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We're All Girls Here

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We're All Girls Here

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

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Abstract

This is a collection of short stories.

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IN CONNECTICUT, IT SNOWS

Anna's father always told her that she was born during the famous Connecticut ice storm. In a lavish gesture, he had the swimming pool heated for her christening, and the guests ran through the snow with fur coats slung over bathing suits, clouds steaming from the water. Her mother rubbed the rims of crystal champagne glasses in an otherworldly rendition of *Hallelujah*, and then they raised the glasses and toasted in honor of Anna. Her father's first and only daughter.

Anna's father also told her, when she was thirty-three years old, that she should not come home for his funeral. She was living far away again, up in the mountains of Arizona, where she woke with nose bleeds, and smoke from the controlled burns eddied above the pines. When her father called, she was walking home from class through the barrio, crossing the pedestrian bridge over the creek.

"Don't be ridiculous," she told him. "I'm coming home."

She leaned her elbows on the steel bridge railing, stroking the chain of feathers strung from her dark ponytail, and when her father argued she told him that when the time came he really wouldn't have much say in the matter.

"Can't you just wait 'til summer to die, s'il vous plaît?"

"I'll do my best," he said.

But Anna knew her father's best was never very good. She was like him in this. Thirty-three years old, living as though she was much younger. Still in college, at a tiny alternative

school with scrap metal art installations and salvaged wood bridges straddling the buildings. Never married, but fond of wearing white dresses, fond of younger men and liquid eyeliner.

"Do better," she told him.

Somewhere, a screen door slammed. A dog barked, rattling a chain-link fence, and the windows of the corner bungalow flung open. Inside, the old man was playing his music again. The stereo speakers cranked up, sending the eerie, bluesy melody of *Blue Moon* clip-clopping past the dying aloe plant on his sill. Anna rested her chin on her arms, pulling the cuffs of her gray hooded sweatshirt over her hands. Down below, the creek bed was dry, the grasses blanched. Just three days ago there had been water.

"You listening to Elvis?" her father asked.

"Yes," Anna answered, because it seemed the simplest way to explain.

"I always liked Elvis."

"I know," she said.

Elvis and modern Broadway musicals, gangster movies and Oreo cookies, keeping secrets and telling stories about the way things used to be fifty years ago--those were the things her father loved. On Sunday afternoons, when Anna was a little girl, the television networks ran old Elvis movies. She used to sit on the carpet, her father smoking in his armchair. Me and Elvis, her father would say, we sure had a lot in common. And if three facts-- that they were both black-haired, had both been bad husbands to beautiful women, and were both born in two-room shacks--could be considered a lot, then yes. Yes, her father had a lot in common with Elvis.

"Don't you remember?" Anna said.

But no, he did not remember. Her father had always been vague, selective in his memories, and now the cancer treatments were loosening the threads. Down the street, the trust-

fund hippies who ran the faming communes and squatted in yurts were chanting mantras in a gutted house, and the Chicano boys loitered on the curb. One of them, shaved head and eyebrows, no more than twenty years old, went by the name Syko. Sometimes at midnight, when Anna was leaving the art studio, she found him waiting for her on the bridge. These hood rat boys will fuck with you, he always said, tucking her books beneath his arm, you gotta be careful, reinita.

On the phone, her father was rambling on about the Super Bowl. The Chicano boy called to her, running a hand over the gang tattoos his neck. Annacita, caile, caile. She waved to him, feeling a flutter in her throat. Oh, she knew. She knew that other grown women didn't kneel in the streets to kiss strange dogs, and they didn't abandon their carts in the middle of grocery stores when they got overwhelmed. She wasn't supposed to wave to teenaged gang members, or make jokes about her father's funeral. But now and then a moment came, and it came now--with the scent of dusty honey skimming off the chaparral, with the blue shadows lengthening beneath the boulders, with the strumming of an Italian mandolin and Elvis' voice quivering like the aspen leaves, warning that tomorrow would be too late, that it was now or never-- and Anna felt an inexplicable rush of joy, as if the world was cracking open beneath her feet and something was shining at the core. Her father wheezed and choked over the phone. And Anna almost said, as if maybe it could fix things--Dad, when you were a little boy you lived on a farm. You went hunting in the woods for a Christmas tree with your little beagle dog and a hatchet, and you got lost out there in the dark. But that little dog, he never left your side, not for a moment, though he must have known the way home-- but it seemed silly, apropos of nothing. Her father could not catch his breath, so she said only that she'd talk to him again soon, and hung up.

Overhead, the dry cottonwood leaves clacked in the wind, and when Anna closed her eyes, it sounded like falling winter ice. That story, the one her father told her about her christening, it was all bullshit. The famous November ice storm had struck Connecticut in 1973, six years before she was born. A midwinter pool party--c'est ridicule, her mother said. Her father had it all mixed up, as usual. Toby had been born in late April. The pool was opened early and heated for his christening, not Anna's, and no one wore a fur coat.

And she was not even her father's only daughter. Back in the early 80's, her father had an affair with his secretary, a pretty Sicilian girl named Doxie, and had gotten her knocked up. Her baby was born three weeks after Anna's younger brother Kyle. It was a little girl. She was Anna's half-sister, her father's second daughter, and the secret he managed to keep from Anna's mother for twelve years.

In Arizona, the late February sunshine was warm on her face, but Anna knew that at home in Connecticut, it was snowing. The eastern half of the country was strangled by a dip in the polar vortex. Her older brother Toby told her it was the worst winter he could remember. A nuclear fucking winter. Car engines seized up. Anna's mother went out each day to shovel a tunnel to prevent the doors from sealing shut, and the Weather Channel said, somewhere upstate, the temperature dropped lower than the surface of Mars. And how her father hated the cold. Last winter, there had been only a tiny black dot on his lung. The doctors said they would carve it out, but it had grown, resisted chemotherapy. The radiation came next, riddling his brain with dark holes, and Anna could not blame him for the night, three weeks later, when he slipped between and just let go.

You've got to see this girl, Anna's uncle Ed said to her father in a trailer park forty years ago. Drop-dead gorgeous. Back then, Anna's mother had been the sepia-tinted girl from old photographs. Gold hoops, honeyed hair draped over one shoulder. She wore white jeans. Sang soprano, cursed in French. Slept with her James Taylor album beneath her pillow. Anna's grandmother smoked pink cigarettes. After she divorced Anna's grandfather, she put the farmhouse up for rent and bought a trailer. It was an artistic decision, she always said, and an acute point of shame for Anna's mother. Oh Elisabeth, Anna's grandmother used to say, don't be so bourgeois.

The night Anna arrived home for her father's funeral, her mother clapped her hands and gave a little cheer. Years ago, the warmth had faded from her hair, but in the background Van Morrison played softly on the stereo. She embraced Anna, resting her head on her daughter's shoulder like a child. *Mon ciel étoilé*, she murmured, *ma bichette*. In her arms, her mother felt light and cool. Anna, as always, was surprised by the curious lightness to her mother, by the perpetual dryness of her hands, and the sense of some painless dehydration wicking away inside. One day, Anna expected, her mother would simply dry up and blow away.

"Are you freezing to death?" her mother asked.

"I'm fine," Anna said.

Her mother and father had had three things in common--their children, a lust for the suburbs, and an intolerance to cold. When Anna was fourteen, her father speculated and lost the cul-de-sac ranch where she had grown up. Modern appliances, central vac, Pink Panther insulation, luscious as cotton-candy--those were the things her mother wanted most. An ordinary life, full of middle-class pleasures, the thermostat set at 72. Instead, when Anna's grandmother died somewhere in Berlin, her mother inherited the old farmhouse.

The windows rattled, and cold drafts gusted between the cracks in the floorboards, and the barn loft, where Anna and her brothers used to smoke marijuana and mix cheap vodka into bottles of Fruitopia, had long since fallen down. The night Anna returned home for her father's funeral, the house had an unexpected air of festivity, and a new, unsettling odor that came to Anna in sickly-sweet whiffs. Candlelight dazzled from frost-rimmed windows, and the kitchen wood stove emitted a warm, cozy glow. In the hall pantry, the second refrigerator was stocked with aluminum trays of chicken marsala and lasagna, and her mother kept asking if she was hungry, if she wanted a soda or a fresh glass of water. It felt like Christmas. It was disorienting. Anna kept expecting her father to come doddering into the kitchen, rustling in the cupboard for Oreos. She and her mother both would turn away, refuse to meet his eyes, start a conversation he couldn't join--potted orchids and Debussy.

But her father was on the antique sideboard, sealed in an urn etched with soaring golden birds. On one side, his photograph--Toby's wedding, her father in an ill-fitting tuxedo, a rose pinned to his lapel. On the other, a cluster of dying lilies. The petals curled, exuding the stench of rotten meat.

The urn had caused an argument in the family. Kyle had decided he wanted his own private portion of the ashes and then Toby asked what made Kyle so special, why was he the only one getting personal ashes, and demanded his own share. Anna's mother, unwilling to spend an extra hundred dollars on mini-urns, lost her temper. She told Anna that she almost shouted, don't be so bourgeois, and in atonement for that impulse, she gave in. *Je me'n fiche!* Anna laughed and refused when her mother called to ask if she also wanted private ashes. Yuck, she said. She did not want a tiny father for her bookshelf, wedged between her Himalayan salt lamp and the snakeskin she had picked up on a dirt road in Kentucky, though now she wondered

which portion she would have gotten. The charred dentures, or the useless hands. The melted blue eyes or the seared skin tattooed with a heart, bannered with the name of his first wife. It was best, she thought, to let it all stay together.

"The urn is beautiful," she told her mother. "Dad would have liked the color. It looks like the ocean."

"He wanted his ashes scattered over water."

"That's very expensive," Anna said. "You have to get a special permit and charter a boat."

"Oh," her mother said. "Then maybe I won't."

Her mother held her hand, and breezed her from room to room. A strange, centrifugal force seemed to drive her mother, almost sparking from the wisps of her hair. There was a glaze to her eyes--something Anna recognized but had almost forgotten. It made her feel like the lights had browned-out. When Anna was fifteen, her father's secret came out. He missed a child support payment and the state garnished Anna's mother's wages. Anna came home from school one day and her father was gone, the windows in the atrium smashed, that glaze hardening in her mother's eyes. Oh Elisabeth, Anna's grandmother would have said, don't make such a fuss. *La monogamie n'est pas d'état naturel*.

In the dining room, Anna dutifully admired the dining room table laid with her grandmother's china, stacked with dozens of new glasses and new linen napkins folded in fan patterns. For the post-funeral party, her mother told her, all things that Anna silently deemed unnecessary, and a waste of money. Down the hall, in the little office room where Anna's father had slept for the past ten years, and where he had died, the hospital bed had been removed. A new sofa occupied the empty space.

"Doesn't it look nice?" her mother asked, and Anna admitted that it did. She asked if the sofa was from Pottery Barn, and her mother said no, Bob's Discount Furniture, but didn't it look close?

At her mother's urging, Anna sat down to try out the sofa, petting the microfiber nap. Her father had died in this very spot, a bizarre and impossible fact. The night he died, Anna was in Vegas. Drifting down the Strip, somewhere between the shrieks of free-fall riders on the Stratosphere needle, and the light beaming from the tip of the Luxor pyramid. You could see that column of light from the moon, her father had told her once. When her mother called, someone was zip-lining. Someone was water-sliding through the Golden Nugget shark tank, and somewhere a Marilyn in a white halter dress said I do to an Elvis in a rhinestone jumpsuit, and all Anna could think to say to her mother was, "Are you sure?" And then, terribly, unable to overcome her curiosity, "What does it look like?" To this, her mother had no satisfactory answer. She told Anna he had died at home, in bed.

There was a storm. Anna could see how it must have been. The television on the wicker stand. Sleet pasting the dark window. Her mother, Toby, and Kyle waiting in a room illuminated by a single candle flame, taking turns holding Anna's father's hand as he slipped into the unknown. Because that was how men died. On bitter March nights, with their sons by their side, with their daughters pirouetting beneath the flower garlands and glowing parasol chandeliers at The Wynn.

Later, Anna changed into her pajamas and curled up on her mother's bed with a glass of Malbec, *Moulin Rouge* playing on the television. They knew the songs by heart. She wanted to ask if there was time to go shopping at TJ Maxx while she was home, if her mother thought it

was too cold for frozen yogurt, if things would be the same. Her mother fell asleep before she had the chance.

Anna refilled her wine glass and licked the rim, a trick to prevent lip-gloss stains. A laminated newspaper clipping of her father's obituary was on the night table. Anna picked it up, ran her finger along the edges. Her father, Robert James Pritchard, known as Toby to his friends. Fond of dogs and yard work. Survived by his four loving children.

I need her name for the obituary, Anna's mother had said to Anna. *That girl's* name. And Anna, with her phone pressed to her cheek somewhere outside the Apache reservation, felt a fluttering in her larynx, the white moths that would escape if she spoke, spiraling above the fallen Ponderosa pine needles and the pitched tents, dissipating into the hard, blue Arizona sky.

Anna was twelve years old when her father took her to The Ground Round and confessed the secret of his affair and Anna's half-sister, over plates of seasoned fries and Dr. Peppers. She could never tell her mother. It would break her heart, ruin the family. Anna would be to blame. For Anna, the choice was obvious. She was a good girl, her father's favorite. After the secret came out on its own, Anna's mother figured out that she had known. Anna could no longer remember how. Maybe she had confessed. Maybe her father had snitched, unwilling to go down alone.

She knew now that she was not to blame. Her mother would say now that she was not to blame, forgetting that once she had felt quite differently. Those were bad years. After Anna's father was finally permitted to return home, Anna spent thirteen years going from room to room when she visited, pushing open the curtains so the light streamed in. She told her mother that her father spent his mornings chain-smoking Marlboro Medium 100's, sipping canned Budweiser, that he was drunk by afternoon, that he was planning on surprising her with a new car for her

birthday, that the repo man took the car again, that Kyle had pawned their grandmother's opal ring for drug money, that Toby's wife was talking divorce, that she herself was picking up extra money on the weekends table dancing in Phoenix--and perhaps her mother never knew that the telling was an endless gesture of contrition, a realignment to position her back by her mother's side. I'm sorry, she meant to say, but couldn't.

And in the campground outside of the Apache reservation, two days after her father's death, Anna told her mother over the phone that she did not recall the girl's full name. It was something preposterous and Italian, like Luigina or Pasqualia. They called her Lia, Anna said. Lia Pritchard. That was all she knew. And her mother said that Lia was enough. More than enough.

Before Anna went up to sleep in her old attic bedroom, she thought of gently touching her mother's shoulder, waking her. She would tell her, as if it would make a difference--Mom, your mother threw a surprise party for your sweet sixteen and you were so embarrassed that you cried. But you met a boy that day, fell in love. You went to Prom, went to college in a secondhand mink coat. He wrote you letters, quoting Keats, wishing you both were summer butterflies, and you still keep them in the bottom drawer of your bureau, tied with a pink ribbon. Maman, she would say, vous es pleine de grâce.

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The front window of Sprung's Funeral Parlor overlooked Main Street, a long avenue of historic New England house that Anna knew by heart. The gabled blue colonial on the corner was haunted. Everyone knew that. And the white one next door, half-hidden behind desiccated hydrangea blossoms, had secret passageways in the walls. Her friend Mike Klar had lived there when she was a teenager. Once, at a party, a boy named Greg held her hand, pressed a wall that

revealed a secret door, and led her through a corridor so narrow she had to turn sideways. It was dim and spidery, sap oozing from the support beams. This is where they hid the pretty girls from wild Indians, he whispered teasingly. You would have had to live back here. Later, she had sex with him on Mike's sister's bed, her hair clung with cobwebs. Her skin still sticky, smelling of raw wood.

The morning of her father's service, Anna and her mother arrived early. The reception room was hushed, the rows of chairs still empty. Kyle texted that he was on his way, Toby that he was running late, as usual. Her father's urn perched on a table, flanked by his photograph and the abhorred lilies, before a velvet prie-dieu where Anna did not kneel. Her mother stationed near the arched entry to the sitting room, swathed in a gauzy black shawl. She was silent, gazing ahead, that frenetic energy buzzing about her like a black horde of bees. Anna went to the windows, pushed the drapes wide. Near the hall restroom, there was a water cooler. She filled a paper cone, drained it twice, and brought another to her mother.

"Merci," her mother said. She took a small, reluctant sip, swallowing as though there was something lodged in her throat. Anna knew her mother did not like too much getting inside. Even a cone of water could upset the balance, risk overflow.

"Hang on." Anna dug in her purse for a tiny yellow pill. "Take this."

The iridescent beads on mother's shawl clacked as she popped the pill into her mouth, making Anna think of desert things. Of cornhusk dolls peddled in roadside tents. Bones picked clean, scoured white by the sun. Of dying cicadas falling from the trees. The frail, translucent wings. The veins. "Merci," her mother said again.

Anna took her mother's coat and hung her own wrap in the coat closet, bumping into Kyle near the back entrance. "Milord," she said, with a curtsy. They had gone to a Renaissance

Faire together a few years ago, up near Tuxedo, and it had never stopped being funny. "May I take your coat?"

"Milady," he said, with a bow. He laughed, cut it short, as if remembering the solemnity of the occasion.

She hung his coat, the wool smelling of cold air and Axe body spray. She told him it smelled like it was still 2003, like he thought maybe later they would hit up some dance clubs and drink caramel appletinis, and he laughed again. Kyle always laughed like he couldn't help it, like it was gut-punched out of him--the kind of laugh that sounded like it was cracking in two. In the family, Kyle was the sweet one, with the sometimes heroin addiction. He would drop by on Sundays, mow the lawn without being asked, get the ladder and dredge the gutters. And he would steal the televisions from every room, overdose in 7-11 bathrooms, and now and then, serve a stint in Westchester County Prison. In the reception room of Sprung's, he hugged his mother, knelt at the prie-dieu and prayed, making the sign of the cross.

Toby showed up not long after. His thick black hair was not quite tamed, the ends spiking. He had their father's hair, like Anna, and a warmer version of his blue eyes. Toby was the good kid, the suit-and-tie brother, the one with dimples and a Vero Beach time share, and the pretty wife who left him suddenly one night. Like Anna, he kept a safe distance from the prie-dieu.

He walked to the guestbook on the podium and scrawled his name with a flourish. "Are you going to sign it?" he asked Anna.

"No," she said. "I'm not a guest. I'm family."

Anna dropped into one of wingback armchairs set in the front row for the family, and pulled her phone from her purse, wishing for a lunch buffet, wishing for Bloody Mary's.

"Mom," she said, "when's the will going to be read?"

Kyle's laugh cracked again, Toby snorted, and her mother rolled her eyes. "Very funny," she said.

"Kids who inherit are so lucky," Anna said. "Imagine how much it would ease our bereavement to get a bunch of money right now?"

Toby nodded, his mouth tightening in that way it always did when he was reminded of more fortunate Connecticut children. The loss of the cul-de-sac ranch when they were teenagers had gone hard with him, almost as hard as it had with their mother. Toby had never recovered from the brief era that followed--the secondhand shoes, the canned Christmas ham from the donation box.

A few years back, he asked Anna's mother to make him the executor of her will. She didn't have much, just the farmhouse and a bit of life insurance. But if you die first, he told Anna's mother, both will go to Dad, and then when he dies, *she* could have a claim, and *she* does not get anything from you. Not on my watch. And Anna's mother, unable to resist that line of reasoning, had relented, although now it no longer mattered.

"Are you sure there isn't anything?" Toby asked.

"No," her mother said. "Like what?"

Anna suggested maybe a ring, a signet ring from the illustrious house of Pritchard, passed down through the centuries, and Kyle asked about the gold Virgin Mary medallion that Anna's father used to wear in the 80's, gleaming on his hairless chest. Button your shirt, Anna's mother used to say. The very memory made her shiver. Four buttons undone. Like the Italian boys on the boardwalk when she was a little girl. Gold chains, greased hair.

"Mom, geez," Toby said. "Your father was Italian. "

Anna's mother spread her hands and said yes, yes of course he was. Northern Italian, but she really didn't see what that had to do with considering a man gauche for unbuttoning his shirt too low. "Oh, wait," her mother said. "There's his coin collection. Somewhere, I think."

Anna laughed and said that the coin collection was long gone, and she was pretty sure Kyle had stolen it for drug money. Kyle scrunched his face, tried to get angry and couldn't pull it off because he had indeed stolen the coins to buy heroin. Come to think of it, he'd probably stolen the medallion too.

"Dude," Toby said. "You pawned our inheritance?"

"I'm sorry," Kyle said.

There was a silence. Anna patted him on the shoulder. "Kyle," she said, "we forgive you."

Anna tilted her head and smiled up through her eyelashes in the way that had so enchanted her father when she was a child. It was her job to fill the silence. To stave off the undercurrent of tension, stiffening her mother's shoulders. There was no telling who might show up to the service. Maybe Anita, her father's first wife. They had grown up together, married as teenagers. Anita looked gorgeous in hot pants, Anna's father told her. She had golden hair, set each night over the trailer park sink in pink foam rollers, and she stood on her head after sex hoping for a baby that never came. The fault, the doctors said, was with Anna's father. Sterile.

Maybe Vera, the scrappy Italian girl who tended bar at the pub Anna's father had owned in Bridgeport. Just before Anna's birthday, her father shot Vera's husband in the leg. I missed, he told Anna, I was aiming for his balls. He sent twelve golden roses to Anna as a gesture of contrition, and asked her to tell her mother that he was sorry. After driving Anna home from

piano lessons, her mother put her head down on the steering wheel and cried. Tell me what you think I should do, she asked her daughter.

Lia would come, Anna had no doubt about that. And maybe her mother, Doxie, the former secretary. At company Christmas parties, Anna's mother told her, Doxie wore tight, fuzzy sweaters and red lipstick, pushing close to Anna's father. Her mother admitted that she had always been suspicious. Maybe she had even known about the affair, though not the baby. But I had two little children, Anna's mother said, and I was pregnant with Kyle. Comme on fait son lit, on se couche.

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An Eastern Orthodox priest, the father of one of Kyle's ex-girlfriend, a girl Anna had once slapped in the face, was the first to arrive to the service. Anna's family wasn't even orthodox. They weren't really anything. Her father had been raised Methodist, or maybe Lutheran. Anna and her brother were half-hearted Catholics, like their mother, baptized down the street at St. Rose de Lima's. The morning Anna had made her first communion, dolled up like a child-bride in handstitched white, a crown of preserved flowers in her hair, she looked out over the crowded pews and saw her father in dark, mirrored sunglasses. When the priest distributed the holy Eucharist, he hung back. Didn't want to get struck by lightning, he told Anna.

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While her mother chatted with the priest, and Toby argued with his ex-wife on the phone in the bathroom, Anna beckoned Kyle to follow her down a long hall, telling him that she was bored and wanted to explore. They found another formal room at the west end, a deeper hush, and seven chintz sofas swelling in the gloom.

"Do you want to play The Floor is Made of Hot Lava?" Anna whispered.

Kyle scrunched his face in that why-are-you-so-fucked-up way, and told her no, definitely not. There was a silence, and then he knelt to untie his dress shoes. He stepped up on a sofa and hopped to another, ducking to avoid the chandelier, and Anna followed. She lost, of course. Her legs were shorter, the upholstery slick beneath her stockings. She slipped on her final jump. Kyle tried to grab her hands and pull her to safety, but one foot grazed the carpet, and that was it. Death by molten lava.

