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Short Stories

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Short Stories

by

Alisa Eve Welch

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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in
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Abstract

In these six intertwining fictional short stories, one fateful decision ripples through the lives of multiple generations. Annie is an unmarried young mother during World War II when she leaves her young daughter in the care of a childless couple. When Annie fails to return for the child after days and then years, a new and fragile family is formed only to be tested by Annie's eventual return. The other stories in this collection follow the daughters and granddaughters who have to navigate their own lives in the shadow of this abandonment. Spanning multiple decades, Annie's decision remains a pivotal psychological scar imprinted in her descendants and those left to care for the child that she could not.

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Little Fox

Wartime has a way of taking a person's little problems and making them seem not so important. After Wednesday Bible study, Mary asked the Deacon if he thought it would help the parish families if she opened her home to children during the week. The Deacon's usual grave demeanor turned nearly sympathetic as he patted her hand.

"I think that's a fine idea, Mary Louise. It says in John that for those denied the vocation of motherhood, they shall become surrogates in the eyes of the Lord." He always made up Bible passages to suit the conversation. She wanted to free herself from his cold-handed grip, but he just stood there, staring into her eyes as if he were some kind of martyred apostle.

For eight years, Mary Robinson had shared a bed with her husband on the most opportune days each month in order to conceive a child. Every morning and every evening, Mary kept a record of her cycle in a pocket-sized ledger by her bedside that, after years of careful record keeping, took on the appearance of an accountant's tabulations. Columns and rows of temperature readings, notations on viscosity and profusion of her body's output, it was all there in green lined pages and pages of pencil marks. After ten years, all of those figures and observations as to the wondrous inner-workings of her reproductive organs ended with only one number on the last line of the ledger: zero.

Mary prayed to Saint Gerard every Sunday at mass. *Render me fruitful in offspring.* Every year on his feast day, Mary baked a white fish-shaped cake with butter frosting and imagined that the sugar and batter might come together in her womb, taking

the form of a baby. She felt confident that any slight wave of nausea, any heaviness in her breasts or fatigue in her step, were signs of pregnancy. Still, no child ever came for them. Hank kissed Mary each morning as he took his coffee at the kitchen table, but Mary knew he thought there was something wrong with her. It wasn't right that they should be such a faithful couple, so obedient to God, and never blessed.

She thought of children constantly, she heard their voices, and when she came upon a little girl or boy in the market, she fought back an urge to wrap her arms around him or her. Her doctor suggested that she wanted this too badly, that it was a common case of hysteria. After eight years of their unsuccessful campaign for a child, Mary took the occasion of Saint Gerard's feast day to place her book of careful notations into the blazing red mouth of the church incinerator.

"Sister Mary Robinson has volunteered to assist the mothers of the parish who are going to work at the shipyards," the Deacon announced at Wednesday evening Bible study. "It's an inspiration that Sister Mary is taking on a vocation, since she cannot have children of her own."

By Monday morning Mary had three little ones—two girls and one boy—standing on her freshly swept porch. Mary wasn't quite prepared for a whole day of caring for children and their arrival jarred her and Hank's usual morning rituals. Hank tried to shave but kept peeking out the bathroom door to watch the children walk around the small living room with their hands clasped in front of them, just as they had been taught in

Sunday school. Mary sat on her davenport with her sewing and waited until the children came to her. One of the girls asked, “You got any toys, Mrs. Robinson?”

Hank went out to gather up some wood chunks from his shop while Mary led the children through three verses of “This Little Light of Mine.” Hank returned and poured a messy basketful of splintered and spider-webbed blocks on the living room rug. For the rest of the morning the kids built castles covered in sawdust and caught spiders under jelly jars.

At lunchtime, Mary piled up encyclopedias on the kitchen chairs and balanced each child on his or her own seat. She served buttered bread with raspberry jam and little glasses of milk. For a few minutes in her kitchen, with three little kids swinging their skinny legs and hitting the heels of their shoes on her chairs, Mary imagined herself as their mother. She felt her heart open with what she believed was a maternal feeling, but the charade only amplified her sense of injustice. Later in the afternoon, she set them free in the garden where they dug for snails in the vegetable beds and fed the poor wiggling blobs to the chickens.

Then they were gone. In a flurry of ringing doorbells, relieved shouts of “Mommy! Mommy!” echoed amongst the slamming screen door. Silence returned to Mary and Hank’s home. Mary missed the children’s sounds almost more than their warm bodies, she wanted them all back; their squeaky voices and jumbled words, their giggles, tears, and the thud of books and blocks dropped to the floor. She held on to the hollowness so desperately that she felt like a wild grieving animal in some forest, dumb and alone.

Annie, a friend of one of the other mothers, called that night in a panic. In a pause-less recitation, Annie said she had a typing job that started in the morning, and could she drop off her eighteen-month-old daughter tomorrow? There were so many bills presently due: her rent, the doctor who'd delivered her daughter Georgia, groceries. Her husband had left two months ago; she didn't know where he'd gone but he would come back, he had to come back, Georgia cried a lot, no one slept anymore. Mary told her it would cost forty-five cents a day to watch Georgia. This was five cents less than Mary was charging the other women.

Annie arrived the next morning, late. She was just a small little thing with bright green eyes and a scowl that soured her otherwise pretty face. Mary guessed Annie wasn't even twenty yet, but her countenance—one Mary read as a mixture of desperation and surrender—spoke of a life lived surviving one disaster after another.

Beside Annie was her daughter Georgia in a pinafore that imitated a Navy uniform, complete with a bright white kerchief around her neck tied just so. The front of her dress was streaked with mud and her brown bobbed hair and crooked bangs went this way and that. Her tiny pale lips stayed pressed together in one thin down-turned line and her eyes were rimmed with violet. If it was possible for a baby to like an old woman, Georgia did. Mary thought of what her own mother had said when confronted with a less-than-beautiful child: all children are miracles.

“Cooking ham and biscuits?” Annie said while surveying the porch and the neat line of rose bushes along the walk.

“Earlier this morning for my husband. Can I make something for you?”

“I haven’t seen ham in the markets for a long time,” Annie said. She shoved her fists into the pockets of her too-large jumpsuit. “You got any kids of your own, Mrs. Robinson?”

Mary smiled with her mouth closed. “No, I haven’t been blessed.”

Annie placed her hand on Georgia’s head while she looked past Mary, inside. The Robinson’s modest decor must have met with her approval because she allowed Georgia to walk unsteadily across the threshold.

“I really thought it’d be different. Having a baby, I mean. Do you know what I mean?”

“I’m not sure I do.”

Annie stared hard at the ground. “I never could see my reflection in her eyes. Isn’t that just the funniest thing?”

“I suppose I wouldn’t know.”

“Georgia makes it so hard sometimes,” Annie said, as though she’d dropped the illusion that she was talking to anyone but herself.

Mary said, “Sorry, I never got your last name.”

Annie seemed to snap back to life. “Georgia’s got her daddy’s last name.”

“So you were never married?” Mary laced her fingers together in front of her.

“Her daddy wanted to save enough for a real nice ring, but with the price of everything these days...”

“It’s a struggle for everyone,” Mary said, trying to sound charitable.

Annie squinted. “I think I’ve had it worse than other folks. Georgia appeared behind Mary’s apron, and Annie bent down to look more closely into her daughter’s eyes. “You be a good girl, Georgia. You mind Mrs. Robinson, hear?”

Georgia raised her arms to hug her mother and her little white kerchief dangled from her neck and finally fell off to the porch. Mary bent down to pick it up, saying, “I’ll tie this back on the little sweetheart, don’t worry.”

Annie eyed the white fabric with suspicion. “Damn thing made us late this morning.”

“Mr. Robinson was in the Navy in the first war, he’ll know just what to do.”

Annie stepped off the porch and waved weakly. “I’ll be back this evening, should be around supper, if that’s all right.”

“Georgia will do fine,” Mary said. “I can see she’s a good girl.” Mary closed the screen door but Georgia remained, watching her mother walk away. Her small and pink hands pushed against the mesh, her fingers like tiny carrots.

The other children let Georgia be since they were older and didn’t have much use for a quiet little girl. Georgia poked at the pile of wood blocks until Mary bent beside her to show her how to stack them. As soon as Mary came close, putting a hand on Georgia’s small shoulder, the girl backed away and ducked behind the davenport, sandwiching herself into a thin crevasse between the wall and the upholstery, where she stayed.

Hank came home for lunch and all of the children washed their hands and climbed onto their encyclopedia-topped seats around the kitchen table. They ate fresh strawberry jam on thick bread and Hank drank his black coffee and left over from the morning. This

was a quiet time of the day, when the children's mouths were full of butter and bread.

Mary called for Georgia to join everyone and waited for her to peek out from her hiding place.

Mary thought she should be strict with Georgia. That was the way her mother would have handled a child refusing an adult's instructions; a slap on the cheek and don't you start crying to me, young lady, you best listen to your mother next time. Mary had come to the table as she was told, but she disliked her mother all the same.

