is the proof. She moves her hand back, like a lovely assistant on the *Price Is Right* showing off wares, while cradling Elizabeth in the other arm.

Trip settles back, whistles again, another habit he seems to have acquired in the last twenty years. He inspects his fingertips. The nails are grimy, not something very appealing in a cook.

"Are you in touch with Judy?" she asks. She still can't bring herself to call Judy *mother*.

"Now and then. She sends me something now and then. I saw their place once. It was a John Denver Christmas special, I'm telling you! Snow falling softly outside, and your mom wrapped up in one of those white snowbunny outfits. The whole house made

out of glass and wood. We drank fine wine. A good time was had by all. Your mother's dream come true."

"When was that?"

"Don't know. I don't remember exactly."

He says he missed her, calls her Katydid, and she lets him hold Elizabeth. He holds the baby very carefully, listening when Nora explains how to cradle.

"I held you when you were like this," he says.

"You know, this may sound crazy. But I thought of naming her Tamara. Can you believe it?"

Trip's whole face changes. He closes his mouth tightly, and something passes over his eyes. He touches his bottom lip thoughtfully. It is a look she had forgotten.

"That bitch. Why would you want to name your only daughter after someone like that?"

"What do you mean? We loved her. She stood for something, Trip. She gave us hope."

"She was a cunt. She ruined our family!" Trip's eyes gleam. "Elizabeth won't grow up to be a slut. You named her right." A waitress, the same one who had been there the other day, glances over. But this is Trip, and if he's worked there any time at all they must know he has some emotional disturbances. Maybe his famous buttermilk biscuits make up for it. But then his look changes, as he realizes he had forgotten himself, and raised his voice while Elizabeth was still in his arms.

"I'm sorry, baby," he says and it is unclear if he means Elizabeth or Nora, but he hands the baby back to Nora. Elizabeth had closed her eyes, but now, in her mother's

arms, she opens them and spreads out her arms. “La!” she says, and then closes her eyes again.

“She’s a doll-baby,” Trip says.

“Yeah, she’s sweet.”

“No she really is something. Most new babies are kind of red and bumpy. But look, she’s really beautiful.”

“Agreed.”

“Tell me,” Trip says, “about how you live. About your husband. Is he Mexican?”

“Peruvian. He is from Peru. American, soon. Guess what? He moved here, years ago, for a woman.”

“Ah. Sounds like a romantic,” Trip says. “That boy you were hung up on in high school was Latin, wasn’t he?”

And that is the part she had not anticipated. She knows something she hadn’t known a few minutes before; she will probably not be seeing her uncle again. She will not be calling him. She doesn’t say, I teach World History and Freshman English and Dickinson High. We rent a townhouse for 850 a month, furnished with Walmart and Craigslist. We are starting over, together, two middle aged parents with almost half a million in student loans between us.

When she starts talking, it pours out of her, all sounding and feeling true. But none of it is. She tells him about adventures that never occurred; the Great Wall of China, an imagined trip to Tibet. She tells him how clear everything was up there, how those giant mountain ranges seemed bigger than the ocean.

“The roof of the world,” Trip says, and sighs. “Where else have you been?”

She tells him she’s seen castles, and climbed the Alps. She milked a cow in Ireland. She’s climbed Machu Picchu. There is Ray, hair blowing in the wind in front of her, reaching for her hand as they climb the Swiss Alps. “The Swiss,” she says, “You know when you leave an apartment they actually go over the walls with a white glove to see if it’s pristine enough for them? No joke.” She must have read that somewhere. After college, she says, she’d taken the E-rail, lived on bread and cheese and wine in Italy. She had seen the Sistine Chapel and it stunned her. She cannot describe it, only she had thought of Trip when she’d been in Italy, thought of him a lot. She continues, lifting descriptions from tour guide and history books buried in her memory. She has been to Confucius’s hometown, Qufu and lost the rubbings she’d bought before leaving China but oh Trip would have liked this town most of all. As she keeps talking, Elizabeth sits propped up in her mother’s lap very quietly, listening too.

“And where you are now? Tell me about that,” Trip says. He is happy again. He isn’t going to ask to visit, and he has this look, another look she knows well. He wants to hear about it, not to spoil it all. So she tells him. Her husband is an adventurer, too. Their house opens to gardens, smelling of jasmine, and all kinds of flowers she doesn’t know the names of that her husband knows, flowers from China, from deserts, from all over the world – all carefully chosen, a great butterfly attraction. There are bamboo walls. And fountains, and a pond filled with beautiful koi. There are rugs on the floor, beautiful rugs from India, from China. Jade on the bookshelves, and pearls in her jewelry box.

“Where did you get the money for this?” He asks.