Anna touched one finger to the tiny beauty mark on her brother's cheek. "You're a champion," she said. "Dad's gotta be looking down on you right now, thinking, I am so proud." She looked around. "Where do you think the morgue is?"

"Probably in the basement."

"Do you want to sneak down there?"

"No. For real no."

She sank down beside Kyle on the sofa to catch her breath, stroking the rhinestone chain in her hair, and told him that she felt a little guilty that she wasn't home when their father died. Not that it really mattered. Near the end, her mother told her, the medicine triggered hallucinations. Anna's father's eyes turned to eggs yolks and he screamed at demons rising from the floor. Sometimes, he tried to stand up and put on his shoes, mumbling that he was late to pick up Kyle from football practice, that he had forgotten to leave Anna's new doll at the foot of her bed, where she would find it in the morning. He used to do that when she was a little girl. Leave presents on the bed while she was sleeping. A vinyl '45 of Tchaikovsky's Sleeping Beauty. A set of pillowcases printed with rose garlands, a gold and seed pearl anklet. Just for her, never anything for her brothers.

In the end, she was the one left out. Maybe that was the source of the darting throb in her throat. Her brothers had borne witness to a great and silent mystery, and she had not.

But Kyle told her she was wrong. He wasn't there either. His girlfriend Alyssa had planned a vacation months before, tickets paid, hotel booked, and the night Anna's father died, Kyle was at Disney World.

"Seriously?" Anna asked, and he nodded. "You monster."

Kyle's laugh cracked. "Oh, whatever," he said. "And where were you, huh?"

Anna adjusted the cuffs of her sweater, smoothed her hair. "I was in Vegas," she said. "On a school trip. Studying *culture*."

"Yeah."

Some throw cushions had fallen during the game, and as Anna set them into place and pulled on her boots, she revised her mental vision of her father's death. A dim room, lit by a single flame. Her father, bald and yellow and sunken, in a temporary hospital bed. Her mother and Toby waiting in grave silence. Kyle, riding a bobsled cart through the bowels of the Matterhorn, his erasure opening a blank space before the arched window.

Then later out in the rear parking lot, Toby told her she still had it wrong. They had snuck out for a few swigs from the pint of Leroux Blackberry Brandy stashed in his console. Anna leaned against the door of his SUV and took a drag from his electronic cigarette, and Toby told her that that wasn't the way it happened at all.

There was a storm. Spirals of white against the black sky. Nearly midnight. Kyle riding the Matterhorn, Anna in a gondola, floating a miniature canal. The morphine finally kicked in, and Anna's father grew calm, fell asleep. In the lull, Anna's mother went to her bedroom for a nap, and Toby practiced his electric guitar up in Anna's attic. He lost track of time. And in that

lost time, her father died. Beneath the light of one flickering electric bulb. Alone, no one holding his hand. Somewhere between *Free Bird* and *Float On*.

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The priest chanted and sang strange hymns, banging electronic notes on a synthesizer set up by the urn table. The room was filling up quickly--Anna's mother's colleagues from the hospital where she nursed, old neighbors from the cul-de-sac, aunts and uncles and cousins.

Uncle Barry, who had fallen down the stairs when he was a little boy, smashed his head on a milk can, and sometimes still forgot that Eisenhower was no longer president, pushed Grandma Pritchard's wheelchair. When he walked in the room, Anna got an unpleasant shock, thinking it was her father. They were so alike. The same thin frame and sloping shoulders, the nervous gestures and useless-looking hands. The dark hair and bright, vacant, blue eyes and hawk nose all inherited from Anna's grandmother, who seemed to have become the milk spilt on the floor now, all white and curdled. "Oh my god," Anna whispered to Kyle. "She's like *Weekend at Bernie's*."

Grandma Pritchard, aged ninety-seven, had outlived two of her six children, and was nearly blind. She had twenty-four grandchildren, and who knew how many great-grandchildren. Anna, never a favorite, had been lost in that crowd. When she ten years old, Grandma Pritchard caught her snorting a Pixie Stick on a dare, and told her father that he was spoiling her rotten. When Anna was twenty, Grandma Pritchard told her that her V-neck Easter dress was lovely, and asked if she had considered applying for a job at Hooters. She meant it as a compliment, Anna's father insisted. Anna no longer visited her, never called on her birthday, and now when she said hello her grandmother did not recognize her voice.

"It's Anna," she said. "Anna. Robert's daughter."

She did not know how well the old lady could hear, and when she leaned in to give her a kiss, pulling away before her lips brushed her grandmother's cheek, she considered whispering *die already* in her ear as a test. She resisted, but had to stifle her laughter. She told Grandma Pritchard that yes, she was living in Arizona now, not Chicago anymore, not Portland either, no, not Florida, which was more than ten years ago. Yes, she was going to school, and no, she was not married yet, no she did not think she was leaving it rather late, and then there was an awkward pause and Anna got away.

“We need to make a line,” Anna told her brothers.

Under her direction, they fell into formation at the head of the room in order of their age. First Anna’s mother, then Toby, then Anna, then Kyle. She shook hands and smiled at a steady stream of strangers. “Thank you so much for coming.” During a lull, she fixed her lip-gloss and teased her brothers about how much more their father had loved her, and their mother too, for that matter. “It’s true,” she said. “You know, Dad used to say I was the son he never had.”

She laughed, and the boys almost joined in, but then Toby touched his tie with the palm of his hand, half-smile fading, and Kyle’s face scrunched, and neither one laughed.

“When did he say that?” Toby asked.

“Oh, all the time,” Anna said, “Like that Christmas I was dating Kelly Hardy and I went with Mom and Dad to get the Christmas tree. And you guys wouldn’t help bring it in the house because Kyle didn’t want to get sap on his Polo fleece or something, so I had to drag it in.” She tilted her head, and smiled as she looked up at them, and then a moment of nostalgia touched her. “God, Kelly Hardy was so gorgeous.”

Toby snorted. “He was an asshole.”

“Which one was he?” Kyle asked.

“I don’t really remember,” Toby said. “But they were all assholes.”

Anna turned to the next person, shook hands and smiled, and repeated this process for hours. More than once Anna went over and took her mother's place as first in line, buffering the introduction to the men her father knew from drinking all afternoon at the VFW, where the draft beers were cheapest and he could smoke inside, among the company of other old men who loved to say hello. Beyond the window, the snow began to fall again on Main Street, on the houses it had snowed upon for centuries.

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Anna's father always told her that he always told Lia that she had an older sister, born during a famous November ice storm. And her older sister was a girl who read long books in a single day, swam in deep lakes without a lifejacket, and sang the French national anthem at breakfast.

He told Anna he used to smuggle the doubles of family photographs to Lia, who grew up taping them to her bedroom walls. Her room was papered with Anna. Anna beneath the dogwood tree in a white lace dress, white pantyhose, and white satin pumps on the day of her eighth-grade graduation. Anna in a coral swimsuit with high-cut legs and a floppy straw sunhat with roses on the brim. Anna holding a soda can, pretending to be Cindy Crawford in a Pepsi commercial. Anna, the girl her father promised would be her real sister one day when they were grown up and Lia wouldn't have to be kept secret anymore.

When Lia turned eleven, Anna's father asked Anna if she would be her birthday present. She was the thing Lia wanted most, he told her. Anna did not refuse. Her father took them to Ponderosa Steak House. Anna was fifteen then, and Lia was a scrawny thing, with badly cut-bangs, not yet grown into her teeth. If they had a conversation, Anna could not remember it. She

might have told Lia that her bedroom was painted mint green and had mirrored closet doors and glow-in-the-dark-stars on the ceiling and what did hers look like? She didn't know if she asked her if she watched *Beverly Hills 90210*, or if she was also sick of Guns N' Roses and liked Nirvana better now. Maybe Lia hated math too. Maybe she liked to stay up late. Maybe she also wanted to dye her hair sea-green and wear blackberry lipstick. Maybe she was dying to be kissed by a boy on the soccer team who wore *Obsession for Men* and a blue Adidas tracksuit, or maybe she was still too young.

Anna only remembered being uncomfortable. The way Lia's cheeks were flushed with eagerness, and how she was too shy to look at Anna in the eye. Neither girl was sure how to behave towards their father. Anna called him Dad and asked for a second glass of soda. Lia called him Papa, and in later years, when Anna wanted to be especially cutting, she would call him Papa too.

When Anna went home from the birthday dinner, she lied to her mother. She told her that her father had taken her out to dinner, just the two of them. Because she was so damn special. His only daughter. La petite Dauphine, her mother said with a smile.

Anna had not seen her half-sister since. In the receiving line, Anna flirted with a friend of her mother's, a man with a sexy British accent who taught literature and wrote poetry. She knew she was laughing too much in line, but she was surprised by the thrill of seeing old friends and the unexpected fun of strolling in a funeral. She did not notice the girl in the dark slacks until Kyle elbowed her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to him, "but he was so cute."

Kyle jerked his chin towards the girl standing beside their grandmother's wheelchair. "I think that's her," he said. "That's Lia."

The girl had soft, curly brown hair. She bore little familial resemblance. The paternal side of Anna's family had a distinct look-- deep-set blue eyes, black hair, sharp cheekbones, and gaunt faces. Sometimes Anna sat in front of the mirror, examining her nose from each angle, worrying it was growing hawkish. Later, at the post-funeral service party, Anna and her brothers would drink Irish coffee garnished with a few drops of leftover morphine, and whisper about the fact that there had never been a paternity test, and oh my god, wouldn't it be hilarious if she wasn't even really his daughter after all, and Kyle would again scrunch his face in that you-guys-are-so-fucked-up way.

But an invisible static undulated through the room. The girl went to Grandma Pritchard, who seemed to have no trouble recognizing her voice, and held her hand, stroking it fondly. Aunt Gail laughed, pushed back a tendril of hair from the girl's rounded cheeks, and her two daughters, the cousins Anna had grown-up vacationing with in Cape Cod, embraced her.

They had known. Grandma Pritchard, who went twice a week to the Methodist or Lutheran church service. On Easter, for the past forty years, Anna's mother went to Grandma's Pritchard's and planted tulips. The old lady would stroke her hand just as she stroked Lia's now. And Aunt Gail, she had been a sepia-tinted girl once too. She wore prairie dresses, teased her hair into a bump at the crown. In the old photographs, Anna's mother and Aunt Gail posed on beaches, straw hats and striped bikinis, arms draped around each other's waists. Of course. They had all known.

For a moment, Anna mistook the flutter in her throat for righteous indignation. But she had known too. Why are you telling me this, she had asked her father, and he told her it was a gift. He wanted to give her the thing she wanted most--a little sister. His eyes burned so blue and bright above his mustache. She did not correct him. Surely her father knew that she never wanted

a sister, that she liked being the only girl in a family of boys. She never had to share her room or her dolls, never had to shovel the driveway. Swimming pools, a center stage position at dance recitals, and satin panties--those were the things Anna wanted most at twelve years old.

Yet the secret gave her a dizzy, flushed sensation so acute that she confused it with pleasure. And no, no, she was not to blame--and one day her mother would forgive her--but the memory stuck. That false, greasy delight. It was with her still--the arrow of shame lodged in her throat. And she felt it quiver, like aspen leaves on an Arizona mountain, like Elvis singing *Love Me Tender*, like the world was splitting open and she was falling through the cracks.

Down the line, Anna's mother chatted to a white-haired man, oblivious. Outside, the snow was still falling, turning to ice. Lia's mother had not come. Dieu merci. And maybe later, Anna thought, Lia would go home, wake her mother, and whisper to her in Italian. Sei piena di grazia. Vera had not come, and Anita of the golden hair had not come either, to bid farewell to the rabbit-toothed boy she had once loved.

Anna saw Lia's eyes flick to the urn, to Anna's mother. Maybe Anna would go to her. Kiss her cheek, a cheek starred with a tiny mole, set just lower than Kyle's. Maybe she would almost say, as if it would fix things--when you were a little girl you had an old-fashioned typewriter and you sent me a letter, the spelling mistakes in the letter were painstakingly whited-out and corrected. You had a cat named Whiskers and you took tuba lessons. And maybe you waited day by day for the mailman, for an answer that never came. Je suis désolé, Anna would say. In her mother's basement, the letter was still tucked into an old box of memorabilia. Sometimes Anna came across it, and cried a little.

Yes, she would go to her sister. Take her hand, lead her to their father's ashes. Mom, she would say, this is Lia, and she is also Dad's daughter. And Anna's grandmother's ghost would whisper, Oh Elisabeth, don't be so bourgeois. *Faute de mieux le roi couche avec sa femme.*

Anna stepped out of line, met Lia's eyes, and took her place beside her mother. When Anna went to her half-sister, she would tell her the story of her father's deathbed, and revise the story again. Our father, she would say, died in an ice storm. He died on a divan in the atrium, illumined by the flames of twelve golden candelabras. Toby strumming *You were Always on My Mind* on his guitar, Kyle sipping drops of morphine from a cordial glass. Their father's eyes turned to crystals. He hallucinated that angels were rushing from the ceiling, that it was cracking open and in the sky, something was shining. Don't you remember, she would say to Lia, how I pirouetted beneath the atrium chandelier, and our mother wept behind a black lace veil, and you knelt by our father's side and stroked his hand as he slipped into the unknown? Don't you remember? +

LIKE SANDS THROUGH THE HOURGLASS

Sophie Sinclair was one of my first babysitters. The Sinclair family lived across the street, two lots west, in a house shrouded by evergreens that my mother said should be cut down. They blocked the sunlight, spawned mold on the roof. Trees like that might come alive, creep through the windows as my mother slept, and suffocate her with their straggly branches.

The Sinclair house was a raised ranch, just like nearly every other house on the block. Just like ours, nothing special. Actually, that's not true. Our house was better. My name, Charlotte, was drawn in the cement of our three-car garage, part of an addition including a new master bedroom suite. My mother had drawn all of our names and the date in the damp cement. Matthew above me, Keith below. 1982. Cody wasn't born until the following year, so his name wasn't there, which wasn't really fair, but what could you do? The die was cast, my mother said.

The Sinclairs had a flat lawn. The Gardiners had a flat lawn too, and a little ice skating pond. We had two hills. Our front yard billowed up to the house, flattening out just wide enough in back for my parents to build a brick patio. From the patio wall, the land rose behind into a second hill, to the woods and the swimming pool, nestled on the crest like a jewel.

My mother would have liked a flat lawn, and I admitted the idea had some allure. In the winter, we had to leave the Dodge Caravan parked at the bottom of the driveway. Back then, my father called on his car phone in the console to say he would be late, while my mother baked peach pies and our Thanksgiving turkey in a microwave oven purchased on sale at Sears for only seven hundred, forty-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents, and my brothers and I flipped the dial of

our new cable box between an astonishing twenty-one channels. But not every field of technology had reached such an apex. The problem of paper, handle-less grocery bags still stumped the world's most brilliant scientists and engineers, who must have spent many sleepless nights pondering the plight of the children. Oh, the children. The poor, suburban Connecticut children who lived on hills. Children like me, forced to haul groceries from the trunks of Dodge Caravans, who too often gambled on a daring hop between ice patches, and lost.

But we had the best sledding in the neighborhood, no question. And that back hill would have been prime territory for a Slip 'N Slide. I'd been heckling my father for months to buy us one, and though he had a soft spot for buying us presents, his refusal was adamant. Those were fancy toys for poor children, he said, hardly a step up from running through a sprinkler on hot days. I didn't need that garbage. I already had an in-ground pool, with an ice-blue slide. My father bought a solar cover instead, one of those plastic sheets that looked like blue bubble wrap, a very poor sort of consolation prize. I was dying to pop those luscious bubbles, to feel them squish and snap between my fingers, but my father said that doing so would destroy the cover, waste thousands or even millions of dollars, result in the drastic cooling of the top three inches of pool water, and possibly provoke a catastrophic nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Pop those bubbles, my father told us, and you'll get the belt.

We also had two stone fireplaces, and a finished basement where my father had his private office, with a coin counter in the desk, and a safe built into the wall. He was some sort of entrepreneur. Silent partnerships in one or two nightclubs. Arcade games, video poker machines that let you gamble for real but had a secret switch, in case the Feds raided, and vending machines. On Thursdays, an armored truck came to haul out big canvas sacks of cash. I asked my father about the square peepholes in the sides of the truck, and he said, well Charlie Cat--my

father always called me Charlie Cat, instead of Charlotte-- that's where they stick out the machine guns.

The Sinclairs didn't have an armored truck, but they had five daughters, milky voiced girls who sang in the choir at Our Lady of Lourdes. They were all teenagers, none beautiful. Sophie was the youngest. Aged fifteen, until she got older. She had pale hair I would have died for, cut short and ruined, fizzed about her face in a cherubic halo. After high school, she had vague aspirations to get an associate's degree at the university, but my father used to bring me along when he restocked the cigarette machines in the girls' dormitory. Those girls sipped cans of Tab and played pool in the common room. My father winked at them. Pool sharks, he said, and I got frightened, peeking at the green felted table for a dorsal fin. The girls sat on the edge and took their shots, long hair spilling to one side. I really didn't think Sophie would fit in there, unless she grew out her hair, and even then, she would not have been beautiful.

My mother was beautiful, uncommonly so, though I was too young to know it then. Theoretically, I knew that she was auburn haired, with gold static in her green eyes, and a face that I confused with the statue of the Virgin Mary in the nave above our church pew. But up close, in real life, my mother just looked like my mother. Like nothing. Like sculpted whipped cream, something cool and sweet that you wanted to eat endlessly, but with no particular color or shape.

I considered beauty the exclusive domain of teenaged girls. Up the hill, down the hill, lived Jessica Jossick, the prettiest girl on the block. Eyes lined electric blue, hair cut in feathers. Jessica babysat for us twice. The first time, she baked a box cake, frosted with marshmallow fluff. The second time she dipped my brother Keith's hand in warm water to make him wet the bed. In the morning my father slapped him. I felt bad for Keith, but I refused to admit Jessica

was the true culprit because once, when she was sunbathing on her front lawn, she waved me over. She showed me a love letter from the captain of the high school soccer team. From Nick, he wrote at the bottom. XXOO. What's that mean, I asked Jessica. The o's are hugs, she whispered, and the x's are kisses. I got shivery. I could not betray such a girl, a girl who wore halter tops and got kisses in the mail.

Sophie Sinclair never wore halter tops. She never wore Jordache Jeans. My best friend's sister, April Everett, had a sullen, fascinating scowl that lured a string of boyfriends driving Camaros and Mustangs, but Sophie didn't. She sang, but not as well as her sister June, and she could not tap dance.

Sophie Sinclair watched television. Soap operas, in the afternoon. I tried, in vain, to seduce her with our new cable box, the first one in the neighborhood. She was left cold by the promise of thrills, spills, chills, and romance on Cinemax. Sophie Sinclair did not want her MTV. She watched *The Young and The Restless*, then *Days of Our Lives*, then *General Hospital*. Sometimes she wheedled me into watching with her, even though my mother said soap operas were trash, fodder for lazy, illiterate housewives, for women who popped Halcion in the afternoons.

My mother had strong opinions. But at cocktail parties, she spoke in a soft voice. She admired the hostess's red mulch garden borders, even though red mulch made your yard look like the KMart parking lot, and she shrugged off murmured apologies for strings of Christmas lights still hanging from the shrubs in July, even though it was a cardinal sin to leave up your holiday decorations past Epiphany. Keep your opinions private, Charlie Cat, she told me. That was polite, not lying. You didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings.

Sometimes I agreed with my mother's opinions, and when I didn't I kept that private. When my mother was pregnant with Keith, she went back to graduate school to become a librarian. I never told her that I thought she wasn't she cut out for the job. Our town librarian, Mrs. Gross, had a square-tipped nose and let her pantyhose puddle around her ankles. My mother had a silver fox coat, a Valentine's Day gift from my father, and diamond earrings like miniature chandeliers. She painted watercolors. Sometimes, Mrs. Gross came upon me in the aisle alone, browsing for books about pioneer girls and orphans. She would brush close and pinch my arm on that tender spot inside, hard enough to bruise. My mother kept her nails short, buffed to a gloss. She wasn't a big pincher, but I didn't want her picking up any bad habits at the library. And I needed her at home to sew my leotards.

Lucky for me, my mother decided to put off in her career until my brothers and I had grown up a little. She stayed home, kept my father's account books. On Sunday mornings, my mother sat at the kitchen table in her white bathrobe, drinking tea with a splash of orange juice. She drew circles around stately colonials advertised in the real estate section, and later went into the yard, hunting down stray seedlings with her hatchet. Chop chop. Marble countertops. Chop chop. Stone wall fragments built three hundred years ago by farmers. Then she went out shopping, went to ceramics class, or to volunteer at Ashlar Masonic Care, or wherever it was mothers went when you were left home with Sophie Sinclair.

Sophie talked on the telephone, stretching the coils of the avocado-green cord down the hall into the bathroom. I thought I could make my escape, dash with my brothers through the sliding glass doors, hop over the little brick garden wall at the place where it joined the splintery wood deck rather than taking the long way around, and make it up the hill to the pool. But

Sophie caught me by the tail of my shirt as I was creeping to my bedroom to change and put one hand over the phone receiver. Wouldn't it be more fun if us girls stayed inside, she said, that wood saw whining in her voice. C'mon Charlie Cat.

I did not think it would be more fun. At eight years old, I didn't know much about Halcion beyond the fact that they were grainy blue and kept on the top shelf of my grandmother's medicine cabinet, but I knew that soap operas were boring. Watching one was like growing up-- it took forever for something exciting to happen.

I had better things to do. It was July, the month you dreamt of waiting at the bus stop before the sun rose, icicles freezing in your damp ponytail, through all the stultifying hours working out long division problems and practicing your cursive. Outside, gold dust glazed the grasses and the sky, and up and down the streets, I heard the murder shrieks of kids in summer.

Even in winter, I had better things to do than watch soap operas with Sophie Sinclair. On snow days, my brothers and I waded through the drifts with our plastic toboggans and began the slow, laborious process of tamping a sled path. Not just any sled path. A spectacular downhill racetrack that sped you from the pool fence, the wind flapping the hood of your purple parka as you zipped through your mother's frozen garden and skyrocketed off the two-foot retaining wall drop, a spray of ice pebbles stinging your cheeks, praying that you would nail a perfect landing that zoomed you down the front hill into terminal velocity, ducking to avoid the whip of forsythia hedges shielding you from Jeanine Piscelli's prying, piggy eyes, straight into the middle of the street, where you crossed the finish line.

And if it was raining, I could be playing with my best friend Mandy Everett in the Sinclair's puddle. That was the only special thing about Sophie's house, and really that puddle was public property. On rainy days, the water pooled in a dip in the pavement near their curb,

expanding into a shining black lagoon. You could tap-dance in your red galoshes or stand still in the narrow fjord near the storm gutter, the rivulets forking past your rubber toes, and admire the way water seemed to know just where to go, always seeking the lowest ground. Down, down, into the gutter.

You could kneel on the rusted grate, cup your hands in the streaming gap, and listen to the dripping, subterranean echo. Down there--where the teenagers flicked their cigarette butts, where the sparrow fledglings got trapped and luffed broken wings--down there anything might be hiding. Spanish doubloons. Rats, alligators. The humanoid Frog People, eyes skinned over, went slinking into the street after dark. Slinking and slunking over flat, marshy lawns. Melding into the gloom of the Sinclair's overgrown evergreens.