When Georgia got hungry, as Mary figured she would, she crawled out of her hiding place and sat alone at the table with her sandwich. Naptime soon followed and Mary spread out four blankets folded into long rectangles on the braided rug in the spare bedroom and the children took to their temporary beds, rolling around and humming until sleep found them. Georgia sat on her bed made of an old afghan, watching the others silently until her head and eyes got heavy. She got on her knees as if praying and leaned forward to put her cheek to the pillow. From her chair in the corner by the window, Mary watched the little girl's black eyelashes flutter and her mouth hang open. The whole room filled with the sound of breathing children.

Hours after the rest of the children had gone home, Hank read the newspaper out loud to Georgia while Mary made supper. Pretty soon, Mary heard the sound of Hank tearing the classified ads into strips followed by Georgia's squealing laughter.

Annie called late, much later than she said she'd return.

“I’m not sure when the bus will arrive,” Annie said. She was shouting over a din of machinery in the background. “It takes a lifetime to get all the way back to your house.”

Mary cupped the receiver around her mouth. “Georgia is welcome to stay with us tonight.”

“I hope it’s not too much of an imposition.”

“Not at all. We’ve enjoyed having her today.”

“I want you to know that I’m going to pay you for the trouble.”

“It’s no trouble.”

“Listen,” Annie said, her voice agitated. “I don’t need any Christian kindness right now, all I need to know is that Georgia will be taken care of.”

The line went dead. Mary figured her time was up. What a funny thing to say when a phone call ends, that the line went dead. We lost our connection. There was trouble on the line. We hung up. Mary would think back on that call many times and how afterwards, Annie had disappeared like an electrical impulse surging up and over the telephone lines, ephemeral and temporary. Maybe she’d never existed at all.

Hank set up the spare bedroom, pulling out the twin bed from the basement so Mary could put fresh sheets and a pillow on it. Georgia eyed the bed with her suspicious little fox eyes from the doorway of the room. She let out a long and lonely cry, a cry she’d been holding in all day when the pain missing her mother was at least tolerable. Hank and Mary spent the better part of an hour comforting, cajoling, singing, and pleading for Georgia to at least try to sit on the bed. It was past nine o’clock and

Georgia's entire face was red from crying and rubbing her cheeks with her fat little hands. Hank pulled off his own boots and crawled into Georgia's bed. He looked ridiculous, nearly doubled up on the bed with the blanket too small to cover up even his legs. But it worked: Georgia finally climbed in. There was no use in fighting. Mary turned out the light. The two of them slept there in that twin-sized bed all night long.

Mary never stopped waiting for Annie to call or come back for Georgia. For the first few days, Mary rushed to the telephone every time it rang out. But it was never Annie calling. It was never Annie's small and tightly composed figure waiting on the porch when the doorbell rang out and Mary hurried to throw open the door.

By time the rains started in the fall, Georgia had nearly twenty words ("mine" being the most frequently used) but referred to Mary as a mixture of names that came out as something close to "Marmie" and, finally, "Mommy." Their days were comprised of a series of repeated episodes that soon felt routine; the filling and emptying of diaper pails, singing, crying and comforting, stories and blocks, nap times and milk cups held by two fat toddler hands. Mary sewed playsuits and dresses at night and during the day, watched Georgia share what had become *her* blocks and *her* books with the other children. Hank started coming home regularly for lunch, taking off his thick denim work jacket and letting the children hang from his outstretched arms. In the evening, Georgia sank into the couch next to Hank, whom she called "Pop," her fat little hand in the crook of his elbow, the other around a bottle with milk.

Over the course of that year, Mary looked at Georgia and saw a nose that needed to be wiped, an eye that seemed sleepy, cheeks that seemed too warm. Mary could identify Georgia's different breathing patterns as she slept, the quality and meanings of her cries. Mary could recall perfectly the feel of the little girl's soft skin even if she wasn't near.

Mary was not the mother. She knew this. Somewhere in the world, perhaps even just down the street, Annie was alive. If Annie had died, a possible scenario Hank and Mary discussed with a delicate mix of concern and hope, wouldn't they have heard about it? Everything that is borrowed must be returned. Those are the cruel mathematics of the universe and Mary felt she knew more about cruelty than most.

One Saturday, Mary guided Georgia through the market. Its aisles were filled with ladies in plain housedresses and pin-curved hair protected under cotton scarves showing off fat babies. No one much complained about the can goods stacked in a way to hide the fact there wasn't enough to go around. The empty pickle barrels didn't bother Mary too much; she went to the market to be in the company of other women. Though she and Hank never discussed it directly, they had stopped going to church after it was clear Georgia wasn't going back to Annie. It seemed the obvious solution to fending off questions they weren't prepared to answer.

Standing in the line along the nearly empty meat cases, Mary noticed a young woman with an impatient frown. It could have been Annie: the same age, the same color hair and red lipstick. Mary nearly fell to her knees. She pulled Georgia to her and turned to walk the other direction, but Georgia escaped. "You catch me!" she yelled, running away with her leather shoes slapping the shiny floor as she headed toward the meat case.

Mary gasped. Georgia ran right past the woman at the meat case, and circled back to Mary. “Mommy, you catch me!” The woman with the red lipstick took the brown-paper wrapped meat and put it in her basket, looking toward the sound of Georgia’s voice. Her lipsticked smile looked like an elaborate velvet bow. It wasn’t Annie after all.

Mary stopped bringing Georgia to the market or anywhere else where they might be discovered. Social calls and visits to family were limited and the day care closed abruptly. Mary never corrected Georgia calling her *Mommy*, or Hank *Pop*. She couldn’t explain, to herself or others, how or why Georgia came to live with them, or even the more damning question of why she never did more to find the child’s mother. Phone calls went unanswered and visitors to the front door were shooed away by a Mary’s pale hand appearing behind a curtain.

On the five-year anniversary of Georgia’s arrival, Mary, Hank and Georgia celebrated with three striped candles on a white cake. Hank presented Georgia with a wooden hobbyhorse with a sisal string mane. Mary and Hank watched as Georgia rocked back and forth for the rest of the evening.

None of this mattered when the big black Packard drove up and parked in front of the Robinson’s house. Mary watched through her drapes as a tiny woman wearing a tight navy suit and red lipstick stepped out of the passenger side and slammed the door shut. The driver turned his head toward the house and hung his arm out the window, the diamond cufflinks on his white French-cuffed shirt sparkled in the sun. Annie walked in short steps up to the door, where she stopped and smoothed her hair and ran her hands down the length of her skirt.

Mary heard Georgia reciting the alphabet to her dolly. She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on what the girl's squeaky voice sounded like in her home. In those last moments of motherhood, Mary smelled Georgia's scalp, felt her soapy hands under water, and held on to the perfection of time when the three of them were together. Her hand on the doorknob, she thought of seeing naked hatchlings fall from their nest, one after another, onto the pavement below. How the mother watched them fall, helpless.

The Intersection

Six months ago, the bastard Georgie left Annie, slamming the door so hard he knocked the coffee cups from their saucers. It was their baby Georgia's first birthday and Annie had spent all day trying to put together the ingredients for a cake, the first cake she'd baked in all of her eighteen years. Annie needed flour, sugar, and eggs, all of which was in short supply at the time. Georgie only had \$1.70 left from payday; that was enough for most of the ingredients and a pint of whiskey, but not enough for a candle. That was all right, Annie thought. She'd just light a wooden match for Georgia to blow out.

Annie put all of the ingredients on the counter. She was measuring them carefully when Georgie yelled from the living room that he had to go out.

"What for?" Annie asked. "Can't you just watch the baby while I bake the cake?"

"Damn it, Annie, I don't need to explain myself to you."

Annie felt real bad since she knew Georgie had been playing with Georgia for half an hour already, letting her hang from the elbow of his good arm. Annie wiped her flour-covered hands on to her apron and walked over to the living room.

She approached her husband sweetly, like she knew he wanted her to, as if he were a pony ready to bolt. She said softly, "It's angel food." Annie thought of how little use it was trying to bargain with him; he'd married a young woman for a reason.

Once again placated, Georgie and Georgia sat side by side on the couch in the paneled living room, Georgie smoking a cigarette and folding and refolding pages of the newspaper while little Georgia ran her toy car over the nubby green upholstery on the

cushion. Georgia noticed Annie watching her and threw herself onto her father's lap, collapsing the newspaper.

“Watch it, kid!” Georgie could get mad like that, all of the sudden erupt and roar, just to scare people into thinking he was important. Only this time the ashes of his cigarette flew around and an ember caught Georgia in the eye. She sat on the couch, stunned and started to scream. Georgie jumped up off of the couch and made a fuss brushing gray cigarette flakes from his slacks. “You gotta do something with that kid, Annie.”

Georgia stood up, her mouth open and dripping drool but neither of them reached for her. She looked so ugly with her toothless mouth gaping, her face red and her eyes filled with tears. Annie turned around to the kitchen to measure the ingredients for her cake.