“Well, I know you are going to find this hard to believe. But you know, the novelist Nora Roberts? She doesn’t write her own books anymore. No, she pays ghost writers. I wrote the last three novels sold in her name. And that’s a funny story itself, Trip. Because the way we met, it was through our names...”

“You are shitting me. No shit.”

There is always tea in the kitchen. Bookshelves line the walls. They are living in New York City now, she tells him. One of those brownstones, you know? Her husband bought it for her, as a wedding gift. Trip closes his eyes. He spreads his bony fingers out on the table, and sighs again. He nods. He can see it.

CATGIRL

The girls are waiting for the ferry, dangling their legs out the side of the van, popsicle juice dripping down their chins. Four girls: Trina, Tricia, Grace, and Allie.

Tricia and Trina, the blonde twins. Grace Hobel, the quiet one, their best friend. And Allie, kicking Grace in the shins gleefully. She wants the twins for her very own. They are beautiful, those two, and Allie wants to enter their tween world, to learn their twinspeak, to braid their matching white-blond hair. The twins' mother is from Sweden; well, not exactly but she is of Swedish descent and she seems foreign, exotic. Allie loves her ice water eyes, her high cheekbones. She wears sunglasses and drinks throughout the day, but in a way that makes her seem slightly mussed, and not soused. Allie wants those twins for sleepovers. They smell like Ivory soap, those two. Even on the beach, after days of swimming in the ocean, they smell sweetly of summer. Not Grace. Grace is getting breasts and has already started her period. She has a body odor problem.

So these girls, setting off on their weekend with a mother other mothers like because she is pretty and rich, know they will run on the beach, build sand castles, and maybe stand around a bonfire with boys. They lick sticky fingers and sing a song about a smashed bumblebee.

At first, they don't notice the man who is behind them, watching, although if they did it would give them a kick; they like it when people watch them, especially together.

Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack

All dressed in black, black, black

With silver buttons, buttons, buttons,

All down her back, back, back.

She cannot read, read, read

She cannot write, write, write

But she can smoke, smoke, smoke

Her father's pipe, pipe, pipe.

Then Grace sees the man and covers her mouth. She jabs Tricia's ribs.

"He likes your creamy thighs," Allie says, just to see if Grace will hide behind her fingers. She does.

"He looks like Kenny Rogers," Trina says.

"Maybe he is Kenny Rogers," Allie says. It's possible. His snow-white beard is very well groomed. His nose is red and a little bulbous.

They sing "The Gambler" and point and laugh. He squints his eyes. They slam the door. The ferry has arrived.

Melanie, the twins' mother, puts out her cigarette. They are listening to Neil Diamond. Even Neil Diamond has a kind of soulful glamour when Melanie Parks listens to him.

This all happened years ago, in the summer of 1982.

The girls stand on the ferry, throwing day-old bread at the seagulls. Grace stands at the prow, looking down, waiting to be splashed. She turns green yet will not back away. She is prone to seasickness. But she never backs out of a dare. The girls have to admire her for that.

They feed the gulls, then run to the back of the boat when the birds dive down. Grace tells a story about mean boys who throw Pop Rocks at the gulls.

“That is just so sad,” the twins say.

“Did you think of that together?” Allie asks.

“What?” They say together.

“When you talk together like that. Like you have the same thoughts. It’s cool,”

Allie says.

“We are nothing alike,” Tricia says.

Grace smiles, a close-lipped smile. Allie wonders if she does that because of her overbite. It’s a cute overbite. Allie likes her again. She had velvety hair and she is good at anything school-related, as long as it doesn’t involve athletics. Grace and Allie are the A students; the twins, they are B-plus with an occasional. A.

“I’m going inside,” Tricia says, and this disappoints Allie. She likes it out on the boat. She sniffs the air; it smells briny, with a hint of dirty bathroom. She would like to stay to see if any dolphins follow the ferry, but she won’t be separated from her twins. Once inside, they play Go Fish until the boat docks.

The house is on Crystal Beach. The twins have spend their summers here since they were tots, running up and down the stairs in matching T-shirts. There are only a few rules at the beach: take off your flip-flops on the balcony before you go inside, so that you don’t track sand in everywhere; and before to check in before dundown with Melanie.

Inside, the house is all one big room, with a little harvest-gold kitchenette and a claw-footed bathtub behind the sink. The house is furnished with rattan and wicker, and there are four big beds. But the girls will sleep out on the balcony on cots, facing the sea.

Maybe on Saturday Melanie will take them back on the ferry to Galveston, where they can eat shrimp in little glass bowls with red cocktail sauce and bottomless glasses of Coke. Melanie is prone to sudden bursts of happiness, and the girls love her for it. Sometimes on these trips she takes them all to get their toenails painted. Or she'll take them the Murdock's to buy matching sunglasses and netted bags of shells.