At night, I slipped from bed, cracked my window. The Sinclair sisters shared bedrooms and got to stay up late. Sometimes, I thought I heard them singing hymns. Milky voices mingled with wheezing, amphibious sighs. Their pinkish bedroom lights blossomed through the trees where the Frog People hid, staring pop-eyed through the slats in their blinds. Waiting, though for what I did not know. Those poor girls. Girls with too many trees, unprotected by hills. One day they would get licked to death, eaten like flies.

And on any given day, rather than watching soap operas with Sophie Sinclair, I could have been reading *Jane Eyre*. I read for pleasure. I could have leafed through my monthly subscription of *Seventeen Magazine*, learning how to alleviate menstrual cramps that I didn't have yet, though some days I pretended I did, and took to my bed. It's cramps again, I told my mother with a saturated sigh, and then asked her to bring me a hot water bottle for the pain.

Sophie thought reading was a waste of time. Her mother was a secretary, old and silver-haired, and though I pitied Sophie for the stigma of having old parents, I rather liked Mrs.

Sinclair. She had hint of the Quebec Lowlands still slurring her soft speech. She minded her own business, and on Halloween she gave out Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. And my mother said being a secretary was good work for a certain kind of woman. I asked my mother if secretarial work would be good for a girl like Sophie, and she said yes, definitely, and then, don't you dare repeat that to Sophie.

Sophie was a sensitive girl. My brother's and I were always making her cry. Her mouth would get all smushy, and I would almost laugh, then feel bad and have to come up with something on the spot to soothe her--like, oh Sophie, your eyes are shining just like Eve Donovan's when she was rescued from that slasher--and she would brighten. And I could see, as she held the tail of my shirt and my brothers abandoned me, that her mouth was getting smushy. Okay, okay, I said, and relented.

Our television was in the family room, not in the formal sunken living room with the satiny white sofas and the baby grand piano, where you were only allowed on special occasions. Even then, you had to slip off your shoes, tip-toe over the white wall-to-wall carpeting and be careful not to leave fingerprints on the mirrored tables. For holiday parties, your mother would let you get dressed up in her sequined patchwork vest, and your father would get you a little satin bowtie and have you mix drinks for guests at the cocktail bar. Seven and Sevens, Bay Breezes, White Zinfandel Spritzers. No Bloody Mary's, because of stains, and no television, because that was tacky, unless you had a carved armoire to hide it in, which we didn't.

Sophie drew the curtains, enclosing me in that Sinclair gloom, a dim mimicking soap opera world. On daytime television, the sun never shone even outdoors, and the characters cried and died and were resurrected among the potted palms, in rooms that seemed coated in a silvery-grey film.

I sprawled on my belly on the carpet. Ankles crossed, one cheek resting on my fist, glancing from the television to Sophie. She curled up on the sofa, doing her best to fill me in on the tragic, wicked, beautiful lives of her favorite characters. Bo and Hope. Luke and Laura. Men revving motorcycles over the train tracks, greasing straight into the hearts of girls who were too young and too rich. Those girls were so tired of being cooped up inside. Poor Laura was switched at birth, or something like that, and then maybe she joined a cult, and eventually married Luke. Sophie said their love story was just so romantic. Luke raped Laura at a disco when she was a teenager--forced himself on her, as Sophie phrased it, her voice dropping to a faltering whisper--but that was all just a misunderstanding. He was Laura's soul mate. She was supposed to marry another man, but Luke kidnapped her on her wedding day. Laura was always getting kidnapped, forced to live in caves or monasteries. Anyway, she married Luke. They solved mysteries together. They bought a southern plantation, and Laura spent the rest of her life dressed up in hoopskirts, pretending to be Scarlett O'Hara. Or maybe that was Bo and Hope. I don't know, I wasn't listening very closely.

During the commercial break, I asked Sophie if she thought Slip 'N Slides were only good toys for poor children. I examined the TV screen shrewdly. True, I had a shiny swimsuit, and the commercial girl didn't. Mine was silvery-grey, glittering like the barrel of my father's handgun. He bought it for me at Macy*s, overruling my mother when she argued that the V-neck and side cut-outs were much too sexy for an eight-year-old. Don't be ridiculous, he told my mother, nothing could make an eight-year-old look sexy, which I considered a bittersweet triumph.

But the commercial girl's swimsuit was perfectly sufficient. She slid across a flat, lush lawn, and had a father in a crisp yet casual collared shirt, no Burt Reynolds mustache or gold chains glinting on his bare chest.

Sophie gave a huffy sigh at my question and answered pretty much the same as my father. You already have a pool. Don't be such a brat, Charlie Cat, she told me, and turned the television volume up.

Shush. Nikki Newman was on. Secretly, I rather liked her too. She had spongy gold hair, like angel food cake. I bet she used Breck Shampoo. Aqua Net. Ankles still crossed, letting my toes drop lightly against the brick platform of the woodstove. I bit my nails and Sophie told me to stop. Nikki was a teenaged stage performer when she first met Victor. She emerged from behind a tinsel curtain, dancing to wild applause in a sparkling silver dress, coiled in a crimson feather boa that made my arms prickle icy-hot. Sometimes Sophie started weeping for no reason, then whispered to me that it was her time of month. She said I wouldn't understand, but when Nikki Newman unzipped her silver dress, revealing a jewel-encrusted fringed mini-dress that matched her boa, I thought I did understand, and that I too would dissolve into weeping.

Red feather boa topped my Christmas for three years running. At night, I soothed myself to sleep, stroking the satin border of my blanket to my cheeks, grazing it along the tender inner flesh of my arm. And I thought, how soft feathers like that must have felt against your bare skin. How bright the crimson.

We had another babysitter, a floppy-haired boy named Nick Caruso. The Caruso family lived through the woods. You went down the mossy path, pretending you were one of the children from the framed picture in your bedroom, skipping through the wood-flowers, trailed by

a transparent guardian angel, her wings melting into the sunbeams. The path forked. You went south, rounding the bend, zigzagging down the dusty trail between the boulders, tickling your hand with lichens, and came out in the backyard.

The Caruso house was not a raised ranch. It was not technically on our block. The roof barreled, and the windows bugled, and the trees had been sternly banished to the perimeter of the property, except for the crabapple. In the springtime, pink blossoms furred the branches. The fruit was pale green, tiny and wormy, not suitable for eating. I bit one once, when my brother Matthew dared me, and he said my face looked just like Sophie Sinclair's that time Keith colored on the back of her math homework.

The crabapple petals fell too soon and left a sticky gunk on the lawn. My father said that tree should be cut down, and my mother said he was a brute, she would never allow it. She deemed flowering trees special, like the birch and willow, and therefore under her protection. My mother would have liked a tree like that. We used to have a peach tree. My grandmother gave it to my mother as a gift for Cody's christening. It blew down during Hurricane Gloria, rotted at the core, but that was only fair, since no one had given peach trees to me or Keith or Matthew when we were born.

My mother and Mrs. Caruso were close friends, and I thought it was because they both liked dried flowers and French novels. Mrs. Caruso had the look of an elegant ostrich. She ran the florist shop downtown, and I would have enjoyed my visits there if Mrs. Caruso wasn't so selfish with her flowers. She slapped my hand once when I dove at a bucket of creamy peonies, the tips glowing pink. They were for a wedding, she said. My finger oils would brown the petals. She made my flower coronet for my first communion, and I almost forgave her when I saw

myself in the mirror, wreathed in baby roses and rosemary sprigs. Like a little Ophelia, my mother said.

Mr. Caruso was possibly the best dad in the neighborhood. He was twinkly, like Santa Claus, and smelled like cedar chips. His mustache was thicker and blacker than my father's, and he always insisted that you eat a popsicle. Mr. Caruso built cabinets and furniture, stuff even my family couldn't afford. My mother called him a master craftsman.

In their kitchen, running a half wall, there was an aviary. Mr. Caruso built it by hand. Pale wood, Palladian arches, and a cupola. Mrs. Caruso kept songbirds, canaries and finches with tufts of periwinkle at the breast. She was selfish with her birds too. You had to make your father take you to the pet store at the mall if you wanted to hold a bird, to feel that flutter in the pit of your stomach as you watched that throbbing little heart, a heart no bigger than an apple seed, downy feathers grazing against the veins of your wrist. Mrs. Caruso wouldn't let you hold hers. You might squeeze too hard. In truth, maybe you would not be able to resist.

I really wasn't sure why Mr. Caruso had ever married her. She must have had some redeeming qualities. She called me Lady Charlotte, and I liked that, even though my brother Matthew told me it wasn't a compliment. She was also an identical triplet. My father said there was about a one in a million chance of that, and I said maybe a three in a million, and he haw-hawed hard enough to spit out his beer. I wanted ask Mrs. Caruso so many triplet questions. If her sisters were caught in an avalanche, would she be able to psychically sense the danger? Had they played triplet pranks on their parents as kids? I didn't need to ask whether she was the good triplet, or the evil one, or the slightly more beautiful but stupid one. That much was obvious. And I never asked Mrs. Caruso her opinion on the great Slip 'N Slide debate, because I already knew she thought I was a brat.

I asked Sophie Sinclair if she thought Mrs. Caruso was an imposter. Maybe it was really one of her sisters who had been engaged to Mr. Caruso, but on their wedding night Mrs. Caruso tricked her sister, drugged her with morphine, and switched places with her at the altar. Maybe that was the secret she had been harboring all of these years, the guilty burden that made her heart shrivel to a grain of birdseed--but Sophie said, don't be stupid, and called me Char. Don't be stupid, Char. Unforgivable.

The Caruso's had two children, a boy and a girl. Vanessa was the elder, about the age of Sophie Sinclair. She babysat for us once, and we played a game where we took the newel posts off my parents' bed and tossed them in a pot. They were shiny black dragon eggs, and Vanessa the Witch cackled and stirred them with a wooden spoon until they hatched. That was a good game. But for the most part, she was dreamy and withdrawn, and we maintained a mutual disinterest. There was nothing special about Vanessa, except for her hair. She had a cascade of curls, black and shining like the dragon eggs. Once, sitting on my front steps, I saw her walking home from the school bus stop, her dark hair tinted the shade of ripe plums. Vanessa is going through a wild streak, my mother said, and I felt that freezing-hot sensation creeping beneath my arms.

For my ninth birthday, I begged my father to buy me a box of Pazzaz Sheer Color Wash, and he gave in on the condition that I wouldn't tell my mother until it was already done. I chose a color called Sheer Burgundy, enflaming the reddish tints in my hair, adding a satisfying purplish sheen. When my mother saw it, she clapped her hand over her mouth and gasped. I'm having a wild streak, I told her. My father said, don't worry, it'll wash out, and finally she shrugged and said actually, it looked pretty cool.

The younger Caruso, Nick, was thirteen, also destined to grow older. He had floppy brown hair, brown eyes, and an endearingly crooked smile. My mother told me that Nick used to pop through the woods to visit when he was a little boy. Nick was eight when my parents built the brick patio. My mother said he knelt beside her in the mud--asking, what is this, and what are you doing--and she let him spoon the putty on the trowel.

He brought my mother little gifts. An abandoned bird's nest, when he was very young, and later a string of pearl beads for Mother's Day, and a little birdhouse, trim painted yellow, that he made in his father's woodshop. On her birthday, a little crystal prism bunny. A slight pink tint to the nose, delicate glass ears slicked back. She set it on her window sill, and sometimes in the afternoons I crept into her bedroom and held my arms in the path of refracting rainbows, letting the colors tint my skin. When he was twelve, Nick gave my mother a thick wooden heart, the crimson stain darkening in the grain, carved with the word *love*.

Love, a word etched in candy hearts you slipped in your best friend's desk, the warm, placid affection lavished on a My Little Pony named Seashell, on your kitten, on Cinderella in her blue dress waiting for you outside her castle at Story Land in New Hampshire. You rode up the hill in a glass pumpkin coach, and let Cinderella enfold you in her arms, sky-blue taffeta swishing against your cheek. An hour later, you begged your father to take you up the hill a second time, popped out of the pumpkin coach, and said, hi, it's me again! You loved Cinderella so much, your mother said.

Nick Caruso gave me presents too. A pack of butterfly stickers, when he accidentally got the wrong gift bag at Amy Martin's boy-girl birthday party. A copper penny, and some glow-in-the-dark jelly bracelets he found near the bus stop. Mike Corilla, known as Mike the Gorilla, once dangled me by my ankles over the high railing of the Everett's back deck, and Nick Caruso

punched him in the head. Or maybe I just dreamt he did, at night when I stroked the satin edge of my coverlet.

Eventually, my parents decided to put him on the payroll. Even at the tender age of thirteen, and at a pay rate of two-dollars-an-hour for four children, Nick Caruso displayed a brilliance and acumen nearly extinct in modern childcare providers. By his side, my brothers and I scouted the sixty acres of forest behind the pool. The Big Rock. The Big Far Away Rock. The abandoned chicken coops in the beech grove.

Out on the grassy swells of the gas pipeline, you had to be careful. Punks from Masuk High, one town over, might be creeping around, looking for trouble. Legends existed of a nefarious dirt-bike gang that mowed down little kids on the pipeline. They wouldn't think twice. You'd be alone. Bleeding from the mouth, dragging your mangled body through the blackberry brambles, praying that you might see your mother's face just one last time. But you would die. So poignantly. Among the graveyard of old Christmas trees, your head pillowed on fallen pine needles. And as you died, a cackle and a cry would rise over the screaming engines, and the last words you ever heard would be: *Masuk Panthers rule!*

My brothers and I were prohibited from entering Nick's room when we were over, but sometimes I peeked. The summer that I was nine, I knocked boldly, and stuck my head inside. His bedroom walls were papered with band posters and Lamborghini ads and magazine centerfolds. Nick was on his bed, ankles crossed, and pulled one ear of his headphones off. Do you think Slip N' Slides are garbage, I asked, and he said, naw, they're awesome, and you guys have the perfect backyard for one. I expected this practical outlook from Nick. Really, I just wanted a peek at the girls on his wall. Girls with kohl-rimmed eyes threw back their teased hair and let their mouths hang open. They dressed in cut-off white tank tops exposing the undersides

of their breasts, in plunging V-neck swimsuits with high-cut legs, in bath bubble foam bikinis, hair still dripping wet.

My best friend Mandy Everett once gave me a poster of Kirk Cameron from *Growing Pains*, lounging in a jean jacket, collar popped, but my father made me take it down. Secretly, I was relieved. I didn't want to be impolite to Mandy, since she was eight months older than me, but I didn't have a crush on Kirk Cameron. I wasn't like Jenna Ball, who lived two blocks down and covered her walls with teen heartthrobs. That was tacky, my mother said, like pendant necklaces over turtlenecks.

Now, I will confess that when I was very little, I slept with a magazine cover featuring ET the extraterrestrial and his best friend Elliot, and I would take it out from under my pillow and kiss him. And once, Mandy Everett and Carrie James peer-pressured me into letting them call the Corey Haim fan hotline from the phone in my bedroom. It cost \$4.99 per minute, and there was a one in a thousand chance that Corey would answer the phone for real. He didn't. Mandy and Carrie wouldn't even let me share the receiver to listen to Corey's prerecorded message. Sorry I missed your call, but I'm out hunting vampires on the set of my new movie. Love ya!

Tormented by guilt, I later confessed to my mother and offered her to let her rescind two weeks of my allowance to cover the cost, an offer she mercifully declined. I used the money to buy a birthstone ring from *Claire's Boutique* instead.

My father did not allow me to pin things on my walls. Not even with scotch tape. I considered the interior walls of my closet, behind the mirrored doors, to be a loophole in this law.

There was one paltry picture of Corey Haim pasted there, but beyond that exception, it was pictures of girls. Girls cut with craft scissors from my issues of *Seventeen*, and my mother's *French Vogue*. Girls in neon-blocked swimsuits with front zippers, girls in vinyl go-go boots, holding pink suitcases, girls in tulle and taffeta spangled prom dresses and fingerless lace gloves. What was the point of posting pictures of dreamy boys? You could never be one of them. But you could be homecoming queen. You could drive to Malibu with the top of your best friend's Corvette rolled down, and then Corey Haim would get *your* answering machine when he called. Sorry I missed your call, but right now I'm busy resting my cheeks on the flanks of a Palomino pony. Love ya!

On weekend mornings, when my mother and his mother hunted flea markets for carnival glass and vintage birdcages, Nick Caruso showed up bright and early. Wake up Charlie Cat, he sang from the kitchen. He whipped up some chocolate-chip pancakes and fried ham that was best, he said, if you used the crispy edges to mop up your syrup. And oh no, we did not wait the required thirty minutes before swimming, though we knew that so many children our age had thus perished from drowning cramps. Just one bite of an ice-cream sandwich. Just one careless mother who let her children cannonball twenty-eight minutes and forty-two seconds later. That was all it took. The moment you hit the water you would seize right up. Paralyzed, but somehow still thrashing. Your poor mother forced to bear witness from the cement deck, cursing the gods and her slow-running watch, tears spotting the shimmery blue string-bikini she purchased on a cruise ship to the Bahamas, realizing that intervention was futile. By the time she managed to ford those two-and-a-half feet of dangerously splashing pool water, risking deactivating the curls of her new perm, you would be gone.

Nick taught us special breath exercises to prevent these fatal swim cramps. He taught us to high jump from the top of the pool slide. He instructed me and Matthew to each grab a corner of the solar cover and pull it smooth over the surface, and then we jumped in on top. That was a great game. The water surged in, forming blue sinkholes, the plastic bubbles squishing but not popping beneath your feet. Those bubbles were hardier than they looked. We played another game, called Space Station, which involved swimming underneath the solar cover, searching for the blue domes shaped at intervals where you could come up for air. And then there was Tsunami, no solar cover necessary. Nick rocked the inflatable life raft to create enormous tidal waves, sloshing gallons of water over the rim. My father was bewildered by the chronically low water level of the pool. He hired a scuba diver to search for a hole in the liner, but she found nothing. She didn't tell my father, it's probably that rascally pack of kids you've got here, though she gave us a piercing look. My brothers and I kept the truth of our pool shenanigans private. That was polite.

Despite the glories of our swimming pool, I was still haunted by longing for a Slip 'N Slide. I lay awake at night, plotting. The previous summer, the Baronowski's cat had given birth to a litter of kittens. There was an orange and white striped runt, and when I cupped him in my hands at the Baronowski's annual barbeque, that velvety, little pansy flower face induced a temporary insanity. I would die if I did not have that kitten. I would die. My father said no. I asked my mother and she said, ask your father, and when I brought her the kitten from the garage, she melted. Just keep asking him, she whispered, as if I had different plans.

Nobly, I forsook the thrill of riding ATVs with the boys, spitting up the sandy turf of the Baronowski's big backyard, and the naughty pleasure of sneaking leftover drops of White Zinfandel with Mandy Everett from our mothers' wine glasses. Instead, I devoted the next six

hours to badgering my father until he gave in. I named the kitten Pittypat. He slept in my bed, curled at the crown of head.

But when it came to the Slip 'N Slide, these tried and true methods proved fruitless. I grew mopey and tragic, trying to make my eyes shine with unshed tears, like Erica Kane from *General Hospital*. My occasional imaginary monthly cramps came bimonthly. While my brothers whooped and hollered in the swimming pool, I took to sitting beneath the willow tree near the property line. The trees thinned, exposing a clear view into Jeanine Piscelli's backyard. She had an above-ground pool, inferior to ours. She also had a Slip 'N Slide.

God, she was dumb. She was the kind of girl who wouldn't get her head wet when she swam because a little water up the nose made her cry. Her lawn was flat. Her brown pigtails bobbed as she ran and belly-flopped on the bright yellow plastic. She ran so slow she only slid half-way down the track, but she whooped and hollered even louder than my brothers. That was just for my benefit. She was a selfish girl, like Mrs. Caruso with her flowers and birds. She must have known how much I wanted a Slip 'N Slide, and oh, how it burned, after being the first girl on the block with a Cabbage Patch doll, the first with diamond chip earrings, the first with a VCR, to now see myself fallen so low. Chop chop. Down, down, into the gutter.

Then my babysitter, Nick Caruso, came through the eastern path in the woods. He flopped down in the grass and lounged beside me like an infinitely more handsome Kirk Cameron. Charles, he said. He always called me Charles when we were about to have a serious man-to-man talk. Charles, this has got to stop. He plucked a blade of grass, chewed it, and pushed his hair back. I've got a plan, he said.

First, he went to the garden where my mother was deadheading her roses and crouched down beside her in the soil. In the sunshine, her hair glimmered like it was tinted with Pazazz

Sheer Copper. She had a little daisy tucked behind her ear. While they spoke, I searched the grass for a daisy of my own, but my mother must have taken the last one. I had to settle for a buttercup. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but my mother nodded and smiled, and if my life was an episode of *The Young and the Restless*, they would have been devising a secret plan to kidnap Jeanine Piscelli, force her into a nunnery on a Greek island, and to forge a legally binding note stating that in the event of her disappearance, she bequeathed her Slip 'N Slide to me.

Then Nick raided my father's garage, returning with a box of black Hefty lawn bags, duct tape, and my mother's Xacto knife. He worked late into the night, and the next day presented me with my very own custom-made Slip 'N Slide.

The slide unfurled down the hill, secured with tent stakes through the grommet holes punched in the hem. My brother Matthew dragged the hose over the wall, up the hill, and let the water run full blast. My Slip 'N Slide gleamed black and gorgeous, like Maui Barbie's ankle-length hair before April Everett's boyfriend chopped it off, like the ravens that roosted in Mrs. Caruso's crabapple tree, like iridescent oil slicks that streaked down the driveway in the rain. You're a master craftsman, I told Nick.

And then I slid. That hill was so steep you didn't even need a running start. You dove like a starling, rivulets of hose water icing your hot skin, slicking you past the rock garden and the willow tree, into a triumphant hollow where the water puddled in the grass. You could have slid forever. You were so close.

My father gave us the silent treatment at dinner, bits of corn-on-the-cob dangling from his mustache. He didn't invite me with him to fill the machines at the New Colony IV diner, where each booth had its own jukebox, and the waitress brought me free root-beer floats. He

sulked for two days, mumbling that if that Nick Caruso kid didn't straighten out and stay away from his Hefty bags, my father wasn't going to let him babysit us anymore, and he would just keep that two dollars an hour for himself, because you know what, money doesn't grow on trees. And he could keep his carved jewelry boxes and wooden hearts and the rest of that junk too.

His shadow darkened the patio bricks. He put his hand on his hips, gold chains shining. We were wasting water. Murdering the grass. We were a bunch of trash bag kids. I hopped over the garden wall to the deck, dripping, and he broke his silence. Don't you have any pride, he asked, and called me Charlotte Marie. Pride goes before a fall, dad, I said. A waterfall. He didn't laugh, and I didn't blame him because it wasn't very clever and really had nothing to do with the situation. I just liked waterfalls.

The next morning, he tossed a box on the living room floor, and the commercial girl in her inferior swimsuit smiled at me gleefully from the laminated cardboard. A real, certifiable, Whamo Incorporated Slip 'N Slide. Finally. However, his capitulation put me in a delicate position. I already had a custom-made Slip 'N Slide, constructed by a local master craftsman. It was like comparing our baby grand piano to Jeanine Piscelli's Casio Keyboard. One was obviously higher quality, but the other had a cheap, thrilling appeal.