Annie heard the door slam a few minutes later and thought that Georgie just went out to get a bottle of whisky at the corner, but minutes turned into an hour and the cake was done. She found it impossible to do anything but watch the window and wait for Georgie, even with Georgia tugging at her hem and grinding her teeth as had recently become her habit. Jesus, it wasn't like she baked a cake every day. Ninety minutes after Georgie left, Annie put on her good winter coat over her apron and housedress and took a nylon triangle out of the pocket and tied it over her hair. All that time with the roller set in her hair that morning would be ruined in the drizzly rain, Annie thought. If she didn't have to bring the baby, she could just take her umbrella and protect her hair, but she couldn't hold the umbrella and Georgia. Once again, I will sacrifice, she told herself. I sacrifice.

Annie carried Georgia next door to Suzy's apartment and knocked on the front door. It was decorated with a poster from the War Department that tried to scare young soldiers from having relations with floozies. Suzy had a strange sense of humor since Annie had watched many young men in uniform pass her window towards Suzy's door.

Suzy opened the door, releasing a whoosh of stale air and Benny Goodman music. She wrapped her silk dressing gown around her chest and tied it loosely around her waist. Annie tried to look away, to give her neighbor the privacy she should want, but Suzy leaned into the door jam, her hip jutting out and her eyes sleepy. Georgia reached out to touch the fabric of the gown as it fluttered beautifully in the wind and managed to grab a hold of the belt. She pulled it loose but Annie slapped her hand hard, fearing Suzy might be left standing naked in a matter of seconds.

“Georgie hasn't come home yet.”

Suzy looked suddenly awake and standing straight. She ushered the two inside, out of the rain and its disappointments.

Annie said, “It's been over two hours and I baked a birthday cake.”

“Has it been a whole year already my little girl?” Suzy grinned her big smile that showed the gray triangles where her broad teeth met her gums. She took Georgia into her arms burrowed her face into the girl's cool cheeks, obviously not minding the crusts of yellow snot rimming in the girl's tiny nostrils. Suzy's affection towards Georgia made Annie anxious—she thought of how Georgie watched Suzy from the living room window, propping up his lame arm on the back of the couch in case Suzy saw him and thought he'd been healed.

“I’ll be back soon, I promise.” Annie pulled her scarf over her hair, tucking as much as she could to salvage some curls for the evening. Georgia waddled over to Suzy and rested her ruddy cheek on her leg.

“She can stay with me forever, as far as I’m concerned,” Suzy said.

Georgia was an easy baby, or at least Annie remembered her that way. She could put her in the playpen with a few wooden blocks and she’d sit and gnaw at them for fifteen, twenty, maybe thirty minutes while Annie sat at the edge of the couch and stared out the window of the apartment. The hardest part about having a baby, Annie learned quickly, is not the baby so much, but all of the hours one has to fill with the baby. Babies are actually quite boring.

When Georgia was six months, Annie discovered she could give her daughter a bottle with sugar and water, put her in the playpen and walk downstairs alone to the grocery. Ten minutes later, Annie would reappear with a fresh pack of cigarettes and a quart of milk but Georgia didn’t seem to notice that her mother had even gone. Annie had always been told that babies can’t live without their mothers, but Georgia had a way of disinterestedly looking past her mother. On the rare occasions when Annie wrapped Georgia in a wool blanket and walked to the park, she studied the other babies who reached for their mothers’ faces. Georgia never needed Annie like that.

It was enough for Annie that Georgie needed her and while their unmarried status caused a violent uproar in her family (“vulgar” was her father’s word for the entire situation) being together suited them both nicely. They’d met at a VFW picnic two years ago when Annie was sixteen and it was the last year she’d go the picnic, she’d already informed her parents. The whole affair seemed false: her father pressing and repressing

his dress blues that were hopelessly faded after 20 years of once-annual use, his good velvet eye patch that looked like someone had parked a small couch on his face, his teeth clenched in the murderous way that soldiers sometimes affect. She'd stopped being in awe of her father long ago.

When she was younger, Annie loved when someone asked her about her dad's eye. Each time, it happened at a different battle: behind enemy lines at the Battle of Château-Thierry or that he was one of the Lost Battalion, taken prisoner and shot by the Germans escaping only with his life and one of his eyeballs. It gave her father—and Annie by virtue of kinship—a certain outlaw appeal in the eyes of the other children at the picnics who repeated the fables to their parents. What frightened her more than having one of her tall tales repeated back to her father, was the inevitability that her age no longer allowed her to lie. Instead, she'd have to explain that her father wasn't brave, just unlucky. Some corporal had shot her father, a Major, while cleaning his gun and the bullet burned a path from her father's chin, knocked out a couple teeth and pierced his eyeball. Her father couldn't work much due to headaches and there wasn't any money for nice things.

At this, her last VFW picnic, she met Georgie. He was a veteran of the same war as her father and right off, she knew he was different than her dad's Army pals who'd come over to the house over the years and never looked her in the eye. Once in a while, one of them might mention what a pretty girl she was turning out to be and her father would hustle his buddy out to the sun porch for a cigar and gossip veiled as concern for their fellow veterans.

Everyone was concerned with propriety in those days, especially her tight-jawed Lutheran parents, but Annie wanted to know more from these men. She wanted to know what *exactly* it was about her that made her pretty. Was it the things that couldn't be changed, like the particular shape of her green eyes that gave her face a feline quality? Or was it something ephemeral that she was better off not being aware of in case she ruined it?

For propriety's sake, it certainly wasn't decent for Georgie to lean against the oak tree at the VFW picnic and ask Annie about the yellow eyelet fabric of her dress while she sat on the picnic table sipping ice tea. She liked his black slicked-back hair and told him he reminded her of Clark Gable. He offered to drive her home and she asked if he knew about the Lake at Rooster Rock. It was there, in a drifting rowboat in the middle of the Lake and surrounded by shimmering mating dragonflies, that she learned more about her beauty than she'd ever imagined.

Only a few blocks from Annie and Georgie's apartment, Moe's Bar rested on a triangular island in the middle of the intersection at Sandy Boulevard and 41st Avenue. Once in a while, a car would miss the slight curve of road that went around the building and come crashing through the brick building. The sounds of those accidents could be heard through the neighborhood and every time, Annie wanted to tear out of the apartment to make sure Georgie wasn't lying dead in the intersection or worse, drunk and dead in the rubble of the bar.

It was past seven and giant splats of raindrops came surging from the trees and the sky, soaking through her light jacket. By the time she'd walked the three unlit blocks to

Moe's she was already defeated. She ruminated on the small details of Georgie's discontentment. There were words she could have said, words that could have calmed him; words that her mother knew and whispered into her father's ear. Her mother always said men were just big babies and she meant that not as a disparagement, but rather as an insight that put their behavior into perspective.

Annie subscribed to her mother's way of thinking (it was, after all, the way most women thought of their husbands) but she also believed Georgie should have protected her from a place like Moe's. As she pulled the heavy wood door open and walked into darkness, into the air so fetid and smoke-filled that she had to shield her eyes, she could only call her actions trespassing. For a moment, Annie steadied herself at the threshold and strained to locate Georgie in the fog. The first thing she saw was a shiny red dress straining against a big round bottom. And somewhere south of that mound was Georgie's good hand.

Annie surged forward and grabbed the woman's fleshy arm, pressing her fingertips hard into her skin and whirled her around, but the momentum of the woman's sturdy figure knocked Annie to the ground. It wasn't an even match-up, not even close. The woman hardly looked phased. "Honey, you don't want to tangle with me," she said. She stared down at Annie with one eye, the other eye covered by a sequined eye-patch. Annie struggled to stand up, looking to Georgie for help or recognition.

"I bet he told you he was some great war hero, didn't he? Well he ain't. He didn't get shot or nothing," Annie said. In her desperate reasoning, this woman meant to interrupt the life Annie had so carefully constructed out of nothing more significant than cake batter.

“You better get on home, Annie,” said Georgie.

“He was drunk and crashed his car, that’s how he messed up his arm,” said Annie. She felt like a spinning, stupid top.

“I said get home to the baby,” said Georgie. He pushed his shoulder back and held his bad arm like it was a rifle.

Later that night, after retrieving Georgia from Suzy’s bed, Annie sat at the kitchen table with its surface still lightly dusted with twinkling sugar crystals. It was past midnight and Georgie wasn’t home. She took a fork from the drawer and ate the entire pink frosted birthday cake. It tasted wonderful.

Days went by without a word from Georgie but Annie expected as much. She knew she’d said awful, possibly unforgivable things at Moe’s and that Georgie might need a certain amount of time to restore the balance of their relationship in his mind. Her mother came for a visit on a Sunday (something she never did when Georgie was around) with rock candy for Georgia but without Annie’s father.

“You know how proud he is,” her mother said. “I’ve asked him to consider letting you come back home. I’ll do my best to stow some extra money for you.” It was enough that her mother offered, even though they both knew that in those days, there wasn’t a surplus of money, food, or compassion.