At Crystal Beach they can run as far as they want. At night the girls will find older boys. One boy, Murhp, frices a Jeep and they all pinle in and scream as he speeds through the water, splashing. "Ah, naw," he says when Tricia kisses the back of his neck. "He tasted like man-sweat," she whispers to them later. They sing him songs. *Say Say my playmate, come out and play with me.* And then the rhymes get dirtier. But it's Grace that whispers the spookiest:

Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack

All dressed in black, black, black

She has a knife, knife, knife

Stuck in her back, back, back.

There is a teenager at the beach when they get there. Her name is Sylvia, and she is some distant relation to the twins and Melanie. She and Melanie make daiquiris and sleep on the balcony, slathered in cocnut oil. The girls agree that Sylvia is not nearly so beautiful as Melanie, although she is sixteen, the age of beauty. The girls - it was Tricia or Trina who came to this conclusion, Allie can't remember which - all agree. Sixteen is the age; the age that it is appropriate to lose your virginity, to have a boyfriend, to wear a miniskirt.

More interesting than the teenager, there is a girl across the dunes. This girl introduces herself on the second day. Her name is Brandy. Her voice is rich and throaty, like a smoker's.

"It's sort of beautiful," Grace says.

"But too old for her body," Allie declares.

She is a pleasant combination of warm goldenhues, honey skin and hair, light amber eyes, jeans cut off before her buttocks end. She lives there. She's a townie. Her house is lit up at night, every night, all night. One of the windows is busted.

"Is that her room? How does she sleep at night?" But once Allie thinks about it, she decides she would like to sleep in a room with the ocean right outside, every night, whistling into the hole in her windowpane.

"It's a bullet hol," Grace says.

"Oh, don't be stupid," Allie tells her. "Whoever lives there, her single mom or whatever, can't afford to fix it. That's all."

Tricia glances over at Grace, casting her pale lashes down. She agrees, she agrees with Allie. Grace can be such a child.

Allie's mom is a single mom. She can afford to fix browkn windows, but she can't afford add-a-bead necklaces or adoptive Cabbage Patch dolls. Alli's mother often reminds her that there are children who don't have enough money for band instruments or three square meals. There are children who run wild and don't know their times tables because there is nobody looking out for them, aiming for a better quality of life. Allie isn't sure what she means by better quality of life. When Allie visits the twins, Melanie isn't around much. She imagines it would be very lonely to live that way without a twin.

The twins have each other though. And there is little doubt, when she watches them in their matching bunny-fur coats and freshly curled wings, singing in the winter holiday program or twirling their batons in unison at the football game, that these two have achieved a finer quality of life. Last winter, when the other girls in the drill team sneaked makeup on in the bathroom, Trina and Tricia wore nothing more than Vaseline on their brow bones and bow-shaped lips. When they throw the batons up high, they spin in unison, and there is never any question that they will catch the batons at the exact same moment. Every time they spin down. Every time.

Many years later, one of the girls will be a woman.

She comes here with her husband and her daughter; they take the ferry out to Crystal Beach.

There isn't any parking, and her husband says, "Goddamnit, why didn't you tell me?" When the state trooper tickets them for expired registration.

"Forgot about that," Tricia says, "I'm really sorry Isaac." When their child falls asleep in back, she reaches over. This trip is about him, about how he says he feels no love for her anymore. For a long time, he has hated his life. He thought it was him, or something outside, but now he knows it is her. She is the one responsible for his unhappiness. She climbs over the seat, in the daylight, thinking, *This will do it, this has to do it*. Her long pale hair in his face, her mother's blue eyes, the lashes darkened now. "I love you, I love you, I love you," she says, and when his arm fumbles and he pushes her off, she'll think, *Fuck it. You fucker*.

He doesn't push her off, he is soft there, holding his head back from her face.

“There are worse things in life than a job you don’t like and a wife who leaves you cold,” she says. “You could have a knife in your back.”

“I don’t want to talk about that. I don’t care about that. You aren’t thinking about it anyway,” he says.

And he is right, until she seats herself again and looks back at her daughter.

“Don’t make yourself cry for my benefit,” he says.

“Man, it’s really changed, she says aloud on the drive. She might as well be talking to herself, he won’t talk to her, only to their two year old. She’d imagined walking along the beach, their girl on his shoulders, her hand inside his. She would point to the dunes. And there it is, that’s the, that’s where...and he would put his hand against the small of her back, guiding her away. Or no, he would rest it on the nape of her neck, cradling.

There is a coffee shop with free wi-fi, and they pass gift shops, even a couple of hotels. “It wasn’t like this back then. It was just houses and a corner store. We used to go crabbing, did I tell you that? Mom would cook them for us, if we cleaned them and pulled them apart. We did it when they were alive. It didn’t bother us. Grace said they had no nerves. One time, I was about to gut one of them and it started eating its brains out. Autocannibalism, Allie said. She was the smart one. We thought it was funny. And we ate mussels too. Trina and I, we brought the traps in every morning. We woke up at the same time. Trina said the same sound woke us, but I don’t remember. I don’t know. Maybe I never heard the sound.