There was a thunderstorm, so I had time to think. I went to my bedroom, locked the door, and steadied my nerves by giving my hair a hundred strokes with my silver-plated brush. Then I lay in my bed, rubbing the satin edge of my coverlet with nervous, fretful strokes. My mother said the Piscellis were Philistines, incapable of distinguishing gold from mica. But I could imagine Jeanine gossiping about me to her imaginary friends. Charlie Fairchild doesn't even have a real Slip 'N Slide, she would say. All she has is a bunch of Hefty bags. How maniacally they would laugh. Thunder cracked, and I shrieked. Scaredy-cat, Matthew shouted from his

room, and I called back, shut up. I went to the closet. That was the safest place in a storm, besides the bathtub or the basement. I yanked the light chain and knelt, gazing up at the girls on the walls, praying for guidance. Those girls slung chinchilla fur coats over their gym clothes. Hair streaked with purple and pink. If you were one of them, you could pair diamond tennis bracelets with blue jeans, walk your pet leopards on a gold chain down 5th Avenue, or dig construction site trenches in silver lamé hot pants and hard hats. They were the quintessential modern women--girls who had it all.

You could have it all. Sophie Sinclair's soap operas and Nick Caruso's Slip 'N Slide. A bird in the hand and two around your neck.

When the storm cleared, I informed Nick Caruso of my plans. Charles, he said, you're a baby genius. I'm not a baby, I said, but thanks. We staked the new Slip N' Slide, beginning at the end of the first one, creating an extension track. The biggest, baddest custom made Slip 'N Slide Plus Extension Track in town. Scientifically engineered by Whamo Inc. and my babysitter to withstand friction, zippers, stray rocks, and golden retrievers. Then Nick one-upped me, by incorporating the swimming pool and some of my mother's tanning oil filched from her bathroom. I changed into my old blue bikini with the off-the-shoulder ruffles--not even for a Slip 'N Slide Plus Extension Track would I have risked staining my gunmetal grey swimsuit--and we all lubed up. That would make us slide faster, Nick said. It was physics.

You started at base of the pool slide. Someone, probably Cody because he was the youngest, was in charge of dipping towels in the pool and wiping down the slide to keep it damp. Climb the ladder, swoosh down the slide, stroke madly to the shallow end and lurch out on your hands and knees. Run down past the puckered mountain laurel blossoms that your mother said were special because they were Connecticut's state flower, kicking up dust that mingled with the

scent of hot cement and mineral oil and chlorine. Dive again, like a swan. Full of grace. And then you slid. Faster and faster, every naked, oily bit of flesh stroking the satiny plastic and the Hefty bags, greasing you straight into terminal velocity, to the speed of light. Close your eyes against the starry spray of water, and warp past the long, slow little-girl years of being told to put your hands over your eyes during movie kissing scenes. This time you make it.

Open your eyes. Charlie Cat, aged sixteen, having another wild streak. Eyes lined with black liquid, hair dyed blue and green. Your father in prison for shady dealings, your mother in crying in her closet, the third safest place in a storm. Among the ghosts of old taffeta party dresses, her auburn hair pillowed on the silver fox coat your father gave her for Valentine's day.

Don't worry, it would all work out in the end. Your mother marries Mr. Caruso after Mrs. Caruso dies in a freak avalanche. Out beneath the crabapple tree, you dig up a box only to be opened upon her death, and inside find a document bequeathing you her aviary. Dear Charlie Cat, the note reads, you weren't really a brat. Please forgive me for that time I slapped your hand. When your father gets out on parole, he sends you expensive presents--diamond tennis bracelets and a pony, and you assure him that you still love him almost as much as Papa Caruso.

Or Charlotte Marie, aged twenty-two, dancing onstage in a feather boa. Skin glitter-dipped, twirling around a golden pole. Snorting bumps of white powder like--wait, no, no. That's not right. Go back to the top of the hill and try again.

Charlie Cat, aged sixteen. Homecoming queen. Crowned in rhinestones, waving from the Under the Sea themed float, perched on a seashell throne. The postman complains to your mother about the burden of delivering so many love letters, and your father tells him to shut up and do his job. We can't help it if our daughter is popular, he says. Just look at that auburn hair, it's shinier than Jessica Jossick's. For the first time, you will openly disagree with your mother. I

prefer Yale, you tell her, and she says, why would anyone ever choose New Haven over Boston. For the drama, mother, you would say. For the drama.

Charlotte Marie, aged twenty-two, famous actress and marine biologist. You will float down the flat lawn of the Fox Hill Inn in an exact replica of the dress Hope wore when she married Bo--tulle and satin and white flower appliques, dripping with crystals, and you will take Nick Caruso as your lawfully wedded husband. The age difference won't matter now that you're grown up. Unfortunately, you will fall off the cruise ship on your honeymoon to Bermuda, get stranded for a few weeks on a deserted island in your shimmery blue string bikini, and suffer amnesia. But don't worry, that will come right too.

And if at any time you change your mind, close your eyes again and go back. To a Slip 'N Slide Plus Extension Track, in a yard with two hills. I hit the finish line, my triumphant cries echoing through the trees at the property line, where Jeanine Piscelli sulked in her backyard. Her mouth looked all smushy, like Sophie Sinclair's, like she had eaten a mouthful of the Caruso's crabapples.

Later in the evening, the mosquitos buzzed, and a neighborhood game of flashlight freeze tag beamed light on the willow trees and the sewer grate, and the Frog People shrunk back into the gloom. Cody fell and scraped his knee, Keith started to sneeze and went in early. And Matthew loaded his BB gun with the hard orange berries dripping in bunches from the trees, and shot Jeanine Piscelli in the forehead. She spent the next twenty years in a coma. No, she didn't, but she went home wailing. And at the top of the street, on another hill, I climbed on the handlebars of Nick Caruso's Mongoose. Down, down, we cruised, knowing just where to go. Streaming through the green, translucent twilight, past the Sinclair's flat lawn and the celestial

harmony of five daughters singing hymns. Past a house just like ours, not to be envied, receding into evergreens that should have been cut down, but were not. +

SOMEWHERE WEST OF UTOPIA

Please don't ask me to be a bridesmaid, Adriane begged when Willa called to say she was getting married, but Willa asked anyway. She promised that the bridesmaids would wear gold lamé mini-dresses, and her wedding veil would be crowned with deer antlers, and the ceremony would be held on a ranch in Texas, and there would be river-swimming, so Adriane relented.

She flew to San Antonio in October, at the end of a stubborn, lingering summer. The city was not what she expected. She had imagined a large-scale model of the Greyhound Bus Station in St. Augustine--stucco walls and red-tiled roofs dulled to ochre by tinted bus windows--or something like the mission church outside of Tucson--Virgin Mary dolls gussied up in blue satin, adobe towers, prairie dogs.

Willa picked her up from the airport, thinner than she had been in college, her mop of golden-brown curls grown out. They had met as undergraduates, at a tiny private school up in the Arizona pine forests. Adriane was twenty-seven, a late bloomer, a refugee from a long, dull relationship back in Connecticut, where she had grown up. Willa was five years younger, but they bonded over bubble-gum martinis and free hot dogs at a deserted bar during a snowstorm.

Junior year, when she was between apartments, Adriane spent the end of the spring semester crashing at Willa's. Beyond the bedroom window, the scent of curdled milk and rotten banana peels wafted from the dumpster, and in the room, your feet never touched the carpet. The floor was a terrain of rolling hills, composed of plastic candy wrappers and chip bags, notebooks and old term papers. Each morning, Willa excavated down to the sediment layer of soiled panties and sequined jumpers and thrift store sweaters--everyone at their college, no matter how sizable

their trust fund, dressed in thrift store clothing. God, that room was disgusting. And yet, Adriane remembered those weeks glazed with a sort of star sheen. The Heartless Bastards playing on the stereo, Adriane propped cross-legged on the king-sized bed, wire-sculpting the appendages of life-sized Marie Antoinette replicas. Willa hula-hooping atop the detritus, flopping down beside her with a longing sigh. She was the queen of longing sighs and exaggerated eye rolls. They guzzled Dr. Pepper and fifths of Evan Williams, tossing the empty bottles on the floor, and slept together in the big bed. Sometimes just to tease her, Adriane poked Willa's shoulder, and Willa would say, stop it Adriane.

On the curb of the San Antonio International Airport, Willa gave a disgusted sigh and said, you can hug me if you want to Adriane, and Adriane gave her a little la-di-da smile and said, no I don't want to. She loaded her bags in the trunk, and Willa rounded the bend, pulling out onto the freeway. Freeway, not highway, that's what you said here. On Adriane's phone GPS map, San Antonio was a spider's web. The lanes tangled, circling past strip plazas and chain restaurants, neon signs streaking the dark, balmy night.

San Antonio looked like any city in the southwest. Not much different than Phoenix. In Phoenix, nothing rose but the heat. Nothing was redeemed. That dark bright city. Adriane used to shuttle down there on the weekends, on Spring Break and during Fall Intercession, make her rent money giving lap dances at the strip clubs. She rented a room at the Days Inn on Thomas. In the pool courtyard, feral parrots roosted in the lemon trees, and down the block, the meth hookers picked knee scabs and spoke with one hand shielding their mouths.

Once, a man followed Adriane to her room. His tee-shirt was stained, his nails filthy. She was wearing Lulu Lemon yoga pants, a high ponytail. At work, customers called her the ideal girl-next-door. Fresh-faced and wholesome.

You wanna have a good time, the man asked, and held out two greasy twenties. That hot arrow of pride spiked up her spine and starched her jaw, flooding her tongue with the taste of pickles. Before she could catch herself, she blurted out, forty dollars, are you fucking kidding me, and slammed the door.

She felt ashamed, then got used to it. Down there, you lived on cash tips and Roxicets, on chili dogs from 7-11, and you smoked cigarettes right out the front door of Centerfold's, in your unwashed satin-lycra bandeau top and booty shorts. Gazing at the heat lightning, praying for the rains to come.

I'm starving, Adriane told Willa, and Willa suggested Lucy's Diner. Open twenty-four hours, closed for maintenance. The girls went downtown instead, got barbeque brisket sandwiches. Adriane ordered three rounds of silver tequila shots, and Willa said, we have to be up early, let's pace ourselves. In the morning, they would head down to the cabin and treehouse resort, for the bachelorette party. Two days there, then two days at the Flying L Ranch & Resort.

And that's where the ceremony is being held, Adriane asked. Willa rolled her eyes, and said no, Adriane, the ceremony is on my aunt's ranch in Bandera, we're just staying at the Flying L, I've told you that a thousand times, and Adriane said, well, it's confusing.

After eating, they strolled downtown. The only stucco wall Adriane encountered enclosed The Alamo, just a dim blur in the shadows. She had imagined The Alamo on a desert plain,

among the blowing tumbleweeds, but Willa rolled her eyes and said, of course it's in the middle of the city, Adriane, it's the reason there *is* a city.

Above, a huge neon sign glowed on the rooftop of the Hotel Robert E. Lee, promising air conditioning. The buildings were old, the stones water-stained, the darkened shop windows hazed pink and gaseous-green. Down the street, Willa was ten paces ahead. Her hair knotted up in a clumsy Edwardian pompadour, fixed in the restaurant bathroom. She was a strong walker. When she was little, she told Adriane, her father forced her on long hikes, threatening to prod her with a stick dipped in fire ants if she was too slow. He was only teasing, but the lesson stuck.

In college, Willa used to walk miles, making rounds of visits in the evenings. She would drop by Adriane's apartment, the double-wide in the alley with the big windows, bringing something to share. A can of Campbell's' tomato soup, or a bottle of codeine cough syrup to mix with Dr. Pepper. They would curl up on Adriane's bed, Joanna Newsom playing on the turntable, reading Anne Sexton aloud, and Willa would sigh over whatever boy she was in love with at the moment. Make-out Matt. The porn star she kissed over summer vacation by an Austin river. The professional clown she met on Chat Roulette. That was before she met Ben and settled down. Adriane would lend her a sweater or one of her faux-fur coats for the long walk home. Those high desert nights got cold.

Adriane had never been able to keep up with Willa, and now she no longer tried. She was in heels, tired from her flight. Two years ago, after things in Chicago had not worked out, Adriane retreated to her mother's house in Connecticut. She sculpted wire trees, cut the lining from the bridesmaids dress she wore to her brother's wedding, and molded the fabric into peonies. She dropped roses in the swimming pool.

By then, Willa was living in Brooklyn with Ben. Adriane took the Metro North into the city to visit on Willa's birthday. It was May, and it rained. The birthday party in the park pavilion was a failure. Adriane sat shivering on the damp cement for hours, cold and miserable, praying it would be over soon, cursing the lack of public bathrooms in New York City. When they walked, Willa kept charging ahead. They lost each other at the subway when Willa hopped on the train, and Adriane was still stuck at the gate with an empty metro card.

On the final night of that visit, Willa got too drunk. Ben had to hold her upright on the long walk back to their apartment. Even drunk, Willa walked too fast. Adriane stopped trying to keep up, and the gap separating them stretched from one block to two. She was in a mini-dress, high-heeled boots. In Chicago, the managers at The Admiral had a rule against letting dancers walk or take the train home. You heard tales of Destiny, Karma, and Lily--girls who chanced walking alone and got jumped at Jackson, beaten and raped, knife slashed from eyebrow to lips. You were better off dead than disfigured. Adriane made her way alone, weaving the dark, wet streets, her eyes fixed on Willa's distant silhouette, crumpled against Ben's shoulder like a paper doll. She didn't know the address of Willa and Ben's apartment. She turned left when they turned left, sprinting to get them back in sight, feeling like she had fallen into a nightmare, alone in a dark city, searching for Willa. She waited for Willa to turn her head and look behind for her, but she never did. Not even once. And the damp mist could not cool Adriane's skin. Her jaw stiffened. She stood taller. When she caught up with Willa she would slap her in the face. Tell her what a spoiled brat she was. You're not the only person in the world, she would say. But by the time Adriane climbed the shadowy steps of their apartment, Willa was passed out in bed. In the morning, Adriane said nothing. She took the train home, and she had not seen Willa since.

Red silk lanterns bloomed in the windows of a karaoke bar, and a dude with neck tattoos smoked a cigarette by the door, leaning back on the brick exterior. Willa was near the crosswalk, but Adriane ignored her and stopped. Inside, someone was singing Fleetwood Mac's *Gypsy*. A girl known as Shannon O'Shea used to dance to the that song. That was when Adriane was working at the club in Fargo. No, in Casper, Wyoming. The club with the long, double stage and the wind-vent where Shannon O'Shea knelt, her waist-length hair lifting in a honeyed cloud.

Adriane pulled a cigarette from her purse and gave the dude with face tattoos the once-over. Doc Marten boots, arms stacked with candy-bead bracelets. He looked like the kind of guy who paid his rent with trust fund residuals but was still always crashing on other people's couches, a guy who had a seven-year-old kid with an ex-girlfriend he was still sort of in love with, the kind of guy who would take you on a date to drink Colt 45's from a paper bag under a bridge, who would take you to see his buddy's band play because he could get you in free, but then you *wouldn't* get in free and he'd ask if you could front him some cash--and Adriane decided instantly that she would not be having sex with him.

Do you have a light, she asked. The dude nodded, and she stepped closer. He dug in his jacket pocket, opened his palm and blew, like he was blowing her a kiss, and showered her with a puff of glitter.

Asshole, she whispered. He dug in his pocket again, scattering another handful in the air. Another, and another. Do you seriously just have a pouch of glitter in your motorcycle jacket, Adriane asked, and he laughed. She laughed too. She couldn't help it. The city of San Antonio shimmered, and though it was not what she expected, it felt better. The stars were falling. She was shining. Time slowed down, and the glitter hung suspended in the air, bright as snow. And it seemed that each speck held a moment.

From the corner, at the crosswalk, Willa called to her impatiently, come along Adriane. Disoriented, Adriane took a step towards her. The man's hand shot out and caught her wrist. Not tight enough for her to kick him. Instead, she did that thing you do when strange men touch you and you don't like it, but you don't want to hurt their feelings. Lower your eyes, glance up and down again, as if you are shy. You smile, almost. More like the possibility of a smile that could be withheld. But it's sort of a sharp, mocking smile, to contrast the eyes and let him know you are not a girl who will go easy. Then you twist your torso and take a step away--fast enough that he can't grab your neck, but not fast enough to startle him into breaking your wrist--keeping your eyes on him, arching one eyebrow, and slipping your arm from his grasp, all in one fluid motion.

The man let her go with an easygoing laugh and leaned back against the wall. Stripper tricks. They still came in handy.

On the corner, Willa waited with her hands on her hips. Adriane. Adriane. Adriane. Do you have a lighter or not, Adriane asked. He whipped a Zippo from his pocket and sparked the flint. Adriane let him light her cigarette. That was proper. At the strip club, she would walk away if a customer didn't light her cigarette, or didn't offer to buy her cocktail, or if he wore basketball shorts. Beneath the flame, the man's left hand was glitter dusted, and shone like burnished silver. The man with the silver hand.

Are you a prophet, she asked, half-teasing. He crossed his arms over his chest. Looked to the sky with a brief, barking laugh, and pointed at her, cigarette clenched between his fingers. You want to know your future, he asked. She nodded, and he cupped his silver hand to her ear. One night you will fall asleep, he whispered, and you will dream twenty-four dreams and when you wake, baby girl, you'll have wings.

The girls spent the night at Willa's childhood home, a sprawling mid-century ranch out in the suburbs, with big picture windows and outdated appliances. There was a scent of vintage nostalgia--talcum powdered kid gloves, fur coats sealed in cedar closets. Laundry starch, the last drop in a treasured bottle of Chanel No.5, and something damp and salty, like tears.

Willa's parents were down south in Bandera already, preparing for the wedding on the family ranch, so the girls had the run of the place. Before bed, Adriane took a bath in the big master bathroom tub. Willa sat on the vanity counter testing toenail polish colors and confessed to Adriane that at least one of the bridesmaids was sure to hate her.

Oh, but don't worry about it, Willa said. Candice hates everyone. Adriane had a neighbor named Candice A. Roses. Sometimes she got her mail by mistake. She was a dark haired, nasal-voiced sorority-girl type, and in her mind, Adriane imagined this Candice would be her twin. But Willa told her that Candice was a mechanic. A mechanic, Adriane repeated, and Willa said yes, of course, like for cars, and she's really good at it--which made sense, now that Adriane thought about it. Sorority girls weren't really Willa's type.

Adriane sank down, warm water covering her breasts. Overhead, black mold blossomed on the ceiling. She was worried she would be the odd one out among the other bridesmaids. One of them, she had met briefly when she visited Willa during college. The other three were strangers. The girls had all grown up together in San Antonio, riding fixed-gear bicycles in their bikinis through the sweltering Texas heat. They were nothing like the girls she had grown up with in Connecticut, girls in fuzzy Benetton sweaters who went to Yale or Bennington.

Willa's friends were Texas trust-fund hipsters, former shoplifters and spray painters, girls who spent winters living in a friend's walk-in closet in Austin. Adriane knew the type. These girls would drag you to storm sewer parties when you were wearing the wrong shoes, and later

tell everyone how you danced in your stilettos until noon--tell everyone that you were a sparkling sewer nymph, a tunnel rave rat queen. They would make you sound so much tougher and more glamorous than you felt, and though you found it flattering, deep down you knew that you were a fraud.

I hope it will be okay, Willa sighed. It's just that all you are Scorpios, and you know how that goes. Except for Amy, who was a Sagittarius, and by the way, now went by the name Silver Brazos Wolf.

She's a dancer now too, Willa said. At Shotgun Willie's, or maybe it was Mile High. So, she and Adriane would have that in common. And Adriane, who remembered meeting Amy when she visited-- a beanie on her scruffy hair, bad skin, and no costume-- just nodded.

Willa extended her leg, toes lacquered silk-grey, jelly-green. Yuck, she said, these all look disgusting. Adriane leaned her arms on the tub, pointed and told her that the white wasn't bad. It's not white, Willa said, it's *Blanc Arty*, and Adriane said, oh my--how elegant. And can you toss me the Dr. Bronner's please.

She squirted a dab on a washcloth, the scent of lavender hemp mingling with the fumes of nail polish the hue of chanterelle mushrooms. The glitter on her chest was stubborn. It would not wash off even when she stood and rinsed beneath the shower spray, no matter how hard she scrubbed.

Is there a towel, she asked, and Willa said, of course there are towels, Adriane, we are not peasants, and tossed her one, printed with canaries and blue flowers. Adriane wrapped the towel around her torso and went to the mirror. A row of exposed light bulbs rimmed the mirror, like strip club dressing room lights. She pulled the skin beneath her chin tight with her thumbs, turned her face from side to side. She thirty-four, still young enough. Nico Fatale, stripper

extraordinaire, had been every day of forty when they worked together at Fantasy, and her monthly earnings doubled that of any other girl in the club.

Do I look much older than the last time you saw me, she asked Willa, who pursed her lips and examined her face. You always look the same to me, Adriane, she said. You look like Vivien Leigh. In *Gone with the Wind*, or *Streetcar Named Desire*, Adriane asked, and Willa said both. Adriane told her that she really looked nothing like Vivien Leigh. They had the same color eyes, that was it. Her hair, strawberry blonde now, had been dyed dark when she first met Willa. That was the reason she saw the resemblance. Adriane pointed out that her nose was not pert and perfect, but Willa said it was something in the cheekbones. I want you to meet my friend Mandy, she said. She's coming to the wedding and she looks like Vivien Leigh too.

Adriane knew that Erin, the maid of honor, was high strung and cried a lot, and for that reason she was sure to be tiny and blonde. She remembered when Erin got divorced, because that was the September in college when Adriane and Willa both skipped the block semester. Willa went backpacking from Barcelona to Croatia with Erin, all expenses paid by Erin's mother, who was desperate to lift her daughter's spirits after the divorce. At a beach rave in Dalmatia, Willa fulfilled a lifelong dream of kissing a boy with Pop Rocks in her mouth.

Adriane hitched a ride with a friend up through Utah to Grand Junction and rented a private room at the historic Hotel Melrose. She took a taxi to work each night. There was a costume shop two blocks from the hotel, and Adriane spent two hundred dollars on a rhinestone collar fit for an Egyptian princess. She wore it floating naked in the heated swimming pool of the club owner's mansion, the jewels falling in swags above her breasts.

Erin, however, turned out to be a pretty, pony-like girl with a loud, sudden laugh that surprised Adriane into liking her right away. She picked Willa and Adriane up in the morning, stopping at the grocery store before heading down to the treehouse resort, somewhere west of Utopia. Adriane was silent and sulky during the trip to the grocery store, because Adriane was always silent and sulky in the morning. The logistics of buying groceries to sustain a group of six girls over several days, when the bride requested Erin's famous homemade chicken curry, but Silver Brazos Wolf was allergic to cane sugar and Sadie was sometimes a vegetarian, and neither of them had opted to come shopping, was more than Adriane could handle. Grocery stores always overwhelmed her. But Erin took charge of the curry problem and the Velveeta log crisis in a fashion that prompted Adriane to front the money for the groceries, though Willa rolled her eyes and whispered to Adriane, god she is so bossy.