Suzy helped Annie out with a roll of bills she retrieved from a tobacco tin on top of her icebox. Annie was careful with Suzy’s money and realized that without the added expense of Georgie’s liquor, cigarettes, and bar tabs, she was able to make the money stretch for four months. After that, she took in laundry, smoothing her neighbor’s cotton shirts and dresses with a heavy black iron. Georgia never asked for her daddy, but she

started walking and getting into messes while Annie worked. Little white teeth emerged from Georgia's gums and the pain of their eruptions kept both of them awake several nights. It was when Annie held her crying daughter that she most hated Georgia.

Suzy got a job down at the Kaiser shipyards and slipped an application under Annie's door. Annie toted a fussy, crying Georgia on the bus out to the Swan Island to apply for a job. The foreman didn't even tell her what she'd be doing but handed her a set of tan overalls and asked her to come back on Monday. On the bus ride home, she overheard some women talking about a day nursery run by a woman who had no children of her own. A saint, they said.

Annie was already running late for her first day of work. Instead of helping her mother by walking quickly, Georgia stopped for every mound of moss growing between the sidewalk pavers, and peeked behind every hedge for feral cats. Annie called out Georgia's name. No response. She said it again even louder and a woman peeked out from behind her drapes and shook her head before letting the heavy damask fall back in front of her. Georgia finally realized how far away her mother was and scampered to Annie with her arms outstretched and mouth wide open.

"Oh, don't be such a baby!" She grabbed Georgia by the wrist and pulled her down the street.

You can't have it both ways, Annie would have said to the woman behind the drapes. Good girls need discipline, not spoiling.

They finally arrived at Mrs. Robinson's house, its exterior prim and white like a country church with the carefully tended red roses on either side of the front door. Church people love their roses, Annie thought. She rang the doorbell and when Mrs. Robinson

opened the door, Annie was surprised to see that she was tall, taller than most men she knew, but carried herself in a way that reminded Annie of a old photograph where everyone had to be so still they looked dead.

“You must be Annie, and this is Georgia I presume?” Mrs. Robinson patted Georgia on the head while Annie looked past her to the inside of the house. Clean, respectable, nothing special. Annie could smell morning coffee, ham and biscuits giving off steam just beyond the living room in the sunny kitchen. Coffee was hard to come by and Annie wondered if Mrs. Robinson had brewed a pot just to show her that she could.

“You be a good girl, Georgia,” Annie said, palming Georgia’s hair. “You mind Mrs. Robinson, you hear?” Georgia looked up at her mother and Annie searched for a look in Georgia’s eyes that connected them, mother and daughter, but couldn’t perceive it. In fact, at that moment Georgia looked precisely like Georgie, so much so that she had the urge to slap her.

“I’ll be back after my shift, should be around supper, if that’s all right,” Annie said.

“That’s fine,” said Mrs. Robinson. Not a church lady, Annie decided, but more like what Bing Crosby might sound like if he was a housewife. Calm. Calming. Yet, she appeared so maternal but without her own child. Annie felt superior for the first time in a very long time.

“Georgia will do fine, I can see she’s a good girl,” said Mrs. Robinson. She pulled the screen door closed.

On her way down the steps, Annie looked again at the roses, their pink and orange buds tightly wound against the thin layer of morning dew threatening their tender petals.

She looked back and saw Georgia at the screen door, watching her mother walk away.

Annie willed a feeling that resembled love to come to the surface, but all she could gather was indifference.

Suzy was at the end of the block waiting for Annie at the bus stop. The women wore the same tan jumpsuit though Suzy unbuttoned the top buttons enough that the men waiting for the bus kept clearing their throats and sneaking peeks at her décolletage. “Hard to leave the kid, huh?” she said. Annie took a cigarette from the pack Suzy offered.

“It’ll do for now.”

That was a long time ago, the day that Georgia went to live at the Robinson’s. Annie’s would tell herself, years later, that she’d done the right thing for Georgia’s sake: she couldn’t care for the girl herself, she had no money, no education, there was no father around. What she could never admit to herself or anyone else was that an opportunity arose and she took it. It was as simple as that.

Paper Tumbleweeds

Annie answered the door wearing a white terry robe, her hair set and sprayed in a dazzling continuous wave that went from one temple all the way around her head. If she didn't know otherwise, Gina would have mistaken the smooth-faced woman before her for a movie star.

“Georgia,” Annie said. “How absolutely wonderful.”

Gina's cheeks were red and moist from the heat of the day. “I'm sorry, am I too early? I thought we agreed on three?” The heat only seemed amplified by the aluminum awning above Annie's front door where even the salvation of shade felt hot.

“No, Georgia,” Annie said. “You're right on time.” She placed her fingertips over the opposite wrists as if she was wearing a watch, but her wrists were angular and bare “I haven't dressed. I hope you don't mind.”

“I go by Gina, now.”

“Such a grown-up name.” Annie extended her arms but Gina stood stiff, her underarms sweating. Annie smiled too sweetly. The two women both squinted in the sunlight. “Come in, won't you? You look thin.”

Gina followed Annie down a long hallway decorated with gold-flecked mirror squares covering both walls and an Oriental carpet lining the floor that was so threadbare down the center it hardly seemed necessary. Gina felt too large for this place and not

unwelcome exactly, but more like a giant attempting to visit an elf's hovel. Avoiding any eye contact with her mirror image, Gina was also aware of being rumpled and in need of her toothbrush after nineteen hours on a Trailways bus. She considered asking Annie if she could curl up and take a nap before their conversation began.

“My memory is not so good. Three years?” Annie directed Gina towards the small sitting room off of the entry hall.

“Five.”

Annie shook her head. “You’re right. 1955. We’d come for Daddy’s funeral. It was the first time I’d seen you since you were just a little thing.” She checked herself in the mirror and patted her stiff-set bob. “The ladies at the salon say I look just like Natalie Wood with this style. That is a very nice compliment to receive when you’re 38 and a widow, mind you. Nice gals at that salon. That’s why I always go out of my way to go there, even if it is in a not so great part of Los Angeles.”

Gina sat on a faded velvet settee. She couldn’t stop staring at Annie. She wanted to make sure that she didn’t miss any details. Now that she was older, she felt more capable of reading signals and interpreting motivations instead of speculating later, after the injury had already been received. “Mother sends her regards.”

“Isn’t that nice,” Annie said. “You must thank Mrs. Robinson for the lovely arrangement she sent when Charles passed.”

“Mother does that for a lot of people.”

Annie leaned back on the other, nicer, couch held tightly together by enormous buttons pressed into the brocade fabric. Annie smiled through a long pause. "I know you think that she's your mother, but I ask that you respect my wishes when you're in my home." Annie shifted her robe and glanced at the starburst clock on the wall. "Let me get you a drink. Would you like a screwdriver?"

Gina felt foolish for not knowing more about adult things, such as liquor; she'd always abstained, just like her parents. "I'll have whatever you're. . . . I don't want to be any trouble." Annie's sitting room, its yellowed blinds drawn but allowing hot rays of light in, seemed forbiddingly adult to Gina as well. There was nothing overtly flashy as Gina imagined a Los Angeles living room contain, but nothing country either, especially no needlepoint chair seats in her mother's living room or glass figurine collectibles. There were also no books or photographs of family, save for one large photo on the blonde wood coffee table.

Annie came back with two tall drinks filled with ice and orange juice and who knew what else. "Dear," she said, handing Gina her drink, "I understand if you're angry with me. I'm quite sure you have your reasons. But I wanted to see you. I have good news."

Gina had come all the way from Portland on ten days' notice for to hear whatever it was Annie had to tell her. "I came a long way. I hope it's good news."

"It is," Annie said, and picked up a large color photo in a mother-of-pearl encrusted frame from the coffee table. She held it as if she'd never seen it before.

“Charles took me to the most wonderful New Year’s party in Miami last year. We flew PanAm. First class. So many people there.” She handed the photo to Gina. “Top people.”

Gina considered the image of Annie by the algae pool in the courtyard of a feral Everglades mansion. In all her life, she’d never seen a photo of Annie—she’d been told that Annie didn’t like to be photographed, but Gina believed her mother didn’t want her child to be confused. If Annie existed in photos, why didn’t she exist anywhere else? But in Florida as well as all of the places Gina had imagined she existed, Annie was beautiful, dressed in a striped blouse and palazzo pants, her lips drawn in bright red.

“It was our last trip together,” Annie said. “Of course, we didn’t know that at that the time.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Gina said. She wasn’t sorry. She’d only met the man once, and even then it was a brief exchange. He seemed annoyed that he had to talk to anyone but “top people.” She placed the photo on the coffee table and turned the image toward Annie.

“There was nothing that could have been done—the doctors assured me of that. An aneurism can cut a man down”—Annie snapped her fingers, which made a firecracker sound—“just like that.”

“That’s really something, I mean it.”