He is smoking, window down. She would like to think he gives a shit, but the way he’s looking at the windshield, she’s thinking maybe not. They’ve been married for

eleven years. When she met him, he was a skinny studio art major at a state college. Now he's filled out; his hair has kept its dark color. He has grown handsome. And glib.

In the backseat, her baby girl gurgles. Two years old, fingers in her mouth. She smiles and blows a raspberry. In her baby oblivion. Her hair is dark like her father's, cut straight across her cheeks. Her eyes are blue like her mother's, like her grandmother's, like Trina's.

The girls sleep out on the balcony, listening to Judy Collins tapes. She sounds so otherworldly. There is a song with whales calling, and a song about eyes like isinglass windows. The girls don't know what isinglass is, but it sounds like something from old ships or lighthouses. Then Allie puts in Stevie Nicks. Sylvia and Melanie are dancing in the field. They wear black bikini tops and sarongs. Melanie unties her sarong, letting it float up, up, and away. It's a warm and breezy night. Across the way, at that girl's house, men whoop and holler.

"I want to call my mom," Grace says. "Your mom drinks too much."

"Oh, go inside and call her then," Trina says. Allie and Tricia smile.

Grace falls asleep with her glasses on, her arm thrown over her face.

Allie, Tricia, and Trina watch as Melanie and Sylvia walk off past the dunes.

"She'll find a bonfire," Trina says.

"Will she come back?" Allie asks, then thinks about how that sounds.

"She always does," the twins say.

Allie whispers, making her voice low, husky. Like the girl's.

"I don't think she's a girl," Allie says. "She's a spook. She's a ghost. She's a demon inside a girl's body."

And then she hisses:

Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack

All dressed in black, black, black

With silver buttons, buttons, buttons,

All down her back, back, back.

She cannot read, read, read

She cannot write, write, write

But she can smoke, smoke, smoke

Her father's pipe, pipe, pipe.

She asked her mother, mother, mother

For fifty cents, cents, cents

To see the elephants, elephants, elephants

Jump over the fence, fence, fence.

They jumped so high, high, high

They reached the sky, sky, sky

And they didn't come back, back, back

Till the Fourth of July, ly, ly!

July can't walk, walk, walk

July can't talk, talk, talk

July can't eat, eat, eat

With a knife and fork, fork, fork!

She went upstairs, stairs, stairs,

To say her prayers, prayer, prarers

And bumped her head, head, head

And now she's dead, dead, dead!

In the morning the twins carry in the crab traps. They wake up at the same moment, and leave Allie and Grace asleep on the balcony. They walk in their pajamas, and wear flip-flops to protect their calloused feet from the sticker burrs.

July Fourth, firecrackers and watermelon. Melanie sips a mint julep from a tall blue glass. The girls sip from the bottom of the tumblers. Their father is there, for this celebration, an arm thrown over his wife's shoulders. They are surprisingly broad for such a petite woman. Allie approves of the exposed freckles, the blood-red stone dipping in between her breasts. The only makeup she wears is dark lipstick, and her toenails are red to match. Her skin is dead-girl white. Tricia and Trina are wearing batik sarongs like their mother's. Allie would have said, *On the beach a woman should be golden*, but Melanie's skin is right, it's unexpected. Her husband has the kind of muted, rumped handsomeness that complements a great beauty. Everyone wants to touch her, just for a moment. Tricia and Trina watch her from a distance, the woman they might become. She is drunk, but not slurry drunk. Women lean in toward her; men brush her arm as they walk by. The girls run up to her with plates of oysters and shrimps, offerings. She rests

her hand on Allie's shoulder for a moment and says, "This is my girl. These are my girls."

The girls stay downstairs in the junk room, sipping lukewarm Lone Stars. That's when they see the neighbor girl across the field, dancing with a sparkler. She moves in waves, making ribbons with the sparks. Allie is the one who stands up and calls to her.

"Brandy, Brandy! Come here. We have beer!"

Brandy motions for them to come to her, waving that sparkler around and around.

The way Melanie taught them in the car, it goes like this:

Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack

All dressed in black, black, black

She has a knife, knife, knife

Stuck in her back, back, back

She cannot breathe, breathe, breathe

She cannot cry, cry, cry

That's why she begs, begs, begs

She begs to die, die, die.