In the car, Adriane took the backseat and Willa sat up front, her bare feet on the dashboard, leg hairs glinting in the sunlight. Erin played some punk band from Austin on the stereo. She knew the lead singer. He was a beautiful monster, and she made out with him whenever she came into Austin. She had another boy, Latino, too young, who brought her tiramisu from the restaurant kitchen where he watched dishes.

The roads narrowed to two-lanes and a speed limit of eighty-five, through swaths of ranch land. In the window, Adriane's reflection was superimposed on barbed wire fences, chaparral, and long-horned deer that Erin said were gazelles, imported for hunting. Willa was saying about juniper trees, but Adriane could no longer remember which ones were junipers, which were cottonwoods.

She tucked her legs up, and thought that in the strip club, Erin would have made more money than prettier girls. She would mind her own business, run the sexy bro routine on

customers, talking about dirt bikes and bird skulls, and shoot her tequila without salt or lemon. Sometimes she would get overwhelmed, cry in the dressing room, and you would smudge back her tears with your thumbs, chanting, mascara, mascara, mascara. After work, she'd offer you a ride home, but you wouldn't go home. You'd cruise the city with her until dawn. You wouldn't talk. She'd blast music on the car stereo and belt out the lyrics loud, and you'd crack the window, leaning your head on the frame, and feel suddenly joyous. Maybe it would be Easter. The air cold and fresh, smelling of earth.

Have you been to Texas before, Adriane, Erin asked, glancing in the rearview mirror. Adriane shook her head, shrugged, and said, just driven through. In the summers, she used to travel from club to club, following the PGA tour or the cycle of men working out in the gas fields. Once, on her way to Missouri, she crossed the Texas panhandle. A cow-spotted horizon. Wind turbines. Colorless grass bleeding into a colorless sky. The scent of dusty honey rose from the plains when it began to rain, and in the thunderstorm frightened horses made a sound like screaming. Just before dawn she had passed through Amarillo. Amarillo was a smudge of bluish shadows. Amarillo doesn't count, Willa said, and Adriane said, then this is my first time.

During the two days the treehouse resort, Adriane won all three rounds of Cards Against Humanity, officiated a secret magical ceremony, lolled on the couches watching *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, and went swimming in the creek winding beneath the long wooden steps from the cabin.

Willa, Adriane and Erin had arrived first, and went straight to the creek. A massive cypress tree cradled the treehouse in its branches, the roots curling to a deep pool in the water. How old do you think this tree is, she asked, and Willa, wading in the shallows, picking up

stones and tossing them back, said five hundred, maybe more. Erin stayed near the shore, saying that this river wasn't called the Frio for nothing. And Adriane, topless, draped her fringed kimono on the rocks, and slipped from the cypress roots into the deep pool. Her ears filled with water silence. When she resurfaced, she felt a flash of that old feeling, like a thousand rushing butterfly wings, like everything was just beginning.

Candice showed up next, sticking her head over the high railing, her apricot hair twisted up in a messy bun. Adriane knew, with a single glance, that Candice would have been the sort of stripper who cursed in front of customers. A big-mouth girl, the kind of girl who sat in the dressing room bitching that the DJ played her song for Isis or Nikki, even though he knew that song was hers alone. She would blame the toilet overflow in the dressing room on the new girls, fume about sloppy whores leaving their pizza crusts on the makeup table and tell you that once she went to a party at the Playboy mansion, and was a feature dancer in Texas, where they appreciated her talents.

You guys know that creek is probably crawling with water moccasins, right, Candice said. Erin called, hello, and welcome, and Candice answered, are there enough beds inside, I'd better have a bed. There are beds galore, Willa said, and Candice disappeared.

Erin asked, is it just my imagination, or was she ignoring me, and Willa said, it probably wasn't your imagination. She hates you, Willa said. Apparently, Erin had stolen Candice's shoes at Rory Tyler's kiddie-pool party, held them over her head, and refused to give them back. Oh geez, Erin said, we were like seventeen. It was ages ago. Well you know Erin, Willa said, it still wasn't very nice.

Silver Brazos Wolf and Sadie drove down together, running a few hours late. The other girls had already eaten dinner on the patio. Erin made her famous chicken curry, and they waited

as long as they could, or until Candice said she was going to die of starvation, and couldn't they just go ahead and eat already and just save them some? Sometime after ten, Silver and Sadie showed up. We went ahead and ate, Erin said, I hope you don't mind.

Sadie flicked her eyes down, pursed her quavering lips in a silent, girlish gesture that indicated that she did indeed mind. Is that chicken, she asked, and her voice had a babyish quality. Yes, Erin said, we thought maybe you were eating chicken now, is it okay. Sadie looked down again. It's fine, she said, and ate only a bowl of rice.

The girls went swimming again around midnight. Adriane treaded water, bats swooping close to her head. Silver Brazos Wolf perched on the seat formed by the roots of the cypress tree. She was a different girl than the one Adriane remembered meeting in Arizona. Her skin clear and brown, hair wiry but grown out long, her abdomen slim. She told Adriane about her partner and their polyamorous adventures, about the strip club scene in Denver. What name do you use, Adriane asked, and Silver said, Scarlett, and Adriane said, oh, that was my name too. She asked her why she had changed her name from Amy to Silver Brazos Wolf, and Silver gave a delicate shrug and said, because of the patriarchy, and Adriane just nodded.

Later, they warmed up in the hot tub. They all went naked, except Candice, who wore a boy's tee-shirt. Sadie brought out a tray of Tootsie roll martinis topped with whipped cream and chocolate shavings, a sweet and revolting concoction that Adriane only pretended to sip. When Sadie asked if they would mind paying her back for the ingredients, Erin cut in and said, not Adriane, she paid for the groceries, and in fact you guys owe her some money, and then winked at Adriane.

Silver swiveled her head away. There was a long silence. When you're a dancer, she finally said, how long does it take to get ready. And Adriane was about to answer, getting

dressed for work was the worst part of the day. You woke at noon, stiff and sore from the night before, feeling transparent. You forced yourself into the shower, shaved your legs, toes, crotch, and underarms, even if you had just shaved the day before. You blow-dried your hair in sections with a round metal brush, clipped in 100% human hair extensions from Sally's Beauty Supply, then flat-ironed for frizz, curled for bounce, teased at the crown, and set with hairspray. Then you packed your tote bag or rolling suitcase and took a taxi to work so you wouldn't have to drive home drunk or pass out at the wheel in the parking lot. In the dressing room, sitting in a velour barrel chair, you layered on makeup like your face was a paint by numbers kit. Contour, blush, five coats of mascara or falsies if you needed them. Then you sprayed your whole body with pantyhose-in-a-can. It left brown stains on your sheets and men dumb enough to wear white slacks to the strip club, but it hid the bruises and gave a subtle shimmer. Not too much. Too much glitter and the men get afraid their wives will find it clinging to their chin stubble, and then they refuse to buy dances from you. Ten to twenty spritzes of cheap drugstore body spray, scented with vanilla or pumpkin or melon, the scents scientifically proven most alluring to men. You never had time to wash your dance clothes, so you spritzed those too. It takes about three hours, Silver said, and Adriane stayed silent.

That night, Adriane shared the king-sized bed in the honeymoon suite with Willa. Erin and Candice took separate rooms in the hall, and Silver and Sadie shared the upstairs loft. Do you think it's going okay, Willa asked her, and Adriane said, totally, it's going great, and Willa sighed. She bent her head over an embroidery hoop in her lap, stitching clumsy letters into the white fabric. What are you making, Adriane asked, and Willa told her it was a handkerchief, sewn with her wedding vows. I can read from it during the ceremony, Willa said, and when Ben

says his vows and starts to cry, I'm going to hand it to him to wipe his eyes. How romantic, Adriane said, and Willa sighed, and said, yes, yes, I know it is, and then laughed.

Upstairs, Adriane could hear Sadie and Silver murmuring softly. In the strip club, Adriane thought, they would have been the kind of girls that always worked as a team. They would share a locker, and sometimes in the dressing room Silver Brazos Wolf would ask to borrow your hairspray or your eyelash glue, and she would give an admiring gasp when you told her you didn't wear falsies. Sadie would stand close to her shoulder, look down when you glanced at her, and Silver would have to say, is it okay if Sadie uses your hairspray too, as if Sadie was a deaf-mute stripper. Sadie would give the can back to Silver instead of just handing it to you, and Silver would say thank you. Give you a shy, fluttering smile that hinted at friendship, a promise she had no intention of fulfilling.

The Flying L Ranch & Resort, in Bandera, was a strange, flat vista of circling drives, tennis courts, clubhouses, and a pool with a giant dinosaur slide. So the ceremony isn't here, Candice asked, and Erin said, no, the wedding guests are all staying here but the rehearsal and the wedding are at Willa's family ranch, about half an hour away. Oh, Candice said, that's so confusing.

Sadie and Silver had one of the bungalow suites, and were being joined by their boyfriends. Willa and Ben, flouting all decency, as Erin teased, were already installed in the honeymoon villa. Adriane, Erin, and Candice shared a one room cabin with a front verandah, in a long avenue of identical cabins. Oh my god, you guys, Candice said, this is so small, but Adriane found the exposed wood walls and bunk beds charming. It's like summer camp, she said, and

wait, where's the tequila. Erin said Sadie and Silver must have taken it, and Adriane fell down on the bed with a shriek.

Whores, she said, which undammed a flurry of complaints against Sadie that broke the ice between the three of them permanently. Nobody likes tootsie rolls in their martinis, Adriane said. And what's with the baby voice, Erin asked, and she never paid Adriane for her share for the groceries. Candice said, what about brunch in a cave, and Erin said, I don't know you guys, that could have been kind of fun, and Adriane said ugh, thinking that Candice's hair was really a rather pretty color, like creamsicle, and maybe she had been wrong after all. Maybe Candice would have been the kind of stripper who told a customer to fuck off when he told you to suck in your gut onstage, the kind who would bring you in on a double dance when you were having a slow night. When you showed up for work drunk, blood on your tiny white dress, and the managers told you that you couldn't work until that black eye healed, Candice would bring you to her house, tuck you into bed. Stroke your hair and tell you she had a cousin who would take care of him if you wanted.

Let's smoke a cigarette, Erin said. They went out to the verandah. Adriane leaned against a knotty beam, handed Erin a cigarette and lit one for herself. Across the gravel lane, a parched wind blew over a field of burnt grass. And it flashed through Adriane. The old feeling that the desert could bring her, that she dreamt of by the window on rainy days growing up in Connecticut. A feeling that she could be dry and warm. Picked clean and scoured bone-white.

And she didn't think of the stillness of a swimming pool encased in cement at the Phoenix Days Inn, or of a night nestled among pillows in the cab of a pickup truck, feeling the sickening heat of the valley lift as they wound up the mountain, as the stars slipped past in the rear window and the mystery of the nighttime desert instilled its silence inside of her. But the

memories were there, encoded deep in the cells of her body. She could feel them thrumming. Stirring like the blades of grass in the wind. And with it, the strange vitality of dry places, where everything was thirsty and dying and fighting and she suddenly felt herself more alive than ever.

You guys, Erin said, lets' go find some cocktails and snacks. They went to the resort bar and ordered everything. Three flavors of margaritas. Tequila shots, calamari and potato skins, fried clams, chips and queso. Just as they were digging in, Willa called and said, where are you guys. The rehearsal time had been moved up, something to do with the pastor, everyone was waiting. They needed to get there pronto. Sadie was supposed to tell you, Willa said, and Erin said, well, she didn't. Be there as soon as we can.

They were late. Very late, because the family ranch was thirty minutes away, and first they had to get the snacks boxed up, run them back into the room, and change into something dressier. When they finally arrived, the whole wedding party was assembled in the southern cottage. The pastor and the parents, aunts and uncles, groomsmen. Sadie and Silver Brazos Wolf, the good bridesmaids. The mothers tried to smooth it over with polite smiles, but Willa had her bratty face on. Eyes perpetually rolled, sighs braced with annoyance. God damn it, Adriane whispered to Erin, I knew I didn't want to be a bridesmaid.

The ceremony would be held by the creek vivisecting the property, so the girls lined up outside, paired with groomsmen, and practiced the procession. Since she was the bride, Willa was last, escorted by her father. Did it look okay, she asked, and Adriane said, you looked perfect, though maybe you walked a little too fast. But the bridesmaids were a mess, Adriane went on, like a herd of cows clumping to the watering hole. They needed to hold the groomsmen's arms. Willa gave her a sharp eye roll, and Adriane, her neck prickling, said, fine Willa, it looked beautiful, like a beautiful herd of cows, like the goddess Hathor and her maidens

clomping to the Nile, and Erin said, don't worry, I'll fix it, come along Adriane, and whisked her away to dinner.

The girls in Adriane's cabin woke at sunrise, determined not to be late again. They showered, packed up, and decided to scout around town for some breakfast and Bloody Mary's. Erin knocked on Willa's cabin door to make sure they weren't ditching her without a ride. Ben answered, bleary-eyed, and mumbled that they should be fine.

Candice drove, cruising the main drag of Bandera for a restaurant that was both open and serving liquor. The storefronts advertised antiques and fresh pickles, and the billboards were painted with wagon wheels or lassos or chili peppers in cowboy hats. Adriane pulled up restaurants on her GPS, and called four, asking are you open, and do you have Bloody Mary's, until one finally said yes, how many do you want. When they arrived at the diner, six Bloody Mary's were waiting for them on an outdoor patio table.

Can I smoke out here, Adriane asked the waitress, and she said, you sure can darling, and brought an ashtray. Candice ordered a frittata, Erin got the southwestern omelet with chorizo, and Adriane lit a cigarette, sipping her Bloody Mary. Overhead, the Texas sky was the color of duck eggs. Erin's laugh was easygoing even in the morning, and the air was growing hot, brushing against Adriane's skin in a way that made her feel soft inside, and more beautiful.

The things went awry. Willa called Erin's phone and asked, how do you just leave behind the bride on her wedding day. She had planned to ride with them, and Erin should have known that, no matter what Ben said. He was gone. Sadie and Silver, thinking Willa would ride with Erin, were gone too, and now Willa was stranded at the Flying L Ranch & Resort.

Oh shit, Candice said. Adriane got the check and they headed back towards the Flying L to get Willa. Halfway there, Willa called back. You know what, she said, never mind. Sadie and Silver came to get me.

Candice turned the truck around again, back in the direction they had just come from, and by the time they pulled down the long, long drive to the family ranch, they were late again. You guys, Erin said, fuck.

Willa was in front of the main cottage, eating a breakfast burrito, Sadie and Silver lingering in the dry grass. No one looked at them, no one said hello. Willa rolled her eyes and waved her hand at the cottage. We're getting dressed in there, she said, and there's breakfast burritos but I guess you guys already ate.

Inside, one of the bedrooms was locked, the other was crowded with floral arrangements, and the only mirror was in the bathroom. How are six girls supposed to share one mirror, Adriane whispered to Candice. In Chicago, at the Pink Monkey, the managers shorted the number of chairs in the dressing room to discourage the girls from hanging out back there. The result was a vicious version of musical chairs. You would come into the dressing room and find Roxy had shoved your stuff to the floor, or Marisella would squeeze in right beside you and jab you with her elbow, or Jenna would stand by your shoulder with an acid smile as you were curling your hair and say, I'm sorry but I need that chair, and you would have to yield because you were new and she had been working there for ten years. Your whole night would be poisoned.

Whatever, Adriane said, bringing her makeup pouch into the bathroom, sharing the mirror with Erin. Candice sat on the toilet, applying powder from a compact. Sadie came to the

open door, and walked away, and then a moment later Willa came, and said, Sadie really needs to use the bathroom.

Adriane and the other girls took their things into the living room. Sadie used the bathroom, opened the door, and then gestured to Silver and Willa, who joined her inside and again closed the door. I went to a slumber party like this once in sixth grade, Erin said. Adriane rolled her eyes and took out her compact. Taupe glitter eye-shadow, pink lotus blush, five coats of mascara. The bathroom door opened, and the three girls emerged, fully made up. You guys can use the bathroom now if you want, Sadie said.

Willa sat in a chair from the kitchen, positioning her deer antlers on her head with one hand, and wrapping hanks of hair around the base with the other. The antlers look surprisingly secure. How are they attached, Adriane asked. Just with my hair, Willa said, and Adriane asked if she needed any help. Hmm, Willa said, tapping her cheek with one finger, I do actually, so can you ask Silver to come here please.

She turned her face away with a little smirk. And it was rising in Adriane, like a heat rash over her skin, that starchy temper in her jaw and spine. She blinked, counting one, two, three. Lashes swooping against her cheek.

Now and then, when she was dancing, she lost control. Dashed her dirty martini at a man who changed his mind at the VIP entrance, then changed it again and came back. She had slapped three customers--one who tried to lick her, one who tried to slip his fingers between her legs when she was onstage, and one who called her a whore when she refused to give his son a blow-job.

And now she thought she would grab Willa by the shoulder, shake her until her deer antlers clattered to the floor, and smack that smug little cheek. She would live forever in infamy as the bridesmaid who slapped her best friend on her wedding day.

But Erin came sailing between them, and said, Adriane, can I please, please have a cigarette, and rushed her out the sliding glass doors. Erin sat with her in sympathetic silence, and Adriane chain-smoked until she was calm. She took a Xanax, offered one to Erin, who shrugged and popped it in her mouth. It's gonna be okay, Erin said, and Adriane nodded. At work, you danced with bleeding feet, with duct tape bracing the broken strap of six-inch acrylic platforms to your ankles. You danced on Christmas Eve, on Thanksgiving. You danced pregnant, your breasts swollen and aching, danced the day after your abortion or until you were six months gone and the managers told you that you were done. You danced when you had the flu, clinging deliriously to the pole, white-skinned and shining, darting between lap dances in the VIP room and alternating bouts of vomiting and diarrhea in the girls' bathroom. You danced the night your boyfriend broke up with you because you refused to buy him a new PlayStation, because you were a worthless whore, and you danced when your father was dying, your voice a throaty whisper, your smile pasted on.

Ready, Erin asked, and Adriane said yes. When they went inside, Willa was in her wedding dress, a simple muslin with a darted bodice. A veil of heirloom Brussels lace, smuggled out of Poland with the sapphire engagement ring on Willa's finger, draped from her deer antlers. She looked at Adriane, rolled her eyes, sighed, and sang, I'm a bride, in an operatic soprano, and Adriane instantly forgave her.

Willa and Ben were married down by the river, the bride following an elegant procession of bridesmaids, much improved from the rehearsal. Thanks to me, Adriane whispered to Erin. The crowd was one part Old Texas, one part Jewish Brooklyn, one part hipster. A Southern Baptist pastor officiated, to please Willa's parents, and a yarmulke sheathed Ben's head, to please his. Ben's voice broke with tears when he recited his vows, and the guests said aww when Willa handed him the embroidered handkerchief. The sun blazed off the river, dazzling Adriane's gold lamé mini dress. Rings exchanged, then a kiss. They stomped a lightbulb wrapped in fabric rather than a wine glass, and mazel tov, Willa was married.

After, the younger guests splashed into the bottle-green river in their dress clothes. Adriane changed into her swimsuit and swam with two long strings of freshwater pearls wrapped around her neck, a present from a customer at The Great Alaskan Bush Company in Phoenix. Okay, Candice said, you have officially won the Most Glamorous Bridesmaid award.

There were no obligations, no timetables. The bridesmaids didn't have to dance with the groomsman, and the groom didn't smash the cake into the bride's mouth, staining her dress with fondant. You went to the buffet when you got hungry, ate some brisket and mac and cheese, chose from one of three signature cocktails from the lemonade stand run by the aunts and uncles, and did whatever you wanted. Danced under the tent pavilion to the playlist Sadie pulled up on her Macbook, plugged to the speakers. Played a game of giant Jenga, hula-hopped on the lawn.

Adriane, I want you to meet my friend Mandy, Willa said, because you guys both look like Vivien Leigh. Mandy wore an impeccable green dress, cap sleeved and full-skirted. Thanks, it's vintage, she said when Adriane complimented her. Her hair was black, and her bright eyes matched her dress, but Adriane was relieved to see that she had nothing close to the beauty of

Vivien Leigh. Later, Adriane changed into a sequined romper and danced barefoot. Oh, she is *not* from here, she heard the girl tell her friends.

And then Silver Brazos Wolf came and whispered in Adriane's ear. She had two capsules of psychedelic mushrooms, and did Adriane want to split them. The rumor snaked through the party, drawing the bridesmaids beneath a cottonwood strung with fairy lights. Erin, Willa and Ben, because now they were joined as one, Adriane, Silver, and Silver's boyfriend Dunk. Okay, Silver said to Adriane, the front tips of her brows fluttering, but don't tell anyone else.

Erin filched a bottle of St. Germain's from the screened porch, and Silver emptied the capsules and swirled, the dried particles forming a vortex in the liquor. They passed around plastic cocktail glasses and raised a toast to Ben and Willa and the greatest bridesmaids the world had ever seen. The sun winked through the glasses, and the photographer snapped a picture, thrilled to have caught such a charming candid moment with the wedding party.

Adriane tipped her glass and drank. Psychedelics were not her thing, but neither was saying no. She was never really sure if it was just an evening of exceptional radiance, or if she hallucinated the brightening sky, the pinkish lustre.

She and Erin found a hammock and swung. Candice joined them. Don't worry, Adriane said, there's room. The cicadas rattled in the trees. You were married before, right, Candice asked Erin, and Erin nodded. Candice asked what her wedding was like and Erin just said, terrible. What made you leave, Adriane asked. The way he smelled, Erin said, I used to love it and then it started to make me feel sick and I knew it was over. Why did you quit dancing, Erin asked, and Adriane said, I didn't have the stamina. Do you miss it, Candice asked, and Adriane said, yes, sometimes it felt like the longing would break her heart. Mostly, she said, I miss the girls, and the hammock swung, a bat swooping in the pearly sky.

Sometime around midnight, when the wedding guests had begun to evaporate into the darkness, and the aunts and uncles sat tiredly on the lawn chairs, sipping gin and honeysuckle cocktails, and the last dancers spun on the temporary laminate floor, Adriane and the rest of the wedding party slipped down to the river to go skinny-dipping.

The glass-green water seemed to glow with an inner phosphorescence. Shadows fell over the boulders, and distant music drifted from the pavilion. The bridesmaids disrobed on the shore. Silver Brazos Wolf's breasts were hard and small as crabapples. From the water floated the drunken, delighted laughter of that other girl who looked a bit like Vivien Leigh, standing chest-deep in the water with a plastic cocktail glass in one hand, the skirt of her vintage emerald dress ballooning against the surface. Unzip me, she cried.

Adriane waded to the small, deep pool where the tree roots grew and dove beneath. When she rose, the water smelled fresh and clean, good enough to drink. On the banks, Erin's cigarette ember burned in the darkness, and her hair swung loose to her waist. Willa stood in the water, deer antlers still proud and straight on her head, one knee bent, and the drunk girl was naked, her cast-off green dress slowly sinking. And the feeling came again, the rushing butterfly wings, the current pulling. Silver Brazos Wolf laughed in a pretty little way, telling the others in her sweet-whisper voice, her strip club voice, that Adriane is such a mermaid.