Annie pouted her lips in a way that made Gina look away. “I’ll get by. I always do. Let’s go out to the lanai, it’s getting awfully hot in here.”

Annie's lanai was a cement patio with a pair of canvas director chairs and an untrimmed potted palm tree whose fronds crackled like kindling in the wind. This wasn't a proper lanai, in other words. It was no vista from which one could ponder paradise. Gina placed her chair in the shade and tried to find a comfortable leg position. Her screwdriver tasted like Tang and witch-hazel. Annie, who was carrying a clear bottle of vodka, moved her chair out into the sunlight. Then she slipped her robe and camisole off her shoulder, sat down, stretched her tan legs before her, and drank directly from the vodka bottle. She withdrew matches from her robe pocket and lit a cigarette. The smoke lingered in the air waiting to see which direction the wind was blowing. "How's Portland? Nice and dreary, I imagine."

"Portland doesn't bother me much," Gina said. "But then I've never lived anywhere else." It was too hot here, even in the shade. Sweat started to pool behind her knees and soak into her nylons. She adjusted her skirt so that the wool—which her mother insisted would be a light enough for California—did not hug her thighs so tightly.

"In Portland," Annie said, "I always felt like killing myself."

Gina felt woozy from the heat and the drink, but mostly from finally being near to this woman whom she'd thought of so many times over her lifetime. How many nights had she sat in bed and dreamed Annie was thinking of her at that very moment. But Annie was never assigned a place in the world, rather she floated freely and unencumbered; just out of reach of Gina. To see her in her own environment, like a wax

figure in a diorama amongst the dry ground covered in pebbles and dead leaves was to acknowledge that Annie chose this life over another.

Annie turned from the sun to look at Gina directly. “You know, if you moved to Los Angeles, you could live with me. You won’t have any trouble finding work with your secretarial skills.”

Gina sputtered in her hazy state. “I’m not sure what to say, Annie.” The orange juice in her drink turned bitter in her mouth and she thought she might have to vomit. It wasn’t the reaction she’d imagined and had practiced a hundred times as she awaited Annie’s return into her life.

“Georgia. Please. Call me Mother.”

“Mother.” Hearing herself say the word made Gina feel like she was long-distance breaking Mrs. Robinson’s heart. She was suddenly angry at the intrusion of Annie and the plans that had been laid without Gina’s knowledge, plans perhaps made only seconds before. But this was Annie’s way. Gina knew that much. “There are many things to consider.”

“Like what?” Annie turned back to the sunlight, her profile sharply etched by the yellowing and impending sunset. “You’re an adult now, you can do anything you want.”

On the concrete lanai, looking out over Annie’s yard of crushed gravel and empty terra cotta pots, Gina thought of all the mothers Annie had been for her over her lifetime: cruel mother, heartless mother, selfish mother. At this moment and when she’d held that photograph, Gina tried to resist adding another few Annies to the catalog: beautiful

mother, bittersweet mother, fragile mother alone in Los Angeles. She could be Annie's friend, someone she could confide in and even grieve with. Maybe, finally, Annie could be her mother. Before she knew what she was doing Gina was smoking her first cigarette in celebration. She would live with Annie.

Annie gave Gina a ride back to the Americana Motel. "I'm sorry you couldn't stay tonight. I need to clear out some of Charles's clothing to make room." They drove fast down the broad Los Angeles four-lane roads that were called highways back in Portland. Gina hadn't been in a car with her mother since she was a little girl, traveling for the first time to live with Annie and Charles in Hollywood. They had made it all the way to Shasta before Gina got food poisoning from a tuna sandwich and vomited all over Annie's black Packard. Later that day Annie drove a straight shot back to Portland, back to the Robinsons.

They pulled into the horseshoe driveway of the Americana, which was the kind of budget motel that advertised on large billboards along the Santa Monica freeway. It seemed very fancy to Gina, but she suddenly knew it wasn't when Annie asked if she was sure this was the right place as she pulled into its driveway.

Annie kept the engine running and put one gloved hand on Gina's knee. "Dear, could you spot me a bit of cash? Money's been tight since the probate."

Gina opened her coin purse and handed Annie a twenty-dollar bill.

Annie looked bewildered. "That's far too generous."

Gina pressed the money into her mother's hand, a down payment of sorts for the future. "I want to help you."

Gina waited all day for Annie's call, leaving her room only to buy crackers and Coke from the lobby vending machine. Outside of her room, she was positive that every eye in every room of the motel was trained on her, that her fellow motel guests were standing ready to inflict some horrible pain upon her body or at the very least, comment upon her hulking, shapeless body. Walking in front of other guest rooms held the possibility that a strong arm could reach out and grab her, forcing her into a strange room with a strange person. She considered multiple possible routes from her room on one end of the horseshoe-shaped courtyard to the lobby on the other. Better to stay close to the cars, Gina decided while congratulating herself on her vigilance.

On her return trip through the parking lot, Gina glanced at the gated swimming pool in the center of the courtyard, its uncorrupted blue water surrounded by green plastic grass and metal chairs shaded by striped umbrellas. This wasn't a pool for swimming. It was more like a movie set or an altogether ignored—yet required element—of a motel in California. To Gina, though, it all looked like Eden, and she was broiling. The Los Angeles sunlight seemed filled with dirty, stagnant particles that were felt on the skin in some dreadfully permanent way. It was best to stay inside her room. At the end of the first day, she started lining up bright orange vending machine crackers on her desk. The trail they made ended at the telephone.

The phone finally rang around the evening news hour, but it was Mary Robinson, not Annie. Gina told her she was fine. Everything was good.

“You know,” Mrs. Robinson said, “that’s what mothers do. We worry about our little chickens.”

Gina hated those chickens in her mother’s yard, always pecking at her feet. Even when the hens got old and stopped laying, her mother would keep them as pets instead of taking the hatchet to their necks. “I might stay here,” Gina said. “It’s mighty nice.”

“You think that’s a good idea?”

“Annie says she has a spare room.”

“I see.”

Gina wound the black phone cord around her index finger and watched the tip lose all color. “I can see a palm tree outside my window.” She thought about telling her mother about the Screwdriver, the way that the drink Annie had fixed made her head fuzzy with good humor and sadness at the same time. Even more than that, she believed that this was the tenor of the adult world; a world Gina had only just today felt any understanding of. But she didn’t tell her mother any of this. She wasn’t the type to understand such emotional contradictions.

“Let me wire you some money—a little cushion until you get settled. If that’s what you want.”

Gina assured her mother that she was taking care of herself and ended the phone call. She didn’t want the line to be busy if Annie decided to call late.

On the second morning at the Americana, Gina dialed the diner on the corner and ordered two eggs scrambled with dry white toast to go. She waited five minutes and walked, head down and stiff-legged, to retrieve her food and immediately returned to her room. With her one morning errand completed in less than fifteen minutes, Gina found it difficult to occupy herself as she had only the television and three New Directions paperbacks she'd purchased at Cameron's in Portland. She decided to spend an hour reading the first book—Miller's *Wisdom of the Heart*, which her mother would have forbade her to read on principal if she'd known about it—followed by an hour watching television. At noon, she napped.

Gina's room grew unbearably hot over the course of the day, even with the drapes closed. She put a wet cloth around her neck, which didn't much help. She knew her mother would be quite ruffled if she saw her daughter with her hair unpinned, the legs of her slacks rolled up to her knees, her blouse pulled up and tucked under her bra. Eventually it became too oppressive to read or watch game shows. Maybe the pool?

She unrolled her slacks, tucked in her shirt, and walked to the motel lobby vending machine. The desk clerk, a young man about her age with black hair and suntanned skin watched her come in and stood up, eager to talk to someone.

“Scorcher, isn't it?”

Gina barely looked up from the red metal box with Coca-Cola in white cursive letters across the top. The desk clerk's tie seemed too large for his chest giving the impression of a little boy who'd borrowed his dad's clothing for work.

“I guess so.” Gina studied him a bit closer: His upper lip had a black shadow of hair and his lips were not exactly purple, but more like the color of beef liver before it’s been battered and fried. She dropped her coins in the slot and opened the glass door to reach for her Coke.

“I’m managing quite well, thank you.” She started for the door and considered him again. The boys back home looked so much different than this man. All of the boys from school looked and acted like boys still shoving each other off the curb if a girl—pretty or not—walked by. Unsophisticated, the lot of them, Gina thought, and that was why she’d never had a boyfriend before.

“I’m Raj,” he said, coming around the desk to open the double glass lobby doors. She could smell the lemon of his aftershave. “Let me know if you need anything.”

By the next day, Gina had propped her door open with the Gideon Bible that let in enough air from the outside while allowing the door chain to remain attached. Annie had not telephoned yet. Charles must have left a lot of stuff for Annie to deal with. She dialed the front desk and asked if she might have some fresh towels delivered. When Raj appeared with a comically large stack of white folded linens, Gina just sat on her bed and watched him put them away carefully into the rack above the toilet. She imagined for a moment that they were a couple on their honeymoon and he was unpacking the car. His shirtsleeves were rolled up and she noticed a small military insignia tattooed on his brown and hairless forearm. “What time are you off?” she asked.