They are clapping, laughing. Tricia loves the way her mother takes to the freeways, speeding, passing, changing lanes with ease. She never curses at the other drivers, and she talks her way out of tickets. One trip, she'd blinked her eyes and said, "My little girl is sick." Trina leaned over the seat and shivered. That officer wanted to give them a police escort to the hospital. Later, they'd laughed, and Melanie bought them all—what were they called back then? Blizzards?—at the DQ. She'd dared Grace to

finish it, knowing full well she would. The things they got her to do, just to see if she would. It seems wrong, now, looking back on that, a grown woman getting a little girl to guzzle down something so big and sweet it made her puke.

The two weeks they spent on Crystal Beach in the summer of 1982 are broken bits in Tricia's head.

When they get to Galveston, Isaac asks, "Why are there all these motels without windows?"

"Oh," Tricia answers, happy he is talking, "it's because of the storms. It's cheaper."

"Why would you come to a beach and stay in a motel without windows?"

"Well, but you could spend a lot of time outside. And like

I said, it's cheaper."

Murdoch's is still there. Audrey is awake, and her father carries her on his shoulders out to the pier and back. They build a castle; well, Audrey and Tricia build it. They search for shells and bits of broken glass. It isn't safe for a three-year-old to carry broken beer bottles but Tricia wants to show her how to make a castle sparkle. "Don't pick up the glass yourself. Just show Mommy when you find one." Tricia's lost track of the years it's been since she's seen a beach, any beach. Everything feels high and bright and washed out. Audrey grows bored with the castles and wants to swim. "Not today," Tricia tells her. She thought the ocean might frighten Audrey, but as soon as she saw it, Audrey wanted to cross it. The ships, bigger than castles, the way the sky seems so much higher than it does at home – it's Tricia that feels small and afraid.

Allie Saenz was a tall, leggy girl. Her neck seemed long for her body, but she might have grown up to become a great beauty. It was always women who had something unexpected—Audrey Hepburn’s long neck, for example, or Angelina Jolie’s big, soft lips—that were so beautiful they unnerved. Allie would have been an imposing woman. Not like Melanie, who was soft and white, and she could wear anything and seem naked. There was nothing predatory about Melanie’s prettiness.

The strange new girl, Brandy, takes them behind the dunes and whispers stories. “Your mother likes to fuck,” she says. The way she says *fuck*, it sounds really bad, like something luscious but wrong. “Fuck,” she says. Grace gets up and walks away. “You want to see her do it? Wait till her man leaves. That your daddy?”

“Yes,” the twins answer together. “She’ll do anything.”

“It’s a lie,” Allie says. Trina is crying. But Grace is very still, alert. When they walk back, Allie whispers, “She’s like a cat in the dark, your mother.”

And they listen to the Fleetwood Mac song on the boom box, out on the balcony.

She is like a cat in the dark

And then she is the darkness

She rules her life like a fine skylark

And when the sky is starless

All your life you’ve never seen

A woman taken by the wind . . .

The adults are going to be up all night, out by the bonfire, drinking, dancing. People spill over from the broken house and the girls watch them. These are guys who get their muscles from working, not working out. Brandy is with them, and the way she stands in the firelight, she seems older. Maybe she's a teenager like Sylvia. She is wearing cutoffs and cowgirl boots, her long hair gathered up at her neck in a banana clip.

"Look at her," Grace whispers, "I think she's sixteen." Brandy and Melanie dance together in the firelight, one shimmery and white, the other all golden, glinting lights. Melanie's small hand rests gently in the curve of the younger woman's—girl's—waist, and for a few moments the laughter is muffled. Everyone is watching.

It's their father who ends it, laughing, calling them all to come inside.

Sunday, the men go back to their jobs, and Sylvia leaves. Melanie makes daiquiris and lies out on the balcony, sleeping, while the girls dig a hole behind the dunes. "Just one thing, girls," she says. "Stay away from that girl."

"You mean Brandy?" "Yes, that one."

"Why?" Trina asks.

"Well, she's kind of trashy. I know that's not a nice thing to say. But I don't think she even goes to school."

"You were dancing with her," Allie says, catching her eye.

"Oh, that...." Melanie's voice trails off. Well, I'm a grown-up. You girls have fun."

A few minutes later, the girls all sit with Brandy beneath her shanty house, looking out at the bright water. It's noon, and the sand is blazing white. Allie closes her eyes against it. Brandy's house is right up on the shore.

"Don't you worry it'll get destroyed in one of the storms?" Trina asks.

Brandy shrugs. She's back to looking like one of them, a kid.

"Our mother says we shouldn't play with you," Tricia says.

"Why?"

"Well...because."

"That don't make sense. She brought Allie here, and Allie's a Mexican, right Alejandra?"

She says the j with a puff.

"She thinks you're trash," Allie says.

"She don't want to get caught that's all," Brandy says.

The girls lie on their backs, looking up at the broken beams under the stilts.

"Where's your family?" Tricia asks.

"Oh, my Uncle Cody? He's gone on his errands."

"Was he out there last night?" The girls want to know.