Upstream, little rapids rushed over the rocks. It was not easy to reach. In places, the water was only ankle-deep, but you couldn't walk it without bruising your feet. Adriane swam up as far as she could, hearing Erin splash behind her, feeling a warmth in knowing Erin followed. In the shallows, Adriane floated on her belly, gripping the riverbed with her hands, dragging over the sharp stones. The current was so strong. Her arms were aching when she reached the rapids, and

Erin was panting. Adriane turned around, legs straight, arms spread wide as wings, hands braced against the stones, the water crashing on her shoulders. What a sexy crucifixion, Erin said.

Along the bank grew trees with names she did not know, etched with the blue silhouettes of bridesmaids, wading bare-breasted to their waists, and the sky was glitter-bombed. In the distance, Adriane heard laughter, and the sobs of a girl who looked a little like Vivien Leigh, crying like her heart was broken over an emerald vintage dress, carried away by the current and lost downstream. +

WE'RE ALL GIRLS HERE

The night before Tamsin's seventh birthday was the year of rhinestone crowns and Funfetti cupcakes. Her mother, Angel, had shown up at the lopsided red house on the lake, not even realizing it was her daughter's birthday the next day, wild-eyed and paranoid that she was being pursued by a man with two knives. Gamma Rae shouted there was no such man, that she was just high as a kite and looking to ruin something, and Tamsin went to bed that night crying. Her cousin Blythe knelt beside the twin bed, in a patch of cotton-candy pink and toxic-waste green light from the neon sign next door, above the trailer park. She stroked Tamsin's hair, shushed her gently, and whispered in her ear. She had a plan. Even at six years old, Blythe was full of clever plans.

They would be queens for just one night. They would be in charge and they would make the rules and they would break the rules. Blythe wiped her cousin's tears with the palm of her hand. Her mother, Tamsin's Aunt Daisy, had been a beauty queen. Past midnight, when their grandmother fell asleep, Blythe crept down the hall to Aunt Daisy's old bedroom, climbed on the dresser, and swiped two of her old rhinestone pageant tiaras. Tamsin bent her head. Blythe crowned her Queen Tamsin, Lady of the Lake of Shining Yellow Waters, ruler of the Kingdom of Connecticut, and with equal solemnity, crowned herself Miss Universe.

The girls slipped downstairs, Blythe pausing on the landing to adjust her feather boa and to give a stiff pageant wave to the imaginary audience below. They stole into the kitchen and ate every single one of the Funfetti cupcakes Gamma Rae had left cooling on the table for the

birthday party the next day. In the morning, Tamsin woke with smears of frosting on her chin, the tiara tangled in her hair, and her mother nearly forgotten. Gamma Rae grumbled under her breath, but Blythe said that was what made the plan so perfect. No one could be punished on their birthday, especially Tamsin, and so the night before was a magic night, a holy night, when no boundaries existed.

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Two days before her twelfth birthday, on an early summer evening, Tamsin sat on the lawn plucking clover blossoms, while Blythe wove them into a chain. Behind, in a ring of tiny bungalows clustered close together, their grandparents' house sprouted like a toadstool from the lakeshores. Somewhere, miles and miles downstream, Tamsin's father Jason lived in gleaming modern house of wood and glass. In the mornings, the sun rose and glinted off the water through the floor-length windows.

Tamsin adjusted her wire-framed glasses and ran her hand over the long grasses. "Maybe this will be the year I go live with my dad."

"No." Blythe puckered her brow. "Not this year. I just got back, and you want to leave already?"

Both girls were living with Gamma Rae and Grandpa that summer. Tamsin, because she had lived there since she was a baby, and Blythe, because her father was deployed overseas. Her mother, Aunt Daisy, had grown tired of living on the military base in Louisiana. She packed up Blythe and little Annabelle and pulled the RV into Gamma Rae's driveway four days later, as fresh and sweet as her namesake, as if she had not just driven nearly two thousand miles alone.

"Anyways," Blythe went on, "isn't your father bringing his new girlfriend to your birthday party?"

Tamsin yanked a chunk of grass. Gamma Rae and Tamsin's aunts had been whispering about this new girl when they thought she wasn't listening. She was too young for Jason, they said. Her parents had a big white house with a fancy chandelier and she used to be some kind of dancer.

Tamsin lobbed a flower at Blythe. "He always has a new girlfriend."

"Be gentle!" Blythe held up the bruised clover. "This one's no good now, but I can't just leave her out. It would hurt her little feelings."

Tamsin leaned back on her hands, stretched out her legs, and crossed her ankles. The sky was milky turquoise, scattered with faint stars. Upstairs the bathroom window was open. A hair dryer buzzed and switched off, and the sound of Aunt Daisy's sweet voice singing *Rhiannon* wafted down over the lawn.

"Are you helping or not?" Blythe asked.

Tamsin shrugged. She wasn't very good at crown-weaving. Her fingers were stubby and the stems kept breaking, and even with her glasses it was difficult to see in the deepening twilight. That was Blythe's kind of thing--flowers and jelly shoes, costume jewelry and Cracker-Jack rings. Pretty things, for a girl with blonde streaked-curls that tickled on her shoulders and a delicate face, part rabbit, part kitten. Blythe's mother was the beauty of the family, and Blythe said that a pretty mama meant a pretty daughter. That's just the way things were.

"You're supposed to be thinking of what we're going to do," Tamsin said. They were behind on planning the birthday adventure.

"I *am* thinking." Blythe's forehead wrinkled in concentration, her fingers dancing over the flowers in little twisting motions and held up the clover strand. "See? This is my chain of thought. Now please, help me."

Tamsin picked a few clover stems and set them in a pile in front of Blythe. "It can't be crowns. We did that already."

"I know. That was baby stuff."

Something rustled in the forsythia bushes. "What was that?" Blythe jumped to her feet, crept on her tiptoes across the lawn, and parted the slender branches, exposing a fluffy white cat. "Miss America!"

Miss America, a former dumpster-kitten, had been missing for weeks. Gamma Rae said Blythe only had herself to blame, that a cat didn't want her claws painted, and she certainly didn't want her ears pierced, no matter how pretty Blythe thought she would look in her mother's dangly earrings. The cat yowled as Blythe extended a cautious hand, and darted past her, through the gap in the chain link fence dividing the property from the trailer park.

"Come on," Blythe called.

Tamsin followed. A delightful inflatable fountain rose in tiers in the roundabout near the entrance, and she stopped to let the water splash over her hand. Miss America proved too wily and had already escaped. But Lana, one of the grown-up girls who lived in the park, was sitting on her steps, beneath a striped awning strung with glowing chili-pepper lights, painting her toenails orange.

Don't bother her, Gamma Rae always warned. That girl. Gamma thought some of the girls next door were no better than they ought to be. Aunt Daisy always rolled her eyes at that and said that whatever they did was a world better than what Tamsin's mother did regular down at the truck stop, which Blythe interpreted as permission to run next door whenever she wanted.

Blythe pointed to the plastic shower cap, smeared with pinkish goop on the inside, covering Lana's head. "Are you dying your hair?"

"I am, sweetheart." The girl took a drag of her cigarette, held carefully so she would not ruin her freshly painted fingernails.

"What color?" Blythe asked.

"It's called *Venusian Rain*."

Tamsin traced her toe in the sand. An old Patsy Cline record played inside of the trailer and kept skipping. She touched her hair. Dishwater brown, hanging straight around her moon-like face. Maybe, for the traditional birthday adventure, they could dye her hair. Raven's Wing Black. The color would transform her lank strands into glossy waves, and pull her cheekbones into sharp planes. Perhaps her gooseberry green eyes would even transform into a deep velvety brown, and when her father came to visit and took her to Friendly's, the waitress would bring them a slice of Wattamelon Roll to share and say *This must be your daughter. She looks just like you!*

"No," Blythe said, as they ran back home. "We did that already,"

Tamsin's eighth birthday. The year of fruit punch and kiwi-lime Kool-Aid dye streaks. The sugared mix made the bathroom sink and floor sticky, and Gamma Rae never again saw an ant in the bathroom without blaming on that night. Blythe's came out brighter, but Tamsin's hair looked like a fading rainbow and the girls who came to her birthday party went wild over it. For some time after, she and Blythe decided that when they were grown-up, they would open their own beauty salon together where they would play Madonna and New Kids on the Block on the stereo, and every girl, no matter how plain, would leave looking and feeling like a pop-star.

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The next morning Blythe spent seventeen minutes standing on her head on the stair landing, her clover-scented curls spilling on the shaggy carpet. She said this helped her think

better, that it was as if all the thoughts had nowhere to go except her head. Her shiny ice-skater skirt flew up, exposing rose-printed satin panties she had swiped from Aunt Daisy. Blythe was dying to wear grown-up panties, dying for grown-up things in general, and she scoffed at Tamsin when she covered her eyes.

“Oh, please.” Blythe snapped her gum. The scent was unmistakable. Grape Bubbleyum. Blythe must have had a last secret piece stashed somewhere, since Gamma Rae had declared a ban on chewing gum last week after that thing happened with the neighbor's cat. “We're all girls here.”

“Not-uh.” Tamsin picked at the rug fibers. “What about Grandpa Bill?”
“Doesn't count. I love him, but he just doesn't count.”

And Tamsin knew that she was right. Grandpa Bill spent most of his time in the garage, sitting in a lawn chair or fixing things that weren't broken. He spoke so little that Gamma Rae simply held up her empty can of Dr. Pepper and shook it when she wanted another.

“You look weird upside down,” Tamsin said. Blythe stuck out her tongue. “So do you.” Her legs wavered and she rested them against the wall for balance, her feet just touching the narrow shelf beneath the window, laden with Gamma Rae's figurines. She stroked one with her toe. “Is it the fawn?”

“There's like ten fawns.”

“The one with the blue bow around its head.”

“Yeah. You'd better be careful. You'll get the stick if you break it.”

At the bottom of the stairs, a plank of wood, just thick enough to fit Gamma's hand, hung from the wall on a nail. It was painted with the phrase *Take Time to Touch*, the words entwined with stenciled blue flowers. When any of the children misbehaved, Gamma Rae snatched it from

the wall and gave them a few licks. That stick was a time-honored family tradition, she said. Worn smooth on the asses of five generations of daughters.

Just last fall, even though they were grown-ups, Aunt Tess and Tamsin's mother had gotten the stick. Right after that thing happened with Aunt Tess and Angel's boyfriend. Tamsin was in the living room, struggling with her homework while Gamma Rae cut an old apron with pinking shears, when Aunt Tess and Angel came tumbling down the stairs. Aunt Tess, scratched and bleeding where one earring had been ripped out, a hank of Angel's mousy hair in her fist. Gamma whacked them with the flower stick until they could be torn apart, and Tamsin had not seen her mother since.

"I ain't scared of Gamma." But Blythe she moved her feet away from the figurines. She got the stick quite often. Sometimes she could outrun Gamma, but when it came down to it, Blythe accepted spankings with a philosophical grace. A few whacks were over pretty quick, she reasoned, but the boredom of behaving yourself lasted forever.

"Are you getting any ideas yet?"

"Maybe I would if you shut up and let me think." Blythe blew a large bubble, and sucked it back in before Tamsin had time to pop it. "Anyway, it hasn't been long enough. It takes at least half an hour. How long has it been?"

"I don't know."

"You're supposed to be keeping time! Do I have to do everything?"

Tamsin tried to reason that it must have been less than half an hour, because Blythe would have had an idea if it was past that, but Blythe was starting to get a headache and the smell of boiled eggs and warm chocolate cake drifting up from the kitchen was making her stomach growl.

“You have that gorgeous Swatch,” Blythe said, “and you can’t even think to use it at a time like this?”

On Tamsin's wrist, orange and yellow triangles formed the shape of a compass on the turquoise face of her Swatch, and ships with billowing sails floated on the band. A present from her father. He had given to her a month ago, the last time he visited. Blythe had burst into jealous tears. It was so unfair, she sobbed, that Tamsin got everything, just because her dad felt guilty. Even now, a tight, angry expression crept over Blythe's face, and things might have gone amiss if Aunt Daisy had not come out of the bathroom. She wore a blue bandanna-print bikini, a towel draped over her shoulder, and a lavender ribbon tied in her strawberry blonde ponytail and gave the girls a sweet smile as she floated down the hall.

“Good morning, angelfish,” She tapped Tamsin lightly on the shoulder with a rolled-up issue of *Cosmopolitan*. “It’s almost your birthday.” And then slipped past the on the stair landing, stopping to raise an eyebrow at her daughter. “Blythe Alexandra Lawrence, those better not be my underwear you have on.”

Blythe pulled her skirt up with one hand. “They aren’t.”

Downstairs, Gamma Rae hollered from the kitchen, telling them they had two minutes to get down there or the party would be cancelled. Blythe came out of her headstand with a heavy sigh. They waited the full two minutes, clocking it on Tamsin's Swatch, and then ran downstairs. Beyond the screen door, junk littered the front porch. Waterlogged copies of the TV Guide, Styrofoam discs stained with coffee, scalped dolls, and a moldy, squashed, woven basket.

Tomorrow, at the birthday party, Gamma Rae would tell the same story she told every year, about the day Tamsin's mother left her on the doorstep in a straw basket. About how the sky was grey and maybe it rained. Tamsin was four months old, already recovering from a

methadone addiction. Her mother set her down and didn't knock. She walked away. In the kitchen, Gamma Rae was washing dishes and saw her through the window, tottering in heels down the gravel drive. I can still see her, Gamma would say, and I'll see her that way forever. Her eldest daughter. Her Angel, suspended in the glass above the pink enamel sink, in an imperfect circle drawn by a dishrag in the steam. The pines fringing the lakeshore. Her silhouette scratching sickly yellow waters the same color as the bruises on her arms. Jacketless. Her shoulders like a sparrow, when a sparrow falls dead from the nest and the bones are picked clean. And she never looked back, not even once, not when Gamma Rae dashed to the porch and hollered from the grimy screen door, *Angel, you ain't gonna leave this baby here!* Not even when Tamsin began to wail, though she hunched her hands over her ears as she walked away and began to sing. Amazing grace. How sweet the sound.

She always had a pretty singing voice, Gamma sighed. Even prettier than Daisy's. Used to dream of being a famous country singer. Used to put on shows on the stair landing, a long swath of black satin from the scrap bag pinned to her head, pretending she was Crystal Gayle. My, how things change.

Tamsin averted her eyes from the basket. And thought instead of the night before her ninth birthday. That was the year of the abandoned puppies, which was supposed to be the year of the school playground. It rained that night and she and Blythe were headed for the swing set when Tamsin found a box on the side of the road. They brought the puppies home, and Aunt Daisy nursed them back to health, and Tamsin liked to think of them sometimes, after they were given away, living somewhere out there in the world.

In the kitchen, Tamsin filled the pink enamel sink with dish soap, washed a Queen Elizabeth II commemorative plate, and placed it on a rack beneath the kitchen shelf with the strawberry and plaid print cookie tins. Blythe performed her job, drying and putting the dishes away, on rollerblades. This was doubly practical, she insisted, because she made her tall enough to reach the bottom shelf, and made the work go faster.

“Plus, it helps me think better.” Blythe stood next to Tamsin at the sink with her legs apart, to keep her balance while not in motion. “Because when I’m moving faster, it makes time go slower, and lets me think twice as many thoughts.”

“Careful,” Gamma Rae said. With her hip, she held open the door of the pale pink refrigerator--the same color as the sink and the double wall oven and Blythe's ballerina slippers--and slid in a tray of deviled eggs.

Blythe reached past Tamsin's shoulder and drew a heart in the steamed window above the sink. Through the glass, the lake winked beyond the pines. “Can we go swimming when we’re done?” Tamsin asked.

“We got about ten million things to do getting ready for this party, miss.” Gamma jerked her chin towards the door to the living room. “When you’re done here, I need you two to go fold that laundry and bring it upstairs.” Blythe peeked through the kitchen door and groaned. Three baskets of laundry-- striped halter-tops and frilled nighties and denim cut-offs and lace bras and at least a dozen towels--towered on the curving faux-suede couch.

“Well, maybe next time you want to change your dress three times in a day, Miss Blythe, you’ll think twice.” Gamma wiped her hands on her apron and untied it. “Anyway, you wouldn’t catch me swimming in that lake. Could be anything in there. Maybe even alligators.”

“There’s no alligators in Connecticut,” Tamsin said. “They don’t live up here.”

“There’s alligators in Louisiana!” Blythe said. Her father had been stationed there last winter. “Millions of them. My friend had one in her pool and we all sat around and I stared right in its eyes and I could hear her alligator thoughts, all about living in swamp water and being so hungry and wanting someone to snuggle with but no one wanting to because they were afraid and so sometimes she cries and uses Spanish Moss as a handkerchief and--”

“Oh hush,” Gamma Rae said, but she laughed and hugged Blythe around the shoulders. “You don’t know everything. There was an alligator that popped up out of a sewer just a few towns over. I saw it on the news. They said folks used to have baby gators as pets, and then they think they don’t want them anymore, so they flushed them down the toilet. So now they live down there.”

“Is that true?” Tamsin asked.

Gamma Rae laughed again. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “I don’t know everything either. But anything’s possible.”

She sat down at the pink dinette set in front of a tray of cupcakes and began frosting them. “Speaking of unlikely possibilities,” she glanced at Tamsin. “I don’t want you getting your hopes up about your mother.”

Tamsin washed the last dish. Pulled the drain. She listened to the water gurgling, going deep down to a place where anything might be living. Her mother had called a week ago. She was living in a halfway house in Hartford and found a church she liked, and things were going well, much better than before. Better than ever. She promised she would come to the party.

“Did she say something?” Tamsin asked.

“She didn’t say nothing,” Gamma swirled blue icing with a butter knife. “She says she’s coming. That might be true and it might not be. I just don’t want you disappointed if it isn’t.”

"I think she'll come."

Blythe skated in a circle and didn't look at her. Tamsin dried her hands on a dishcloth. She reached to the shelf with the swan figurines and felt for her Swatch. She fumbled with the strap. Tomorrow on her birthday her father would bring her something even better. Ten Swatches. She would wear them all at once, in a line up her arm.

"Come here," Gamma Rae said. She took the swatch from Tamsin and buckled it on, directly over the white space left from her tan. "Your father will come for sure. No doubt about that."

No doubt anymore. Tamsin's father didn't come often, but he came when he said he would. He would come tomorrow, maybe with his new girlfriend, who wouldn't matter. Maybe wearing a new leather jacket. If Gamma Rae thought Jason was getting too big for his britches, she would tell the whole party the story about the time he waved a gun in the air and told his mother that he would shoot Angel and his infant daughter and then himself if she would not give him money to score. About how he made his mother drive him to the projects in her emerald silk pantsuit, as she sobbed into the steering wheel, and how one day, he got into that silver sedan and drove away from Angel and the baby without a glance in the rearview mirror.

Tamsin wouldn't think about that. She thought instead of the night before her eleventh birthday. The year of the leopard-print high heels and the red-satin high heels and coke and cherry Slurpees mixed together. They stole the shoes from Aunt Daisy. Tamsin wore lipstick and Blythe put on mascara and they walked to 7-11 at three o'clock in the morning in shoes that didn't fit. Blythe didn't even stumble. And she confessed a secret dream that they would both become prostitutes when they grew up, and Tamsin shrieked and laughed because she dreamt that too. They would live in an old house and smoke pink cigarettes from ivory holders and

dance to piano music. They would wear miniskirts and tease their hair and walk the streets at night with no one to ever again call them home.

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There was still no plan for the birthday tradition by mid-afternoon, because Blythe had gotten distracted when her mother called her outside to rub suntan oil on her back, which was a job she took very seriously, and Tamsin got sucked into an episode of *Baywatch* that was playing on the living room television.

“David Hasselhoff is the most beautiful man who ever lived,” Gamma Rae sighed. She had a framed photograph of him hanging by the table, and owned all his albums, and Tamsin often heard her singing his songs in the shower.

“He’s not as good looking as my daddy,” Tamsin said.

“Oh, Jason’s always been a pretty one, I suppose,” Gamma Rae said. “But he can’t hold a tune. And his arms don’t look like that, and never did.” She pointed at the television screen and turned her head as the front door opened.

Aunt Tess pushed through the door with baby Sharky, who was nearly two now, clinging to her hand, and a shopping bag dangling from her other arm. The plastic tortoiseshell comb in her French Twist was slipping loose, dark strands clinging to her sweaty neck, and a large baby bump pushing through her tee-shirt.

“Well, look who finally decided to show up.”

“Sorry Ma,” Aunt Tess put her hand to her back and bent to adjust her plastic flip-flop. “I had to drop the kids off at Ron’s mother’s.”

“I see you had time to go shopping,” Gamma Rae said. “At a department store, no less! While your sister and I have been slaving all day in this heat to get things ready for the party tomorrow.”

Aunt Tess dropped Sharky’s hand and waved him toward the backdoor. “Go outside and see Grandpa. Ask him to show you his tools.”

“Stay away from those cupcakes!” Gamma Rae called after him.

Tamsin sat up on the couch, kneeling backwards to face her aunt, resting her arms on the rounded cushions. “Hi, Aunt Tess.”

“Hi honey,” Aunt Tess said, pushing her bangs off her forehead. She brought the shopping bag around to Tamsin and set it beside her on the couch. “I wasn’t shopping for myself,” she said to her mother, that self-righteous tone creeping into her voice. “I was picking up something for Tam.”

Aunt Tess opened the bag and pulled out a lovely party dress, printed with bright yellow daffodils, and held it up against her chest. It had a sweetheart neckline and flutter sleeves.

“An early present for you, Tam,” Aunt Tess said, stroking the fabric. “I thought you could use something pretty to wear to the party tomorrow.”

“Say thank you,” said Gamma, though she frowned at Aunt Tess.

“Thank you.”

“It’s very pretty, Tessie,” Gamma said, “but it’s too expensive, and it’ll only be me you’re calling when you can’t make rent again. And how do you know it’ll even fit?”

“I found it on the sale rack, Ma,” Aunt Tess said. “And Cameron was with me. I made him try it on. Don’t tell Ron. But they’re about the same size.”

This was the worst of all. Tamsin's cousin Cameron was always begging the girls to let him try on their dresses or wear their lipstick, but it was humiliating that at nearly twelve years old her aunt should compare their figures.

“It’s your color,” Aunt Tess smiled.

Tamsin held the dress up to her shoulders. It was very pretty. Yellow was her favorite color. Maybe yellow was her favorite. Or maybe she just liked it because she was tired of pink, because she lived in a house with too many girls, where plastic flamingos grinned on the front lawn, and on the vinyl shower curtain, and on flamingo tea pots with matching cups and saucers.

“It’s too long for her,” Gamma Rae said.

“So I’ll hem it,” Aunt Tess said. “It’ll take two minutes on the machine.”

“It’s so pretty, I’m afraid I’ll get it dirty at the party,” Tamsin said. “I don’t want to rip it.”

Aunt Tess gave a big sigh, that nothing-I-ever-do-is-right sigh, and Tamsin heard the kitchen door slam as Blythe came bounding into the living room, smelling like Ban de Soliel and Coppertone mixed together. She threw her arms around her aunt and kissed her round belly, and whispered hello to the baby cousin inside. And then she saw the dress.

“Oh my goodness!” she cried. “That is the most beautiful dress I have ever seen in my entire life. Is it for me? Please, please, please say it’s for me.”