He took long steps toward the door with his head down. She'd been too forward—certainly by her own standards—and he was embarrassed now. “Six. I usually stop at the diner for a burger. Nothing fancy.” He looked up finally and Gina understood something fundamental about men that she'd never known before; she had control.

On the seventh morning at the Americana, Gina took her desk chair and set it outside her door. She ate her scrambled eggs and dry white toast while pondering the stillness of the swimming pool. No one had been in the pool since she'd been staying here. In fact, other guests seemed to appear only at sundown, their headlights streaking across her ceiling. She thought about Raj and how they'd spent every evening together that week having dinner and then walking back to her room where he'd kiss her hand and leave. Something changed last night at the door—maybe it was the emptiness of the parking lot or the full moon (which her mother always blamed for men's lustful misbehavior) but Raj took her hand and kissed the inside of her wrist and she could feel the whiskers above his lips brush her skin. It was the most intimate thing that had ever happened to her and she wanted more. Yet in that moment, nothing could have made her feel more valuable.

With her eggs were finished, she rolled up her pant legs up and opened the top two buttons of her blouse. She hoped today Annie might call.

In the evening of day ten, Gina sat beside the pool with her feet moving in circles along the tiles awaiting Raj, whose shift at the front desk had just ended. At fifteen dollars a week, she could only stay at the Americana a few more days. If she cut back on

meals at the diner and Coke, she might be able to stretch her stay, but she would have to find a cheaper motel—but that could mean Raj wouldn't visit as the progression of their relationship was dependent on the motel. Once she moved into Annie's, she would entertain Raj there; Annie didn't have her mother's prudish ideas of impropriety, she was sure of it. Just then, in the middle of a detailed contemplation of the precise areas of her body that Raj had touched (the small of her back, her forearm, most of the fingers on her right hand) she heard the phone in her room ring behind the propped door. She sprinted with wet feet across the parking lot.

It was Mary Robinson, who told Gina she'd just hung up with Annie.

Gina almost couldn't concentrate on her mother's words. She could only think of Raj's thin fingers combing through her hair and their first kiss the night before that tasted of fresh bread.

"Annie," Mary said, "isn't coming. She's not calling you."

"What are you talking about?" Gina fell back onto the bed and looked up to the ceiling. This was the view—of thickly painted plaster bumps and thin cracks—that children saw at night when they thought about the future and that adults saw when making love.

Her mother's voice was quiet. "It must be a difficult time, losing her husband and all. She said her friend offered her a job in Las Vegas, a fresh start was what she said."

Gina set the receiver back into its cradle. She closed the door and pulled the blinds. Raj knocked on the door a few minutes later but Gina didn't answer. She opened

her small red suitcase on the single bed and took out the stacks of neatly folded clothes that remained as crisp as when her mother packed the bag for her on the kitchen table back home. Three starched white short-sleeved blouses with round collars. Two pair of khaki Bermuda shorts. One summer weight navy blue wool pencil skirt. Nude nylons. White nylon slip, no lace. She gathered up each pile, ruining their creases and her mother's careful ironed hems, and carried the load into the bathroom and dumped everything in the tub.

Gina retrieved the Los Angeles White Pages A-M from the bedside table. She ripped out thirty pages of Davises and crumpled the individual fragile pages before watching them land and roll across the clothes like paper tumbleweeds. On the narrow metal shelf about the toilet, Gina plucked the book of matches from the ashtray and ripped one match from the center. She ran it against the red strip and set the whole book aflame. Leaning over the tub, she lit each waded mass of smudged names and numbers, and watched only for a moment as her clothes disappeared into the thick gray smoke.

Out the door, not bothering to close or lock, she walked barefoot on the hot pavement, between the cars headed for better places. On the diving board of the Americana pool, Gina held her nostrils tight with blackened fingers and jumped.

A Gift for Cruelty

Harvey didn't bring anything or move anything with him after the wedding. Not even a suitcase. He started living with Georgia and her mom, Gina like a newborn baby just coming home from the hospital. On their wedding day, he wore brown slacks and a silky navy blue shirt and a medallion that read SHALOM nestled in his chest hair. No one like Harvey had ever been at her mother's table.

At first, Georgia liked the way Harvey talked. He sounded like a hippie, or a cartoon man from Mad Magazine. He knew lots of slang and referred to his stepdaughter as "Sister." Georgia, who was only ten but knew lots of bad words, got a slap on the mouth if her mother heard her talking slang. When she was alone in her room, Georgia liked to watch herself in the mirror repeating her favorite prohibited words: ain't, doobie, far-out.

Getting ready for school, Georgia took a great deal of time deciding on an outfit and settled on navy knee-highs and a denim wrap skirt with her striped T-shirt. She looked into the mirror, turned to the side to see if anyone could tell she was developing and pulled her long hair forward, binding it all into two thick ponytails. Her mother passed Georgia's open door and she could smell her perfume, the one they bought at the pharmacy that smelled like honey. Georgia had suggested that her mother buy the big yellow bottle of *Jean Naté* because she liked the commercial where the woman stepped out of the shower and splashed it all over herself. That was the sort of excess Georgia wanted to experience, but when her mother took off the cap and inhaled, she coughed and screwed up her nose, saying it smelled like her mother.

Georgia returned to the kitchen, arriving just in time to see her mother climb on to Harvey's lap. "What it is, m'lady. What it *is*." Harvey said. He whistled and looked his new wife up and down. Gina wore her business suit, the one with the plaid silky blouse that tied in a big bow around her neck. Gina hung her arms over her new husband's shoulders and kissed him on the lips. In return, he reached his hand around and patted her bottom. Georgia noticed with concern that her mother's hairstyle was different: it was loose.

On the school bus that morning, during third period reading time, during recess and gym, and bouncing all the way back home on the bus, Georgia felt queasy. It wasn't from her breakfast or lunch or even the ongoing annoyances of the fourth grade (never-ending penmanship worksheets, for example) but rather, Georgia felt stuck in a bewildered state; somewhere between crying and thinking.

When she came home, Harvey was on the couch watching soaps. Georgia found herself being careful around Harvey, locking the bathroom door, changing her clothes quickly in her closet. It wasn't anything obvious or overt; he wasn't a pervert or anything. But what if he came into her room late at night and stood by her bed, just watching her? Before Harvey showed up, it was always just Gina and Georgia. During seventh period, her boyfriend Chris Parish broke up with her because she wouldn't kiss him. Georgia decided that if Harvey came into her room in the night, she'd allow it, think of Chris Parish or Shaun Cassidy, but she'd tell her mother in the morning.

Stepfathers had to be good for something. Maybe Harvey would teach her how to drive.

When school let out a few weeks later, Gina informed her daughter that Harvey would be watching her during the workdays during summer break.

“It’ll be fun, kid,” said Harvey. He was sitting at the head of the table ripping apart a dinner roll.

“I’ll expect you to keep up on your reading, of course,” Gina said. She plopped an enormous pile of mashed potatoes on Harvey’s plate.

“Why doesn’t Harvey get a job and you stay home with me?” Georgia said. Her body went limp and sulky.

Gina placed the glass bowl of potatoes on the hotpad and exhaled. “This is not up for discussion.”

“But, Mom!”

Gina grabbed her daughter’s chin and pushed her mouth up a forceful way that made Georgia’s teeth chomp down and her eyes go wide and watery.

“You gotta learn some respect,” said Harvey. There was mashed potato stuck to his moustache.

It didn’t take long for Georgia and Harvey to establish a daily routine that was both lazy and free of any unnecessary interaction. They ate cereal for breakfast (Georgia took hers on the couch while Harvey slurped loudly at the table), followed by morning TV game shows. At 11:00 a.m., after *Sale of the Century*, Georgia hopped on her ten-speed and rode circles around the cul-de-sac while Harvey plucked at his guitar on the front porch. Harvey took off around noon and walked to the 7-Eleven for a couple hot

dogs and a thirty-two-ounce Mountain Dew. Sometimes he came back with a magazine in a paper bag, and Georgia always asked to see it. He always said no. Georgia couldn't imagine what kind of magazines Harvey bought, but maybe they were about Fritz the Cat, since everyone at school said that those were the worst.

Afternoons were harder than mornings. Harvey watched his soaps and took up the entire couch with his white-skinned legs covered in patches of black hairs. Georgia spent most of her time outside at the glass-topped patio table, cutting pictures of girls out of the JC Penney catalog and pasting them into her photo album. These were holy images to Georgia, faces of beauty to which she aspired. She noted everything from the exact angle of a clip holding back a model's long hair to the way all of the girls smiled with only part of their teeth showing. For the first time, and only through her minute examination of the thin catalog pages, Georgia also realized that the faces on the pages were not natural, but rather required tools and makeup in order to imitate perfection. There was something infinitely reassuring about this knowledge and the possibilities that were now created (where before there was only her mother's vague consolations that Georgia would "grow into herself") made her giddy.