"Cody? I have a lot of uncles. They all like Melanie. Everyone likes Melanie."

Tricia's father died a few summers later. Or was he their father? He worked a lot. When he was home, his soft eyes were on Melanie, always. He was a tall man, gray hair, gray eyes, cuff links. His heart gave out, and when he was gone, the summer after, her mother brought them to Corpus Christi, to a different beach, and her skin was tanned this time, her hair in blonde cornrows. There was a different man and a different party.

“Husband?” Tricia says, thinking he will not answer to anything now. Their daughter is sleeping on the king bed beside them, bottom up in the air, legs tucked under.

“I want to know. What made you love me? Something, right? Maybe you can just try to remember one moment, like maybe when we went out for gravy fries, after I got off the nightshift

At Caesar’s. I read about this. You put yourself back in a moment, let the feelings trickle back.”

But he is turned away. There is sand in the bed. The sheets smell funky, as if they’ve been sprayed with air freshener but left unwashed. She won’t sleep. She walks out to the balcony. The hotel doesn’t face the ocean; it faces a water park. Beyond the water park is the ocean, but she can’t see it, not from here.

When it started, maybe the fourth day? Or the fifth. She remembers her mother’s warm breath on their faces.

Melanie, they call her, when they are at the beach. “Girls, she whispers, “my girls...” Trina turns around, grabbing Tricia’s elbow. Grace and Allie are fast asleep.

“Oh, don’t bother,” Melanie says. “They won’t wake up. I took care of that. This is just for you, for my kittens.”

And she takes them out to the sea, one pretty daughter on either side, and they seem to glide with her. She whispers to them, and sings, and she tells them what happens at night is different. “We don’t talk about what happens at night in the daytime.” They walk and walk until they find a bonfire. “Come on, my kitten.” Melanie smiles and everyone smiles back, men who aren’t teenagers but not really men, college boys mainly, and a few women in shorts and Rockets T-shirts. Trina takes her mother’s hand, and

Tricia rolls her pajama bottoms up over her calves, walking into the water. She doesn't know where to go, what to do. Her mother was kissing those men last night, and when she glanced over her shoulder, Trina was too. Tricia puts her head under the water, wishing it were colder. When she looks back everything gleams.

She remembers moonlit foam, the waves splashing...The women were gone, it was only Melanie and Trina who remained, and Melanie was on top of one of the men, leaning back, digging her hands into the sand, smiling upside down. Tricia was too far to see her mother's face, but she knew she was smiling. Melanie's body bobbed back and forth, her pale hair spilling to the ground. Trina was on another man, kissing.

"You are both cats. Catpeople, like your momma." She giggles. "Meow, meow."

Tricia is silent, and Trina runs ahead, her arms open wide. Once they're on the cots out on the balcony, she whispers, "I could taste melted marshmallow on his tongue. It was sweet. He sucked on my tongue hard and then he let it go. It almost hurt, but it felt good."

"I don't want to hear. That's slutty," Tricia tells her.

"No. We're cats. In the morning we'll be different people. Like Melanie said."

They wake at sunrise. Trina grabs her elbow, but they walk out into the ocean to bring in the traps, not speaking. The beach was a dream.

At home, they live in a long ranch house. Sometimes they turn off the hallway lights and play ghost. Their mother takes many naps during the day, but she is more like a mother there than she is at the beach. She pours them Count Chocula cereal in the morning, she signs their report cards, she makes them cucumber sandwiches. She even

watches television with them sometimes. It's entirely possible, when they come out here, Tricia thinks, that their mother is some sort of cat creature.

Audrey came out with a head full of dark hair. Then her dark hair fell out and was replaced by still darker, plumier hair. From the beginning, she latched without difficulty. Tricia held her whenever she cried, which was often. She remained toothless until she was a year old, and then they all came in at once. Audrey was up all night, feverish, and Tricia would stick her index finger over the sore gums as her baby clamped down. "Go ahead," she'd whisper, "bit Mommy. It's okay." Audrey was colicky too; Tricia held her in the steamy bathroom and rubbed her back and Audrey cried and gasped. It sure seemed damn hard to be a baby. When Audrey wanted Tricia's body, she would touch her mother's face and turn it away as she took the nipple into her mouth. She would twirl her fingers, close her eyes. Tricia misses that sometimes. How just the breast could sooth her daughter into a trance. Nothing seems to have replaced that kind of content.

Tricia called her mother once, during a particularly difficult day of colick. She was calling to borrow money and Melanie was annoyed.

"Do you remember us? I mean do you have a suggestion?"

"Oh I wouldn't know sweetheart," Melanie said. "I didn't nurse you two. Why don't you get someone in to help? Where's the little shit?" That's what she calls Isaac.