“No, sweetie, it’s for Tamsin.” Aunt Tess patted her head. “For her birthday party.” She insisted Tamsin try it on right there in the living room. Tamsin wriggled out of her shorts and tee shirt, pulling the dress on as fast as she could, because of course she wasn't wearing a bra. They were too uncomfortable, and as Blythe so often pointed out, Tamsin had nothing to fill

one out yet. She turned around, letting Aunt Tess pull up the back zipper. The dress hung past her knees.

“I told you it was too long,” Gamma said.

The flutter sleeves slipped off her shoulders in a way that would look flirty and charming on Blythe, but made Tamsin feel ridiculous, as if she was trying to be pretty, as if she thought such a thing was possible. And Blythe gave her a baleful stare, tears of envy burning in her eyes. Daffodil dresses were Blythe's thing. Being pretty was hers too.

“It looks ridiculous!” Blythe said. “She doesn’t even like it and I do! I want it.”

Gamma Rae pinched Blythe’s shoulder. “That’s one,” she warned, holding up her pointer finger.

“She can wear it.” Tamsin stroked the skirt. It was full. It would bell out if she twirled. She was too clumsy to twirl. Her father would come to the party tomorrow. He might take her for a ride in his Mustang convertible, just the two of them, and let her listen to rap songs without the curse words bleeped out, or he might want to shoot some hoops with her in the driveway, and Tamsin didn’t want to have to worry about some stupid dress getting in the way. “I don’t mind. Really.”

“See?” Blythe said. “She wants me to have it. It’s her birthday. She gets to say what happens.”

“You have a hundred pretty dresses,” Aunt Tess said to Blythe. “This one is for Tam.”

Blythe gave a piercing shriek. She began to cry. She cursed at her aunt and her grandmother and Tamsin too. Gamma Rae grabbed her under the arm and dragged her upstairs. Blythe scratched and bit at her, and when Gamma got her to the landing, Blythe grabbed the fawn figurine on the shelf and threw it down the stairs. It shattered against the wall at the bottom.

“Don’t worry about her.” Aunt Tess struggled not to cry herself. “She’s being a spoiled brat.”

Tamsin stared at the shards of the little fawn sparkling on the carpet. She thought of her mother and Aunt Tess tangled at the foot of the stairs. Aunt Tess had already been pregnant then, and though she wasn't showing yet, and no one spoke about it, everyone one knew that Angel's boyfriend, and not Uncle Ron, was the father.

And Tamsin thought of the night before she turned ten. That was the year she dreamt of snow. When the lake was thick with green scum. The light bulbs in the kitchens buzzed and browned-out, and the whir of the electric fans slowed and sped up again, and Tamsin could not sleep because her nightdress stuck to her damp skin.

Blythe said they would be snow maidens for her birthday. That night they swiped a canister of silver glitter from Gamma Rae’s craft supply closet. Tamsin scattered handfuls on the carpet. Blythe dusted the mantle. Glitter on the wood stove, on the stair railing, on the swans and fawns and the hearts. On David Hasselhoff. Tamsin remembered the way it shimmered like frost in the moonlight through the window. The way it made her feel cool for a moment, as if it were truly winter.

+

Blythe was confined to Tamsin’s room for the rest of the afternoon. When Gamma Rae called up and said she could come out, Blythe refused. She stayed in there sulking through dinner, and well into the evening. Tamsin knocked but Blythe ignored her, even when she whispered that she was sorry, that she didn’t want that dress and Blythe could have it or she would throw it in the lake. And Tamsin sat down with her back against the door and cried.

Downstairs, the sewing machine hummed in the living room, where Aunt Tess was hemming her dress, and complaining to Gamma Rae about the fact that Aunt Daisy had been sitting on her ass all day sunbathing. Lazy Daisy, she called her. She hadn't lifted a finger to help them, and her daughter was growing up exactly like her, thinking the whole world was going to be handed to her on a platter just because she was beautiful.

"And smart too," Gamma Rae called back. "Don't forget about that. The only one of you girls who bothered to finish high school."

"I could have graduated too," Aunt Tess said. "If I hadn't gotten pregnant with Amy."

"Coulda don't count," Gamma said.

"I made it farther than Angel," Tamsin heard Aunt Tess mutter. "Eighth grade."

"You shut up about your sisters," Gamma Rae said. "If Angel don't show here tomorrow, most likely you're to blame."

"Ma!" Aunt Tess began to cry.

Tamsin didn't hear anymore, because the key turned, and Blythe opened the door. She wore a fresh dress and walked past as if nothing had happened. Tamsin followed her out the backdoor and sat on the steps. Blythe picked up her baton from the lawn and began to twirl it in the blue summer dusk. Fireflies signaled in the grass and flew up high in the trees, higher than Tamsin had ever seen, like stars shining between the leaves.

"*Never* go to Louisiana," Blythe said finally. "It is a terrible place." She marched back and forth. "There are bugs the size of your hand. And it is too hot."

She tossed the baton in the air and caught it. "And don't worry," she said. "This helps me think. An idea is coming. Very, very soon."

Tamsin popped the head off a dandelion. Aunt Daisy came out of the garage in a strapless black sundress, calling the girls a pair of sparkle ponies as she brushed past into the house, smelling of sunshine and violets and the secret cigarettes she smoked with Grandpa in the garage when she thought no one was around.

“Hi Tessie,” Tamsin heard her say. A moment later, the bathroom light flicked on, and the radio began to play, and Aunt Daisy’s voice floated with the music over the lawn.

Tamsin pelted Blythe with the dandelion head. So nothing would happen on the night before her birthday. Maybe it didn’t matter.

“Don’t do that,” Blythe said. She knelt and cupped the flower in her hand, stroking it like a wounded kitten. “It’s just a darling baby thing.” She whispered to it and held it to her ear and laughed.

Tamsin scratched a mosquito bite on her leg. The full moon rose over the lake. Grandpa Bill came out into the yard and stared at the sky with his hands on his hips and told the girls it was the strawberry moon. Gamma Rae stepped out on the steps to argue with him, because a moon so big and gold had to be the harvest moon, even if it was the end of June.

+

The girls took a bath together before bed. Tamsin stepped out first, when the water grew cold and the bubbles from Aunt Daisy’s strawberry shampoo were fizzled down. She sat on the fluffy pink toilet lid, working the tangles from her hair with a comb.

Blythe had her head underwater, which helped her think the best of all, because she didn’t have to worry about breathing. Tamsin was supposed to be counting. Instead she traced daisies in on the steam bathroom mirror.

Blythe came rushing to the surface of the water with a gasp. She pointed at the wooden rack where their swimsuits were hung to dry. A bikini for Blythe, with ruffles and pink hearts, and a nautical stripe one-piece for Tamsin.

“We’ll wear our bathing suits to bed,” she said.

Which really made no sense at all. But Tamsin smuggled the suits out of the bathroom in her towel. Blythe closed their bedroom door. She grabbed two of Tamsin’s nightgowns from the chipped yellow bureau and took the prettier one, with the short, puffed sleeves and the pink roses. Tamsin pulled the other one over her head. Her bathing suit was still damp, and Gamma Rae was always harping about wet bottoms being a recipe for yeast infections, but Blythe just shushed Tamsin and promised it would be worth it.

“I can see your straps,” Tamsin said. “And the ruffle.”

“Fix it. And hurry up.”

“You hurry up,” Tamsin said. There were no locks on the bedroom door and no one in the house ever knocked and any moment Aunt Daisy or Aunt Tess might burst in looking for watermelon lip-gloss or blue eye-shadow or stolen satin panties printed with polka dots, and then they would get caught.

“Lights out,” Gamma Rae called. “And I mean it.”

Downstairs, canned laughter came from the television. They would have to wait until Gamma Rae dozed off on the couch. Blythe switched off the lamp and they hopped into Tamsin’s bed. The neon sign from the trailer park cast the usual comforting electric pink and green streaks across the room. The yellow dress hung on the back of the door. She would not wear it. Aunt Tess could cry all she wanted. Tamsin didn’t care.

Her mother might come to the party. Tamsin didn't want her mother to see her in a department store dress, even if it was off the sales rack. It might make her mother feel bad that she couldn't afford to buy Tamsin nice things, that she had never bought her anything at all. She might think Tamsin cared about things like expensive dresses. What if her mother didn't wear a dress? Angel might be embarrassed by that. Or what if she did wear a dress and Tamsin's was nicer, and her mother cried tears of spite just like Blythe and stomped out of the room and then smashed one of the fawn figurines on the mantle? What then?

Aunt Daisy stuck her head in the door. "Goodnight, buttercups," she said, and kissed them both.

Tamsin turned over on her side. She touched the photograph taped to the wall. It was her favorite. Taken with her father, when she was about two years old. She was dressed as a lion in a tawny romper, sucking on the tail. And he held her in his arms. His hair was still long then, falling in glossy black waves to his shoulders. Maybe he wouldn't bring a new girlfriend to the party, after all. Maybe Aunt Daisy had come home from Louisiana because things weren't right with Uncle Rudy. He was away so much anyway, maybe it wasn't so terrible to think they might break up. Aunt Daisy, with her skin the color of ripe peaches, was beautiful enough for Tamsin's father, whereas Angel never had been. Perhaps it was possible they might fall in love, and nobody would mind, and everybody would think it right, the way it should have been all along. Aunt Daisy would be Tamsin's mother, and Blythe would be her sister.

"It's time," Blythe whispered.

They crept from the bed and down the stairs. Gamma Rae snored on the couch. Blythe tiptoed to the door. It was unlocked. Gamma Rae always said they had nothing worth stealing that Angel hadn't already taken, and that locks were for prisons, and that no force on earth could

keep a wild-heart child cooped up on a summer night if she had a mind to be outside, and Gamma Rae said she was too old to try.

Tamsin followed Blythe out into the warm night. She did not know yet that her mother would not come to her birthday party. Or that Tamsin would let Blythe wear the yellow dress, and Tamsin's father's new girlfriend be overdressed too, and turn to smile at Blythe when she descended the porch steps, and never glance at Tamsin at all. In later years, Tamsin will wonder how it might have been different for her, if she had been the girl in the daffodil dress, but for now she only knows that this would be remembered as the year of moonlight lake swimming.

The girls left their nightgowns on the shore. Blythe said that when they grew up they could move to Florida, and grow their hair very long, and get jobs as professional mermaids. The water was like velvet, and Blythe dove beneath the surface, and Tamsin followed, in the path of golden light the moon cast on the water, swearing forever after that something rough and scaled brushed against her leg, and disappeared. +

GROWTH

Ruby lived in an old mansion in Connecticut filled with things nobody wanted, like taxidermied vultures, polyester pantsuits, and children. It sat on a forgotten corner of a historic lane, the spot where the housewives, upon spying the crumbling iron fence and overlong grass, suddenly decided it was growing late, doubled back their baby strollers, and went home. The house had two hundred windows, mostly broken. Doors opened to brick walls and staircases led to nothing. And everywhere there were boys. The house was overrun with them. Skateboarding in the corridors, sliding down the bannisters. They never took off their shoes. They never made their beds. But the old lady said boys were best raised in the manner of sea monkeys or pet rocks, and washed her hands of them.

Ruby was the only girl in the house, and the old lady's darling, so she had the grandest bedroom, on the third floor, at the furthest end of the furthest wing. She could play her mother's old vinyl records without disturbing anyone. There were holes in the vaulted ceiling and butterflies got trapped between the rafters. Windows lined three walls. When the drapes were opened, she felt as though she was living in a strange girl-aquarium.

To the north, nothing much to look at beyond the dumpster.

To the east, the cobblestoned street and the slow clatter of sad horses pulling tourist carriages. Ruby longed to follow them home to their stables. She would steal their sugar cubes to suck between her teeth, tear the blinders from their eyes and set them free, and she would run

beside them in the meadows. Run and keep running clear across the country until they reached Carefree, Arizona.

She watched the lemon-haired housewives, never wavering in their smiles, though sometimes the sunlight flared against their diamond solitaires, like the SOS of a sinking ship. Ruby thought they might have been even sadder than the horses. That if she followed them home and unlocked the doors they would not even have the heart to run.

And to the west, the courtyard and the gardens. That window was almost as good as going outside, and far less frightening. Ruby spent most of her days sitting on the sill. From there, she could see the mansion's west wing. The windows glowed brilliantly in the evenings. The old lady's silhouette glided from room to room as she adjusted the chandelier dimmers and switched on art deco lamps. The old lady loved electric light almost as much as she loved roses, almost as much as lemon wedges and David Bowie. She said it reminded her of the Chicago World's Fair, and of her only love, who had been lost to her forever when she had worn a pearl necklace to dinner and refused to take it off.

From the western window, Ruby could see the attic window across the steep-pitched roof. That was Joseph's room. Far below, the roses grew in tangled briars along the crumbling stone terraces. The kitchen door was down there. It slammed at least forty-eight times a day as the boys came and went, wherever it is that boys go on summer days when there is no school. During the day, the older boys loafed around the yard drinking Coors light and throwing the cans into the empty swimming pool. Some of them had jobs. Joseph mowed lawns and Andy fixed cars. Tristan woke at dawn without being told and spent his days tending the gardens. The younger boys went to the lake or rode their bicycles to the sand pits. The old lady said they were

fairy changelings. Years ago, she had decided Ruby was old enough to know where babies came from. The fairies left them in the parsley bed.

“That’s not what I read in *Seventeen*,” Ruby had said.

But the old lady had scoffed at such superstition. She gathered Ruby onto her lap in the velvet wingchair and explained the facts of life to her. A baby could not get inside of a woman, and by the spear of St. Michael, however would it get out? That was just a gruesome village tale, told to frighten the girls into behaving themselves. Those magazines were nearly a quarter century old, and Ruby should not believe everything she read. The women she had seen with swollen bellies had probably done something foolish, like swallowing watermelon seeds during the full moon. She told Ruby fairies preferred the new moon and that if she was patient and watched from the window she might catch a glimpse of one.

One night, Ruby heard a bleating in the garden like a fawn that had once gotten trapped inside the iron fence during a thunderstorm. She crept to the window. The yew hedge by the forest rustled. And she saw it. A baby, squalling in a leafy patch of greens. A fairy, with mottled grey-violet skin and wasted arms, was slipping away. She was as tall as a woman, but much thinner. Her hair straggled to her shoulder blades, so sharp that her wings must have soon burst through. She twitched as she fled the yard. In the streetlamps, her cheekbones were tight and her eyes glittered, and Ruby knew that the old lady had been telling the truth.

It was the scent of parsley that attracted the fairies to the dilapidated mansion. But they were wicked, lazy things. Sometimes they did not make it all the way to the garden. The old lady found babies in the post box or the bucket in the bottom of the well. Christopher had been left on the verandah in a soup tureen, and Gabriel was found in a metal trash bin all the way at the end of the lane. The fairies left older boys too. The older boys were often bruised. In the mornings,

the old lady shook the branches of the cherry tree, and boys fell out with the rotten fruit. Joseph Hunter had been nearly eight years old when the old lady had found him rootling for parsley in the garden. If she had known what was best, the old lady always said, she would have raised the bed to the ground the day she found Joseph, and been done with fairy mischief for good.

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In the winter, it was not so bad. True, the old lady had a strict and unreasonable rule that furnace was never stoked until the Hunter's Moon rose. It was her only rule, and she prided herself on the keeping of it. There were years when the first snow fell when the late roses were still in bloom, when only yesterday Ruby might have sat in the western window of her bedroom, wrapped in a patchwork quilt, watching the last butterfly stagger over the withered grasses below. In the night, snow drifted through the holes in her bedroom ceiling. She woke to find sparkling heaps dusting the curio cabinets and the golden spiral staircase, and her eyelashes frozen closed.

The old lady came with a broom and swept the snow. "Now, now. It's nothing more than fairy dust." Her breath hung in clouds and her eyes no longer looked like the Bermuda sea but rather like a frozen pool where someone drowning was trapped beneath.

In the winter, the old lady was softer. She brought mulled cider instead of Diet Pepsi. She brought soup. In the winter, the boys went to school, and Ruby thought less of running away with the boy who worked at the gas station.

But in the summer! The summer was a very different thing indeed. It seeped in and caused a sweet sort of itch, because Ruby was just thirteen years old, the age when a girl's skin is still far too tight to fit her spirit in, and her heart has not yet grown. It was still the heart of a girl-child. Hard and green as an unripe crabapple, painful and throbbing triple time. At night, Ruby

sat in the western window, praying for a cool breeze. Those were night-swimming nights. The boys would go to the lake. They would go to 7-11. Mix coke and cherry Slurpees, drive around with the windows rolled down, blaring Stone Temple Pilots from the tape deck, and end up at the church carnival. The girls would be there. A different kind of girl. The kind who slept in canopy beds. Girls named Jennifer, or Kristen, or Amy. The daughters of stockbrokers and former opera singers. Sleep-away camp girls, ice skaters, cheerleaders, virginity savers, holding out for blowing white curtains and rose petals. They would pair off and ride the Ferris Wheel. The boys would make the chairs rock so the girls would squeal and grab their hands. At the highest point the wheel would stop. And maybe, just maybe, there would be a kiss.

And Ruby would watch the carnival lights from her window, and try to breathe. Oh, she wanted peaches! She wanted to die, and learn to drive, and wear sheer white dresses and silver glitter eye shadow, and a jewel in her navel. She began to cry, and her tears were like something good to eat, like salt-water taffy.

~

On summer afternoons, sunlight slanted low over the floorboards. The heat was sickening. Ruby went to the claw-footed porcelain tub the alcove. It was large enough to fit three people. She drew a cold-water bath and told herself it was like an indoor swimming pool. She put on her mother's Edith Piaf record, and unpinned her hair. The old lady liked Ruby to wear it braided and wound up in a coronet because it was too long and thick. And it was not a proper color at all. Golden-red, like Indian summer. The ends curled, which everybody knew was the mark of a fairy curse.

She slid into the water, feeling her heartbeat slow. The light from the stained-glass oriole window turned her feet blue. She was a blue-scaled fish. The boys said blood was blue and so

was her heart, that only exposure to oxygen made it turn red, but Ruby didn't know for sure. She pressed her legs together and lifted them out of the water. She was the last mermaid kept in a tank. All of her kind had died and turned to saguaro cactus when the seas dried up and left only deserts in their wake.

Except that Ruby knew real mermaids were quite small. Curio cabinets lined her bedroom walls, filled with strange and lovely things that Ruby found in the trunks the old lady let her unlock. Mexican paper flowers and deer antlers. Something that looked like a dry and withered hand, and the skeleton of a mermaid not much longer than Ruby's arm. It had teeth that looked suspiciously like wood.

"Just like George Washington," the old lady had explained to her.

Ruby had never seen a desert but her mother had been there. She might be there still. Some of her mother's things were in the trunks too. There was a pair of red China satin platform heels. An elaborate rhinestone tiara. A bottle of Love's Baby Soft with a few drops left at the bottom. Postcards, all blank. Salt Lake City, Reno, and Las Vegas. Grand Junction, Colorado, and some place called Carefree, Arizona. There was Revlon pancake makeup, dried to dust. Her mother's sophomore yearbook. *Wydeville High 1979*. Girls with feathered hair and electric blue eyeliner. Signatures in bubbly script. *Don't ever change! Remember Silver Bridge? Let's keep in touch. First period math was the worst! Have a great summer!*

Her mother had left them, as clues to be deciphered. When Ruby held the blank postcards, she would know that her mother was a showgirl in Reno. That she wore gold glitter eyelashes and ostrich feather headdresses, and that sometimes when she danced onstage she thought of Ruby and her smile would stay painted on but a single tear would slip down her cheek that the audience would never see. But later she would wipe off her makeup with Pond's Cold

Cream before a brass mirror framed with light bulbs and whisper to her reflection, *non, je ne regrette rien.*

Ruby stepped out of the bath and wrapped a white silk sheet around her body. It clung to her skin and blushed pink. Pools of water gathered at her feet. She walked slowly around the room and pulled the velvet drapes open. The sheet left a damp trail on the splintered floorboards. She tightened it around her torso, and went to the western window, leaning her elbows on the sill. She let her damp hair hang out the window to dry in the breeze. The sun warmed her skin. She danced a few steps to the music, and twisted a lock of hair around her fingers, pretending it was a ring of rose-gold. The old lady had one like that. She promised Ruby could have it when she grew up. A useless promise. The old lady seemed to have no intention of letting her grow up, though Ruby had made her plans, just in case. She would wear rings on each finger, eat ice-cream in bed at dawn, and sunbathe on the beach in a shiny silver string bikini.

Down below, the younger boys were playing on the lawn. They all had silly names that Joseph gave them. Monkey Toes was trying to stand on his head. The old lady had promised him ten dollars for a good headstand and he had been practicing all summer. He fell on his back, the scent of crushed grass drifting to Ruby's window.

"I think it's because your head is shaped like an egg," she heard Blanket Head say.

She tried to remember the feeling of cool grass underfoot. There had been a terrible day, perhaps yesterday, when the old lady had led her outside wearing her mother's red China satin platform heels because she couldn't find another pair of shoes. The sky had tried to crush her into the ground. And the older boys had fallen silent at the sight of her. The ones she knew the best looked away. They grew fascinated by anthills. By shoelaces and bits of string in their pockets.

And the red shoes made her stumble. Ruby knew how to walk gracefully in high heels. She spent hours practicing in room, placing one front directly in front of the other, like walking on an invisible line, because she read that was the way Marilyn Monroe had done it. But upstairs in her bedroom the wood floors were smooth. Outside things were different. She had not been brave enough that day for the garden or the forest or for boys as they were in the real world. But now Ruby thought that at the very least she should have slipped one shoe off and pressed her bare foot into the grass before letting the old lady take her back inside. She had lost her chance.

Her mother had lost her chance. That's what the old lady said. Ruby wasn't really sure what it meant, and the old lady never gave her a straight answer.

Ruby heard a racket on the stairs, a shriek in the kitchen, and then Joseph bounded out the screen door, sandy curls still damp. He looked taller every time Ruby saw him, his green Clean-Cut Lawn Care tee shirt shrunken and tight across his chest. Joseph was a fish-eyed boy, with early jowls, his sandy curls still damp. The small gap between his front teeth showed when he smiled, which he did often. The old lady stepped out on the terrace and Joseph planted a big kiss on her cheek.

"You little devil." The old lady gave him a sharp slap on the arm, but Ruby knew she was still pleased. "And no more of your tricks. Saint Sophie's hair, have you never heard of a toilet?"

"I have ma'am. One of the marvels of the modern world! In the future, I will try to utilize one more properly."

On the street, a car door slammed. The girl with the fawn hair and bird shoulders was waiting for Joseph in her yellow Jeep Wrangler. Her name was Jessica Brown. Joseph bragged about her all of the time now. She had the most perfect smile in the world, and a private phone line in her bedroom because her father was an orthodontist, and even though Joseph was just the

orphan boy who mowed his lawn, the old man had been impressed with his admirable work ethic and invited him to dinner. When Joseph asked if he could take his daughter on a date he consented. They were together quite often now.

“Do you think my head is shaped like an egg?” Monkey Toes asked as Joseph jogged past.

“Yes,” Joseph called back. “But I can flatten it for you.”