She slipped past Harvey, half-asleep in front of the console television, and opened the bathroom closet where her mother kept her basket of metal tools: eyelash curlers that looked like torture devices, tweezers, scissors, and files. Standing on the top of the toilet, she started plucking her right eyebrow in the precise, tadpole shape of the JC Penney models. After the thrill of seeing the shadow of her teenage self passed, she decided the whole affair hurt too much and quit with only one brow thinned and highly arched, but it

pleased her to have one fashionable eyebrow even if the other was still bushy.

Nonetheless, she hoped her mother wouldn't notice.

While filling up her photo album over a week's worth of afternoons, Georgia thought up elaborate moneymaking schemes in order to purchase the \$8.95 Levi jacket from its cover, the same jacket popular with eighth-graders who plucked their eyebrows. By Friday, she'd settled on selling cups of Kool-Aid in front of her house. Georgia took a stack of Dixie cups from the bathroom and a pitcher of grape Kool-Aid out to the curb and waited for buyers. After an hour of sitting outside in the unshaded sun without a single customer, she poured herself one tiny Dixie cup and drank it fast. Over the next hour, she told herself this would be the last one, but her thirst came again and pretty soon the whole pitcher was empty and Georgia's stomach hurt.

Late in the afternoon as the nightly news droned in the background, Georgia was curled up on her bed, still sick from all the Kool-Aid. She heard her mother's car engine in the driveway, her key in the lock, and her soft voice asking Harvey about his day. Had it been a few months before—in the days when it was just Gina and Georgia—her mother would have checked on her first. Instead, Georgia held a pillow to her stomach.

"I've had a productive day researching oil futures, honey," he said.

"I don't even know what that is." Gina breezed past Georgia's door, unbuttoning her work blouse and skirt as she walked.

"You know, buy low now and then when the price of oil goes up in a few months, sell and make a bundle."

"I think you mean the stock market?"

"No. I watched a show about it this afternoon. Folks are making a fortune."

“Of course, honey.” Gina was standing in the hallway outside Georgia’s room in her bra and underpants, pulling on jeans. Georgia watched her mother’s body and thought she looked like one of the teenage swimsuit models from the catalog.

“You could quit working and could make all of our money just by calling up a broker.”

“It sounds a bit risky, don’t you think? How much would we need for the initial investment?”

“I dunno.” Harvey sat hard on the couch, the vinyl cushions exhaling loudly. The volume on the television went up too.

“Let’s talk about it some more, okay?” Gina went to him. “How about pork chops tonight?”

Oil futures were never discussed again but every few weeks during that summer Harvey got all excited about a new idea that even Georgia, who now thought of herself as an entrepreneur, thought was cockamamie. Plans presented by Harvey with an evangelist’s furor only to be quickly dismissed on account of their complete impracticality and enormous expense included importing chinchillas for pets, contracting with the Mozambique government to remove landmines from farmlands, and a restaurant that served only mashed potatoes. Each time Harvey told Gina about his newest idea, Georgia watched her mother’s face closely for any sign of incredulity but instead, Gina listened patiently, lovingly.

It was all too much for Georgia. The act her mother put on to impress Harvey, always saying sweet things and kissing on him? If only she knew. Georgia spent more time with Harvey than her mother did and most of the time he did nothing but sit in front

of the television, his shirt undone and his hairy belly growing larger by the day, leafing through a growing pile of magazines stored in paper bags under the couch. Georgia, on the other hand, had amassed nearly half the cost of the Levi's jacket selling Kool-Aid at the busy corner of Foster Road. She just needed a little more time and she'd show her mother the money and the completed order form. Then how stupid would Harvey look?

Dinner times were especially hard to deal with for Georgia. Things her mother never cared about before, like when Georgia used her fork rather than her knife to cut her chicken, now were a big deal. Rules popped up like pimples when Harvey was around.

"Sister," Harvey would say. "We're not animals tearing apart our meat."

"I'm not."

He threw a butter knife across the table at her and it clanged against her plate.

"You use your silverware properly or you're going to bed."

Georgia looked to her mother.

"You heard him."

Georgia listened from her bed to Harvey recount her behavior, and Gina seemed to agree. "You've got no perspective!" he'd announce if Gina disagreed with anything he said. "She's got to learn the basics of civility. I'm just glad that I got here in time to set your household straight."

Gina always demurred and Georgia felt so bad for hating her mother, she wanted to scream.

"Where you been?" Harvey asked Georgia one particularly hot August afternoon. He didn't look up from the television.

In turn, Georgia didn't feel an urgency to respond, though it was unusual for Harvey to say anything to her as she returned each afternoon with an empty pitcher and a stack of white Dixie cups.

"Nowhere. What's it to you?"

"I don't like that kind of talk, smarty. You gotta learn some respect."

Georgia remembered something that her mother told her a long time ago about making the choice to be cruel or kind. She said Georgia had a special gift for knowing just what to say that would make a person feel bad. It was a gift that Georgia could use for good or for evil. "So go and get a job and then I'd respect you." She put her hand in her pocket and gripped the \$1.35 she'd earned in Kool-Aid.

"If it were that easy, I'd have ten jobs." Georgia thought of the men who worked in her mother's office, their hair combed and sprayed to the side, their loafers polished and their ears free of hair. Watching Harvey mindlessly bang around her mother's tidy lemon yellow kitchen for a while, opening and closing drawers and cabinets, Georgia could only think of a sweaty gorilla. "What's your mom making for dinner tonight?"

"Tuesday night is always hamburgers, you should know that by now."

"I'm thinking we get some steaks and make dinner for your mom. Make her life easier." This was typical for Harvey. Every time he rinsed his coffee cup or wiped the counter with his shirtsleeve, he announced that he was "doing his part to support the ERA" and that always made Gina laugh. Harvey opened the drawer with the telephone books. "Shazaam!" he said holding up the keys to Gina's station wagon.

Months, even years later, Georgia wondered what agents conspired to put her in the car that day with her stepfather. It wasn't as if she wanted to spend time with him or

felt she needed to be there to protect her mother's car, which Harvey had never driven before and had only recently been paid off. No, she recognized that she was there to bear some sort of witness, not to the Harvey as Georgia understood him, but the Harvey that her mother loved and married.

Harvey shuffled on flip-flopped feet out to the station wagon. He wore a bleached out tank top and shredded denim shorts that were so short the white lining of his pockets flapped loosely on his hairy thighs. Georgia followed behind him watching a bald patch on the back of his head become excruciatingly obvious when a dusty wind blew his thin hair forward.

At the IGA, Georgia stayed three steps behind her stepfather across the parking lot and through the sliding glass doors. At the butcher's counter in the very back of the store, Harvey ordered three prime rib steaks from the besmoked butcher. Georgia wrapped her windbreaker tightly around her body, hiding her hands in the sleeves. She watched the butcher plop the thick red slabs on the scale, wrap them in brown paper, and scribble \$6.97 in black pen across the paper. He handed the package to Harvey and glanced around for another customer.

"Since when is steak such a pretty penny?" said Harvey. He looked up at the butcher with a slack mouth.

"You want the good life, you gotta pay for it, son," the butcher said. He wasn't looking at Harvey, but rather down at his knife that he ran over a pink splotched towel.

Harvey said, "I'm just trying to feed my family, man."

Georgia turned her back from the butcher counter and rocked on her heels.

"Do you want to return it?"

“No, I don’t want to return it.”

“We have a special on ground chuck.”

“Highway robbery is what this is,” said Harvey. He shook his head in disgust and his bald spot appeared again. “Highway robbery.”

Georgia didn’t want to be associated with Harvey any longer. She snaked her way down the gleaming white linoleum aisles to the front of the store. She expected Harvey to be somewhere behind her but when she emerged from the pickle and relish aisle only a few feet from check stand three, Harvey was gone. She retraced her steps and zigzagged through bread, produce, and frozen foods. In the pasta aisle, she found Harvey picking up a floppy bag of macaroni, placing it on top of the steaks and putting the whole thing under his tank top. Georgia felt a sudden rush of alarm. That was her stepdad, her mother’s husband. She wanted to turn him in, to get rid of him forever. There’s no way he’ll make it out of the store looking like that, she thought. Harvey’s belly was now a square and bumpy mass on top of a beer gut.

“Get in front of me,” Harvey said.

Georgia tried to look straight ahead. She was walking briskly, almost running.

“Not so fast!” he said.

She moved past the last register. The checker was an older woman with her hair in a long braid under a tan visor. Gina had that same visor. It was a freebie from the bank. What would Gina say when she told her about Harvey? Maybe she’d just think it was funny, or that Harvey was his own man.