Her mother is not so very far away now. She lives with another husband, in Dallas. But Tricia has not seen her in almost eight years. She hasn't seen her sister either. It wasn't a big deal, they said. They talk about it, about meeting for something, for a holiday. But there are always islands to visit, things to be done.

Isaac is gone; he is here but he is already gone. Her mother, her sister are catpeople but not Tricia. She is a woman, nothing special. She can't keep him, nor dispose of him. She loves him, or at least she wants him back so she can try to love him.

The night it happened, the moon was murderously bright.

That's what Melanie says when she wakes them: "Wake up, wake up, my girls, the moon is murderously bright!" And this night, she wakes them all, Grace and Allie, Tricia and Trina. "Wipe the sleepy dirt from your eyes. This night is enchanted. It will last for a hundred years."

The air feels charged. Allie and Grace stand up, wobbling, rubbing their eyes. They would follow Melanie anywhere.

The house flickers in the distance, that broken house that seems to come alive at night and die every morning.

And Tricia remembers, yes—before that summer, it was an empty, abandoned shack, the stilts sinking into the sand, the windows boarded up. Tricia and Trina would go there, find things that had washed up. A glass disc full of colored blue water and pale sand. There were old shoes, baby bottles, fish skeletons. Once, a ring they thought was diamond, but when they brought it to Melanie, she told them it was cubic zirconia. Oh, and a coral necklace. That had been a treat, how they rinsed it and handed it to their mother. It was their greatest find.

But this night, there are men around and inside it. The women who are there are there for the men. There is a woman with stiff breasts and boots that go way up past her knees, walking toward the water. She looks painted onto the landscape. "It's a stripper," Grace whispers, and Trina says, "Be quiet." The girls run beneath the house,

looking for some- thing. They whisper, wonder if they've walked into a ghost story. It's very dark beneath, and there's a sliver of light where the stilts rise to their highest, where the light from the win- dows and the moonlit ocean cut through.

“Do you think Brandy is here tonight?” one of the girls, probably Allie, whispers. Grace is scared. Allie takes her hand.

Upstairs, Melanie's laughter, ice giggling inside a tumbler, war whoops.

A man jumps from the deck to the sand. When he sees them down there he squats, smiles. “Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

He's reaching for Grace, and she begins to cry. She's still in her pink pajamas, the ones with daisies all over them. Allie wraps an arm around her and so she feels the bottoms dampen. Grace has wet herself. It's just a party. That's when they hear Melanie say, “Come on, Grace, it's all right. Come on out.”

“It's okay,” the twins whisper. “It's Melanie.”

It's Mother's Day. There are no Mother's Day gifts; Isaac didn't come up with anything and Audrey's too young to have done anything on her own. They sit in the lobby, eating their free continental breakfasts. Tricia peels a bruised orange for Audrey, and then they make waffles. Audrey is fascinated by the waffle maker. She sticks her fingers into the syrupy cherry sauce. “Oh, sorry, Mommy,” she says, “not sanitary.”

Isaac looks awful. Like his eyes are just holes punched into his face. He hasn't even bothered to shave. “Why would you, for this grand occasion?” she says, and too late she realizes she said it aloud. What the hell are they doing here? Why is he here with them? But he just nods.

And that's when she squints, blurring his features a bit. Men, for her mother, were interchangeable. She liked to have sex with them, and she liked to look at them. She liked them to look at her. But beyond that, they didn't interest her. And so, for Tricia, her father had been a scent, a cigar, cuff links, a nice leather chair. Those men on the beach, they were bar boys or college boys, or working men in soiled shirts and Stetsons. Her father wore boots with his suit. He liked to call them his girls.

She squints at Isaac, and sees him . . . tries to make him flat. Isn't that what he's done to her? She is nothing, he says, it's nothing, it's never been any good, it's no use . . . For a moment, he's a loser with a five o'clock shadow. And then he gets up for more coffee and he's back to being Isaac again.

"Well," she says when he comes back, "can we go out? For crab maybe? I'd like to do that."

When Isaac and Tricia were first married, they lived in Austin, down the street from UT. They walked their dog to the Crown and Anchor once a week for beer and soggy fries, and she liked to sit out on the lawn and listen to the football games. She liked the roar of the crowd, which carried like voices over water down Duval Street. The announcer's voice was masculine, rich, slow and easy, like her father's. After the game, if they'd won, kids would drive down the roads yehaw-ing, whooping. She reminds herself that they were innocent whoops of joy. Or probably. Or most likely. But maybe there was a fine line. Something Isaac said to her, tonelessly, once, as he was throwing out platitudes in that bitterly dim voice he used lately, was, "There's a fine line between love and hate."

That wasn't it, though, for Melanie. She didn't hate any- one, really. Some people were beneath her, that's all. She liked fun.