Ruby pulled the velvet drapes closed. She went to the turntable, and put on her mother's Ziggy Stardust album. David Bowie, the old lady always said, was the most beautiful man who ever lived, and a prophet besides. Ruby held up her hand mirror. Her skin was not tanned because she could not go to the beach in the afternoons. Her eyeteeth were slanted, and her breasts were too large for her frame, so that her tee shirts did not fall in lovely straight lines from her shoulders.

Above, the light burst through the holes in her ceiling like a nuclear explosion. A black butterfly with golden-tipped wings escaped. The old lady said there was something monstrous about butterflies. Insects should not have wings made of flower petals. And the old lady said that caterpillars were fairy babies that had not been born. In the chrysalis, they turned to egg yolk. Ruby unwrapped the white silk sheet from her torso. She held the ends and tried to flutter them like wings. She would escape through the ceiling. But she couldn't get off the ground. The metamorphosis had to come first. She pulled the silk sheet over her head and wound herself up in the lace under-curtains and waited to dissolve. All she had to do was let go. She could feel it beginning.

“What are you doing now?” The old lady was there. Over the music, Ruby had not heard the rattle of keys dangling from the jeweled chatelaine she always wore at her waist.

“Becoming a butterfly.” Ruby's eyelashes fluttered against the silk. The room was a white glow, like she was living inside an incandescent light bulb. She heard the clink of the domed silver tray, and saw a dark shape.

“You should have told me you wanted to be a butterfly,” the old lady said. “I used to be one myself.”

She put her hands on Ruby's shoulders and unwound her from the curtains. Ruby knew her chance was lost again. The old lady had told her before that a butterfly forced too soon from the cocoon would die. That it had to fight free on its own to strengthen its wings to fly.

“You’ve ruined it,” Ruby said.

The old lady smiled. Her teeth were very white, almost blue-ish, the same color as the thick braid of hair hanging down her back. She wore a bustled black taffeta train tied over her skirt, and the coral silk blouse that meant it was Saturday. A mangy fur pelt was wrapped around her neck. She always wore it, no matter how hot the weather, because it had been a gift from Lady Violetta long, long ago, when the old lady had been a housemaid at her manor.

“It was already ruined,” the old lady said. Her train dragged like a tail on the dusty floor as she turned away. “It’s time for you to take your medicine now.”

She poured a dose from a brown glass bottle on the tray into a shot glass. Ruby gagged as she swallowed it. She took a sip of water but the taste burned her tongue.

Ruby didn’t really know why she needed medicine but the old lady insisted it would keep her healthy. It would kill the germs or any parasites. And the old mansion was overrun with rats. Ruby could hear them at nights scratching in the walls. The old lady said a female rat was called a doe, and once one of them got pregnant, there was no undoing the damage. Ruby needed to be careful, and never sleep with her mouth open.

"I once knew a girl who swallowed a rat," the old lady said.

Ruby went to the turntable and set her mother's New Order record beneath the needle, keeping the volume low.

"Long ago," the old lady said. "A girl by the name of Alis O'Brien." She withdrew a fresh white chemise and a bra with pink satin bows from the curved French dresser and handed them to Ruby.

Ruby sighed, and stepped behind the dressing screen, tugging the chemise over her head. She in no mood to be twisted all round by one of the old lady's stories. But Alis O'Brien. Poor Alis O'Brien! A wild-heart girl, with peach blossom skin, no better than she ought to have been. Down she slipped to the river one afternoon when she should have been helping her mother mind the little ones, and went for a naked swim. After, her skin water-chilled, she stretched out in a patch of sun on the banks, and what do you think she did, the careless thing, but fall asleep right there, her dark curls tangled in the cattails and long grasses, with that pretty red mouth of hers hanging wide open. And as she slept, along came a rat and crept down her throat.

"That's impossible."

"Tricky things, rats." The old lady bent to retrieve the silk sheet left in a heap on the floor and glided to the balcony staircase. "Do you know," she asked, "they've been known to stretch out so thin they can slip through water pipes?" Her train swished as she ascended the steps. At the top, she smiled down at Ruby, her white braid dangling over the railing. "Oh, they are strong swimmers too. I would not be surprised if one made his way right up the drain into this old tub one day when you're bathing."

Ruby extended her arms, pointed her toes, and turned a pirouette. "Im-poss-ible," she repeated. "When I take a bath, the drain is plugged. "

The old lady pursed her lips, and Ruby twirled three times in triumph. It was not easy to score points against the old lady. The white silk sheet unfurled over the balcony railing, grazing Ruby's hair. The old lady gave it a few smart snaps. She fastened the sheet to the clothesline running overhead, beside last week's chemises and the bedding Ruby had scrubbed out in the bathtub on her knees before the old lady could see the stains. The wooden pins clicked, one, two, three.

"Well," the old lady said, "I suppose if you aren't interested I can leave rest of the story for another time, or tell it to the boys."

"I thought that was the end."

"There's always a bit more, after the end."

Ruby curled on the daybed and tucked her legs beneath her. The sun was setting. She pulled at the hem of her chemise, her skin feeling oddly cool, as if she too had just emerged from a glinty river. The electric fans whirred, sucking through a gentle cross-breeze. She leaned back on the cushions, gazing up at the ceiling rafters. The white sheet billowed and snapping taut. Breathing in and out. She yawned, to let the old lady see she didn't care much about her stories, and closed her eyes as if she was settling in for a nap. Behind her lids, a girl was skimming through marshy fens. The sound of water filled her ears, and then there was no other girl. It was she, not Alis O'Brien, bathing naked in a river, drifting to sleep beneath a chandelier of willow branches. Only, it was a boy and not a rat who crept up to her as she slept. A boy with tribal tattoos and eyes like a sad lion, who bent his head, kissed her throat, and whispered, we live always underground.

Her eyes snapped open. The old lady's heels tapped on the staircase as she descended, and though she did not look at Ruby, a small, satisfied smile played on her lips.

And that was the thing about the old lady's stories. They got inside. They kept spinning. Always a little bit more. A dozen different endings from the first time she told the tale, splintering in a thousand directions like light refracting through the prisms strung in the western window, bits of color that dazzled the suffocating walls of Ruby's bedroom and brightened her skin, until it flashed in her eyes, and knocked her off balance with a sudden blindness.

"Fine," she said. "Tell me the rest."

"The rest of what?"

"Of the story."

"Which story would that be?"

The old lady paused at the foot of the stairs, and Ruby lobbed a pillow at her, pounding the daybed with her fist. "The story about Alis O'Brien! The one you were just telling me!"

"Ah." The pillow came shooting back and smacked Ruby in the face. "Poor Alis. Not that there weren't those who would be later saying she that had it coming to her."

Rubbing her smarting eyes, Ruby tucked the pillow behind her neck. Yes, yes, five little ones at home, you said that already. And her poor mother working her fingers to the bone. And fine, fancy Alis flitting about with her head held as high as if she was Lady Violetta herself, with her breathless dancing in the music halls with Greek sailors from down by the docks, in those twinkling green velvet heels of hers.

"Secondhand heels, to be sure, but just the same."

The old lady droned on and on, her voice falling rhythm with the fans. She would spin the story out forever, just to punish Ruby for the interruption, knowing that with each crank she was corkscrewing even deeper. And the visions would get all tangled up with the girl.

Alis O'Brien. Dusky light shivering and sheening the river, and the scent of peat fire when she woke on the banks, none the wiser, and went skipping home, gay as ever, with a little white lie for her mother sharp upon her tongue. Oh, and surely nothing seemed much amiss, and she would have fetched a pail of water for boiling, leaning on her elbows for a long, dreamy moment to admire the shadowy girl who lived in the well bottom. She would have sang while washing the dishes, the old hymns that pleased her mother. That night she would be out in her green heels again. A green silk sash cinching her slender waist, never dreaming, in that time, that a rat was curled up inside her. And she went about her dawns and middays and night rains in her easy, laughing way, just as she had always done.

But it wasn't so long before she grew pale and sickened from the thing. Her belly all aflutter as the wretched beast unfurled and pattered about, tickling her with its tail, eating what she ate, growing bigger every day. Oh, the shame of it. She no longer held that proud head so high.

"There was no more dancing for her, the poor thing," the old lady said. She sat in a horsehair chair and rest her hands on the arms, her nails tapping against the wood. There was a long silence.

"Is that the end?" Ruby finally asked.

"The end indeed."

She twisted around and propped up on her elbows to look at the old lady, who was watching dust motes filtered in the sunlight. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"What happened to the shoes?"

"Given to the priest to burn."

Ruby gave a little shriek of dismay. Those lovely, gleaming shoes, gone to waste.

"Now, now," the old lady said. "Some say her sister switched them out with an old pair of slippers, at the very last minute."

Ruby stroked the ends of her hair, her brow puckering as she tried to work it all out. "And how did the rat get out?"

"They cut it out."

"No!"

"Oh, but they had too. It would have gone much worse for her if they had not. The creature had begun to eat right through her."

"Did she die?"

"Yes."

"What happened to the rat?"

"Thrown back in the river it crawled out of."

"Dead?"

"Most likely," the old lady said. "But as I've been telling you, rats are notoriously strong swimmers. So be a good girl now, and don't argue with me about your medicine." She pointed to the silver tray. "I've brought a treat for you."

Ruby tried not to get her hopes up. Sometimes when Ruby lifted the lid the plate was empty. The old lady would sidestep the silver dome when Ruby threw it. "Finished already?" the old lady would ask. "Indeed, gluttony is a mortal sin."

The old lady was always playing tricks like that. Once she had gone up and down the stairs three times in a row promising the joke was over, and each time she brought back an empty

tray. She laughed until she cried. Ruby threw something or kicked her and sometimes she laughed too. She couldn't help it. It was so ridiculous.

But usually there was a plastic package of Saltines. Spoonfuls of raw honey or fat-free sour cream. Fat-free fruit snacks. Fat-free anything. That was healthiest. There were cans of Diet Pepsi, sometimes a bucket of ice, and always lemon wedges. The old lady's former pirate ship days had left her with a lasting reverence for lemons.

"Go on," the old lady said.

Ruby lifted the lid, and underneath was a videotape. *The Royal Wedding of Charles and Diana*. Just a few years ago it had been released on video and so the old lady finally bought a VCR. She let Ruby watch it with her now and then as a special treat.

"Put it in," the old lady said.

Ruby went to the television and fed the tape into the VCR. She pressed play and went to sit at the old lady's feet again. The old lady put her hand on Ruby's head and stroked her hair. The princess was shrouded in veils inside a glass box drawn by horses. And the broadcaster said that for the first time they would see in all of its glory—that dress. Ruby thought it looked like a crumpled wad of handkerchiefs. There was a girl spun up somewhere deep inside the foamy layers of satin and tulle but Ruby could hardly see her. All she could see was her diamond crown. And her train was so long that she nearly stumbled backwards on the church steps from the weight of it.

"Her slippers had suede soles and were etched with 24 carat gold," the old lady told Ruby. She always said that. She read it in *People Magazine* years ago. Ruby thought of the golden swirls on mother's red satin shoes. If she ever married a prince maybe she could wear

them. But the prince has mouse teeth and his ears stuck out and when the bride walked down the aisle Ruby could see that she was breathing too hard.

“Poor thing,” the old lady said. Being a princess was a terrible thing, she told Ruby, and these days it seemed like it could happen to anyone.

Ruby watched the bride’s father give her away. That’s what parents did with children they didn’t want anymore. They wrapped them in white and ate them or gave them to nutcracker princes or left them for fairies to steal away and leave in some old lady’s parsley bed.

The videotape was over two hours long. The electric fans whirred and the white silk sheet billowed overhead. Ruby curled at the old lady’s feet with one arm tucked beneath her head and drifted to sleep. She dreamt of abandoned amusement parks and a marble staircase where girls floated up and down wearing high heels and she herself was a rabbit being pulled from a hat. When she woke, it was past twilight. The television screen was blue and the old lady was gone.

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The evening of the Midsummer's Night Dream Dance, the overwhelming scent of *Drakkar Noir* and *Obsession for Men* hung in clouds above the narcissi beds. Beyond the western window, Chinese Lanterns on the lake pavilion glowed through the trees. The boys said there would be dancing, sparkling punch spiked from vodka flasks. The DJ would play an old Billy Joel song about how these were these days to remember, because they would not last forever.

Ruby sat in the window and watched the boys leave. They wore dark jackets and slacks that the old lady had gotten second-hand, and spent weeks carefully pressing and mending. The kitchen door slammed a dozen times. Joseph was the last to leave. He whistled as he jogged down the garden path and did not even glance up at Ruby.

Ruby heard a motor running on the street. She went to the eastern window and peeked from behind the curtain. There was Jessica Brown in her yellow Jeep Wrangler. She stepped out on the street curb. The wispy dress she wore looked like iris petals in the morning. Joseph pinned a cluster of white roses to her flat bodice. She wore her hair down and when they drove away Ruby saw it hardly even stirred in the wind.

The curtain dropped. Ruby smoked a cigarette hidden in a golden case beneath her bed. She could feel her own hair coiled like a boa constrictor atop her head. The weight made her neck ache. She took a swig of peach brandy from a secret bottle, but it didn't change the fact that she had never slow-danced with a boy. And she would never be sixteen and stand on the sidewalk in a shimmering dress from Nordstrom's, or look into the face of a boy who pretended to be better than he was, just for her. She would never know a day that didn't last forever.

Her bedroom was hot and miserable. Beneath the window, the roses had grown to inordinate size. Out in the yard she could hear the little boys planning to spend the evening catching fireflies in mason jars. They could use the jars as lanterns. They could seal the lids and wait for the largest one to eat the others. Ruby could smell the algae from the choked fountains and the warm stone of the terraces. She could smell the damp grass and candy apples. It was maddening.

She knelt on the floor. She heard scratching in the walls. Tiny laughter. Ruby looked over the dusty trunks and old books, the piles of rotting dresses. A long tail flicked through a hole bored in the wall. Ruby sat on a tufted ottoman and pulled her legs up to her chest. The old lady was right. She always was in the end. There were rats in the house. In her room. Perhaps hundreds of them, driven by some Pied-Piper melody into the sea of her bed.

She put her hands to her belly and felt sick with dread. Sometimes now there was a fluttering there beneath her chemise. And Ruby knew that somehow, something had gotten inside. She began to cry. She thought of how careful she had been to always spit out the lemon seeds, and all the wasted days she had been kept out of the sun and warm breeze, far from the forest and the fallen leaves and the water's edge, and it had all been for nothing. She had swallowed a rat anyway.

Ruby twisted her chemise between her fingers and wiped her tears with it. She tried to stay calm. She put on her mother's Bruce Springsteen record. She smoked a cigarette that was hidden in a golden case beneath her bed and paced the floorboards. She twirled on her toes and looked up at the rafters. She thought she might be wrong. Maybe it was just butterflies in her stomach. She might have swallowed a chrysalis. There could have been one in her Diet Pepsi.

Ruby sang along to *The River* and thought that perhaps one day soon she would open her mouth to sing and white butterflies would pour out and envelop her in a cloud. They would glow in the moonlight. She would glow too, like the World's Fair. Like someone's only love. She would meet the Thin White Duke and she would say, I am white too. The old lady said that white butterflies were souls of children. The old lady knew everything. Ruby's breath grew calm. The old lady would know what to do. She was so good to Ruby. She would help her. And even if by some small chance it was a rat, the old lady had said herself she knew how to kill them.

The old lady would take care of her. Things would not have to change. Not very much. Tomorrow she could go outside if she wanted to. Ruby took the pins from her hair and undid her braid. It fell down her back in burnished ripples. She shook her head and she laughed. Ruby drank a Diet Pepsi, threw the can out the window, and played *I'm on Fire* over and over again. The constant longing brightened inside of her. She knew that in the lake pavilion a hundred girls

were dancing. A kaleidoscope of girls in petal dresses, clinging to beetle-black suited boys. She danced around her room alone. Her shadow danced over the garden below.

She waited for the hour to come. When the torn crepe streamers floated to the floor, among the crushed corsages and the soda stains, when the cars melted into the indigo. The good girls would go home. And the boys returned to the house, climbed the trellis, skirted the steep-pitched rooftop, and came in and out through Ruby's window with their stories and their laughter and sticks of chicken satay wrapped in cocktail napkins.

Joseph was the last of all. Ruby had not thought he would come. The others had gone. It was nearly dawn when she saw his shadow at the window. His tie was loose, his jacket was missing, and a golden crown pasted with jewels was tilted on his head.

"Milady," He swept a grand bow and nearly swayed off the roof. Ruby caught his hand and he stumbled in the window. His eyes were bloodshot and unfocused.

"Though it's really you who should bow to me!" He puffed out his chest and put his hands on his hips. "For tonight, I have been crowned king!"

Ruby swept a curtsy. The old lady had taught her a proper curtsy when she was a little girl, just in case Lady Violetta ever happened to be in Connecticut and stopped by for tea.

"Your majesty," Ruby said, her hair brushing against the floor.

Josephus the First. King of Connecticut. Earl of Orphans and Attics and Lawn Mowers. He turned and vomited out the window.

"Charming," she said.

"Water."

Ruby handed him a tepid glass from the night table, and turned her face away as he rinsed his mouth and spit out the window. When she looked up he was watching her. Her loose hair

spilled past her shoulders. He looked at her neck. Ruby saw that there were fading blotches on her wrists and she could still feel her cheeks were hot.

“Jesus Christ,” he said, and for a moment looked as if he would just go back out the way he came. But Ruby took a step closer to him. He was so tall now she barely reached his shoulder.

“It’s hot as Lucifer’s balls in here,” he mumbled.

“We could go swimming.” She gestured to the claw-footed tub. The cold water looked gelatinous. Joseph stumbled across the room and sloshed in without bothering to remove his clothes. The water spilled over the rim, and his golden crown still clung to his head.

“C’mere.” His eyes were as cold as the bathwater. “As your king, I command you!”

He grabbed her wrist and Ruby knew if she tried to twist away he would snap it. Then she would have to make up some story, and let the old lady set it in a homemade splint of birch bark and silk stockings and limestone plaster, and that was never fun. She let him pull her into the tub and tasted blood on her lip. She swirled around him, and tried to grab the crown from his head.

He smacked her hand. “It’s not for girls.”

And the queen had already been crowned. Ruby knew who she was without asking. A girl with a pearl smile, in a fey green dress with a handkerchief hem, clutching a tiara of rhinestones to her head. Jessica the Pure. Dreaming her chaste dreams of Joseph’s kisses even now as she slept now in a golden sleigh bed, her silken spider web hair fanned out on her pillow.

Ruby touched her own hair. It clung to her neck in damp ringlets. Every night for years the old lady made her braid it, and wound it around her head in a coronet. Things were lighter without it. She had her mother’s tiara hidden in the faux-leopard suitcases. Ruby rested her chin on Joseph’s chest and felt the wet fabric of his dress shirt against her skin.

“I have my own crown,” Ruby said.

She smiled up at him. It was her tremulous Marilyn smile, practiced in the mirror for hours. She didn't care right then if her teeth were crowded. And her eyes were strange and blue-green, like the Sargasso Sea, like a place that made ships lose their bearings, where things disappeared and got lost forever, though the water was shallow. She felt Joseph grow still, and then he crushed her head tight against him.

“We can leave,” he mumbled into her hair. “Next month I will be eighteen.”

He said the sort of things he always said, in those dark-night moments. That she was a whore. That he hated her for the things she did. That she was heartless. That he would forgive her. That they could run away and get married. It had to be legal somewhere, like in Kentucky. Joseph had money saved from work and years of stealing from the old lady. They would take her jewelry and Ruby could wear five wedding bands at once if she wanted to. Joseph could start his own landscaping business and he promised to build her a little house without ghosts or secrets. There would be air conditioning and pancakes and a garden Ruby could go in whenever she wanted. She could almost see it.

“She would find us,” Ruby said. “She knows everything.”

Joseph said they could change their names. Ruby could cut her hair off and dye it brown. And he would build a wall so high around the garden no one else could ever get in.

“But what about the others?” Ruby stretched away from him, and languished on the lip of the tub. She pretended her legs were mermaid fins and gave a splash. “How will they get in?” Joseph's eyes bulged. “They won't fucking get in! That's what marriage is. Two people, together forever. Alone.”

Ruby traced figure eights with her fingers on the surface of the water and sighed. She was tired of forever. And by Joseph's logic it sounded as if she might already be married to the old lady. Ruby remembered when she had been outside, and the terrible weight of the sky as it tried to crush her into the ground. She felt the fluttering in her belly again and tried to squeeze her arms over it.

"I'll take care of you." His voice was gentle. "Both of you."

"Both of who?" Ruby asked. "Me and Jessica?"

His face looked sick and he was practically crying now. He dug his fingers into her shoulders. "Ruby, don't be so fucking stupid!" He shook her but it just made her laugh. He pushed her head beneath the water to make her stop. She came up gasping. He pushed her under again.

It was a game they had played since they were children. Ruby pretended to struggle. Her hair swirled like riverweeds in the water as she went under, and Joseph held her a moment too long. There was an amphibious tint to her skin when he loosened his grip. Her eyes stayed closed and her lip was split. A bruise darkened on her cheek where his elbow had struck.

"Ruby." He slapped her cheek. "Ruby. Cut it out."

Joseph pressed his lips to hers and breathed. But she was dead, and Joseph would have to hide her body, perhaps wrap the lace turban around the head of the doll with the rhinestone eyes, prop it in the window and pray to St. Rita the old lady never noticed the difference. The thought made Ruby laugh and she peeped one eye open.

"Don't bury me," she teased.

"God damn it Ruby."

She let him fold her in his arms and listened to his heart beating. Once, Ruby had seen him limp home with his leg tendons cut nearly to the bone from a broken glass fight down by the docks. The old lady gave him a of shot whiskey, poured some on the wound, and stitched it closed with her sewing needle and some fishing line. He never flinched. And Ruby remembered the day, years ago, when the letter came that Joseph's mother was found dead of an overdose in a motel room in Reno. The boys whispered that the body was already three days old when it was found. Later, Ruby heard Joseph laughing about it on the terrace.

But with her ear against his chest, Ruby could hear the truth. His heartbeat was timid and faltering. It was the heart of a small creature that has been stepped on and half-crushed, but goes on living. Still hoping. The heart that loved her, unwillingly, although she was not the girl he wanted her to be. It was the saddest thing she ever heard. But when he tightened his arms around her she was already imagining her spirit slipping free, rising up and slipping through the holes between the ceiling rafters.

When Joseph was gone Ruby went to the window. She saw the lights go out in the attic and she knew that tomorrow he would go whistling out the kitchen door. He wouldn't even bother to glance up as he passed beneath her window. Jessica would wait for him on the curb. She would look up at him with a face so pure and plain that anything in the world he wanted could be printed there or washed away. But Ruby would still hear his heart beating.

Ruby felt a strange ache. She thought of Joseph living out there in the world, pretending to fit in. Minding his tongue around girls who had never been locked in a closet, or never been burnt with a cigar butt, never cut the mold from the bread before eating it. A girl who would not let you throw up out her window, or pretend to let you drown her in a bathtub.

Ruby pressed her wrist to her ear but there was only silence. She couldn't hear her own heartbeat. Yet she could feel it. Bruising her chest. A hard, tiny seed just planted. She smoked a cigarette and from the window she saw neon glow of trapped fireflies in jars lining the garden path where the little boys had abandoned them. They signaled frantically and thudded against the glass and in the morning when Ruby woke they were dead. ~