Isaac won't go out, and so it's Audrey and her mommy, facing the seawall. Audrey has pineapple juice and a sunfish bib. Tricia orders king crab, and then another. She can't remember ever feeling this hungry.

"It's alright, it's Melanie," they tell Grace. There's that windchime laugh, and Melanie's voice, saying sweetly, "That one's the plain one." Then the sounds settle, as if something thick has descended.

Upstairs there is moaning, sighs, and something warm and rich, a cawing, a mewing. Tricia and Allie crawl under the floorboards of the deck and look up through the slats. Grace is whimpering, and those moans, they seem to come from a creature buried for centuries, but they're coming from Melanie. She's straddling one of the men. Her body moves up and down, riding waves. Brandy's there too. She looks like a boy, standing in the doorway in a man's shirt, a pipe in her mouth. Tricia and Trina climb from under the deck and their mother looks over the man's shoulder and smiles.

Grace is in laps, hands around and inside her, the pink pajamas in a soiled heap, flung across the deck. Tricia chews the back of her hand, then bites her tongue and tries to taste. She turns away, crawls back under. And Trina stays.

Tricia and Allie lie there, thinking. Tricia holds Allie's hand, then puts her head against her chest, listening. Allie is still, but for her heartbeat.

Even now that she's grown, she believes in this, that Allie heard her thoughts.

They know you are here. You have to run. I'm afraid. We have to do it together.

No. They won't hurt me. I'm her kitten.

They took Allie down though. Tricia's eyes were closed, her hands digging deep, deep into the sand, pushing deeper, to where the sand was damp. So she didn't see it, but she knows Allie fought. She wasn't even looking for Melanie, but Melanie was watching, Tricia knew she was watching. Allie screamed and flailed, fighting with her nails and teeth. The men were different than they were with Grace, they weren't thick and private. They whooped and laughed. What must it have sounded like? There were still people out there in their vacation homes vacation homes. But later, in the morning, when the patrol cars came, people said they only heard a party.

Tricia never dreams of that night. Instead, she dreams of a dark room and sounds: a rooster crowing, wind chimes tinkling, men whooping, a woman moaning, giggling, tearing, screaming. Sometimes there are people there with her, in the black. Sometimes an alarm clock interrupts, and sometimes the other sounds overwhelm.

In the morning, her girls stood behind her. Melanie's eyes were red-rimmed, and she pushed her sunglasses up her nose. The policeman spoke to them separately. "No, we were sleeping. They must have dared one another to go exploring," Melanie told the men. "Those girls were always fascinated with that house."

Allie's mother, a nurse at Texas Children's, moved away to somewhere in Virginia, and then to someplace in the Midwest, and then she moved again and again, from hospital to hospital. She felt no anger toward Melanie. She wrote letters, asking again and again what the girls did that day. And Melanie sang her the songs they sang, told her about the virgin daiquiris she made them. "I feel close to you, Melanie," Allie's mother said.

“I know. I do too. I know how lucky I am. I’m surprised you don’t hate me, with my two still here.”

“I don’t have many girlfriends,” Melanie said to her twins when she hung up. “I’m glad she feels she can talk to me.”

After a while the phone calls stopped. Allie’s mom never came back to Texas.

On that drive back, they returned early. The sky was damp and close. It was the kind of muggy Houston weather that felt as wet as rain, but the rain wouldn’t come.

“The clouds look like smashed brains,” Tricia said.

“It’s a hard day, I know, kittens,” Melanie said. She turned on the radio and rolled the windows down. She sniffled, wiping her nose with her wrist, and lit a cigarette. In that moment, Tricia believed her mother was as close to sad as she could ever be.

She and Trina weren’t really twins, after that.

Someday, when Isaac is gone—and he will be gone, Tricia is sure of that now—she’ll bring Audrey back to the beach. They’ll buy matching skull shirts on the Strand and have their pictures taken together in a booth. They’ll come here in the winter and search for sand dollars, and dip their ankles into the surf. It’s not so crowded in the wintertime. Tricia will raise her hand up to the sky and sprinkle the shimmers all over the water, just as her mother used to do. She’ll laugh and tickle her black-haired daughter. “I come from a long line of witches,” she’ll say. “My grandmother was a witch, and her daughter was a witch, and I am a witch, and you!” She’ll jab Audrey in the ribs until she giggles. “But not for real. Just for pretend.”

“That’s right,” Tricia will cackle, “we’re good witches. And just for pretend.”

What she remembers that day as they drive back, Isaac silent as she points out the freighters and the gulls to Audrey, what she remembers on that very bright day is how, after the men had gone away in their trucks, her mother carried the naked bodies out into the sea.

It wasn't ceremonious; it wasn't unkind either. The bodies looked like bodies, not Allie, not Grace. Legs and arms and necks in the moonlight. They were lovely the way a wet, dead fish shining in the dark is lustrous before it splits open and begins to rot.