The checker glanced over at Georgia and then her eyes rested on the macaroni shapes emerging from beneath Harvey’s shirt. She looked him the eye, like what the hell

are you thinking? It was as if Harvey had no choice but to go all the way at that point. He walked up and said something close to her ear. She froze for a second, then pushed a big button to open her register and slowly pulled the stacks of bills from the drawer, including a fat envelope from beneath the tray. It was a lot of money. She handed it to Harvey, looking him straight in the eye. Georgia followed Harvey through the sliding glass doors and Harvey took off running towards the car awkwardly juggling the macaroni, steaks, and the wad of cash under his shirt.

In the car, Harvey gunned the engine as Georgia scrambled into the back seat. He peeled out of the parking lot narrowly missing pedestrians and old people who turned and raised their arms in protest. Georgia pulled the collar of her jacket around her face and sunk as low as she could in the mushy backseat without crouching on the floor, which she considered doing.

“Slow down!” Georgia shouted. He said nothing. “Harvey? Are you even listening to me?” She pulled herself up and gripped the back of the driver’s seat. Harvey never looked at her, but adjusted the steaks and macaroni still pressed to his body, checking the rearview and side mirrors.

They pulled out onto 82nd Avenue and orderly lines of traffic waiting safely for lights to turn green. It was too hot in the backseat and Georgia wanted to open the windows but was afraid of what Harvey might say or do. Maybe that was what he meant about learning respect.

Georgia saw two boys up ahead on the train trestle that crossed 82nd. They wore orange shirts and blue shorts, just like her school gym uniform and she wondered if she knew them, and even more significantly, if they knew her stepfather had just robbed the

IGA. Who could know what happened by now? The store manager, the police, her mother?

She watched one of the boys on the trestle struggle to hold a large wooden post over his head. He held it aloft for a second, like a strongman in the circus then dropped it on the road below as easily as if it were a stick in a pond. Georgia couldn't find the words fast or loud enough, they just stayed in the brain tubes and veins that connected her thoughts to her voice: *slow down, something is coming to get us*. Harvey never saw anything fall from the sky; he was reaching over to the glove compartment trying to get it open so he could shove the stolen food and cash in there. He wanted to surprise Gina.

The railway tie cut through the windshield with amazing accuracy. Georgia squeezed her eyes shut and heard the horrible thud of the wood piercing Harvey squarely in the face. The car spun around until it hit the metal guardrail. Georgia was thrown sideways, coming to land in the hollow space on the floor of the backseat.

She cradled her face and the bloody gash that tore her freckled skin from nose to chin. Glass was everywhere. She called out to Harvey but there was no answer. It was so stupid. She hoped her mother wouldn't be mad about the car.

Their Pretty Liberty

Brock was the kind of dreamy high school senior best viewed in slow motion. How better to watch the way he whipped his long sandy brown bangs out of his eyes, the way his Levis clung to his skinny hips, the way he walked down the hall and all the girls turned into their lockers to giggle. Brock was the reason Vinyl Palace sold out of “Take My Breath Away” 45s every week during the fall of 1986. He was certainly responsible for Central Drug’s uptick in sales of Bonnie Bell Lipsmackers and peroxide after a twittering table of freshmen girls overheard him mention that he thought Madonna (circa “Papa Don’t Preach”) was hot.

As for Georgia, a friendless freshman at Lincoln High, Brock was what she’d been waiting for her whole life—not just a boy, but *the* boy, his existence made known to her on the first day of school near the clay bins during Beginning Ceramics. He smelled like cedar and dryer sheets and she had to quickly step away from him before she made a grab for the hem of his faded Pink Floyd T-shirt.

Brock, like so many other things at Georgia’s new high school, was exotic. His level of attractiveness, more suited for modeling for the Sunday Nordstrom circular than mingling about with sloppy teenagers, was previously unknown to her. The sharp contours of his jaw line were unquestionably Simon Le Bon-esque and his lips permanently moist. To her mind, Brock was symptomatic of Lincoln High’s ridiculous

beauty. Here the kids were smarter, the girls prettier, and the boys were able to grow respectable moustaches.

After her first freshman gym class, Georgia tried not to stare at her classmate's summer tan lines set off by their matching lace bras and panty sets. Even more than the caramel-colored arms and smooth legs moving confidently through the locker room, it was the underwear that Georgia marveled at. These were the candy-colored bits of satin and padded mesh of adult women, not teenagers. These were the undergarments of girls who had sex.

Immediately after school, Georgia stole three pairs of pale pink lace Dior briefs and matching bras from the downtown Meier and Frank. She was in such a hurry to shove them in her backpack while the clerk looked away that she grabbed the wrong sizes. Still, they were expensive—as her discerning classmates could tell if any of them were to get close enough to inspect the embroidered brand name that decorated the hip—and she wore them daily. Soon, however, Georgia worried that one of the other girls might notice that she wore the same underwear and bra every day so she dressed and undressed in the locker room at manic speed.

Being a woman was a riddle Georgia wasn't yet meant to solve. The other girls exhibited more of the type of information passed down from mother to daughter, which happened to be just the kind of pipeline Georgia was missing. Standing in line in the cafeteria, a girl behind her tapped her on the shoulder. "You have dry hair. You should use conditioner."

"What's conditioner?" Georgia asked. The girl, with her shiny eyes and tiny clips holding her bangs back, just stared at her. Understanding and obtaining that particular

beauty product would have required a knowledge of the myriad of hair care goods available for the American consumer, or more particularly, the dry, dandruff-filled, combination hair of the average American teenage girl. In order to fully comprehend these chemical compounds and how they work, a teenage girl needs a guide, usually her mother, though an older sister will do in a pinch. Since the accident that killed her stepdad died four years ago, her mother moved in an unpredictable orbit that Georgia had learned not to intrude upon. Most of her mother's hygiene-related information was outdated and possibly dangerous ("One should always douche with vinegar at the onset of a yeast infection," she once said, just for instance). When it came to questions of sex, her mother believed that young women should respect themselves above all else, though how this state of self-respect was achieved, remained a mystery. Georgia found herself stuck in the infinite loop of whether or not a self-respecting woman would have sex since sex implied that she had no self-respect.

In the grand scheme, conditioner just wasn't that important.

Georgia made her first friend riding the downtown number fifteen bus during the second week of school. Her name was Liberty. She walked on the bus while still reading a copy of *Siddhartha* and sat next to Georgia without looking up from her book. Georgia pulled her copy of *Ethan Frome* from her backpack and started reading too. Liberty glanced up and noticed the book first, then Georgia. "I loved that book. We read it in eighth grade."

“Pretty depressing, though,” said Georgia. She tried to sound as if she wasn’t in remedial. “He spends so much time mooning over the cousin and never says anything to her?”

Liberty turned her body to face Georgia more squarely. “You go to Lincoln? I haven’t seen you before.”

“I’m new and I don’t actually know anyone yet. I’m invisible.”

“You look cool. I like your makeup,” she said, and brought her face close to Georgia’s, as though she were inspecting some small animal she might want to adopt. Georgia noticed Liberty’s lovely round face was clean but for dots of concealer on a smattering of pimples. There were not many girls her own age that she would call *lovely* but that was the word that came to her. Not pretty or beautiful, but lovely. Loved. “How do you get your skin so pale?”

“White clown makeup,” Georgia said. “You blend it with regular foundation and then brush baby powder on top.”

“My mom would never let me leave the house like that.” Liberty sat back in the seat and assessed her full and colorfully striped Guatemalan skirt. “You must have a pretty cool mom.”

“I guess.”

“I totally dig your scar too.” The bus stopped a block from school and Georgia followed a few steps behind her, barely able to see with her hair hanging limply over her eyes and covering her lip. This was the longest exchange she’d had with another human in months and there was comfort in even the slightest familiarity. Before she walked

through the heavy metal doors into Lincoln, Liberty turned back to Georgia to acknowledge her with a small wave.

A friend. A nice friend. A normal friend. Georgia was overjoyed. She looked for Liberty to board the bus every morning and soon their bus-only relationship developed into lunch in the cafeteria and eventually bloomed into a mad rush to connect between every class period. After school, Georgia got off the bus with Liberty on 24th Avenue where every house had at least three stories. Liberty lived with her parents in a big Victorian decorated with worn Oriental carpets and wicker baskets filled with dried flowers; the whole place smelled like vitamins.

Liberty commonly grabbed a bag of chips out of the pantry (Georgia had never before seen a room wholly dedicated to food) and took Georgia to her room, where they listened to Tracy Chapman and smoked pot from her dad's stash. Liberty was concerned with big, global social issues like Apartheid and she'd talk at length while Georgia watched her practically writhe on the floor with the injustice of Mandela's continued incarceration. It wasn't that Georgia was uninterested in these issues, but she couldn't muster the fire with which Liberty argued her position. Georgia realized she just didn't care that much about people so far away. It was selfish but felt justified, given where she'd come from.

Liberty's mother liked to leave notes applied to Liberty's dressing mirror that quoted classic rock lyrics: "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose," or "Even though we ain't got money, I'm so in love with you honey." This one got under Georgia's skin a little, though she wasn't sure exactly what about the note bothered her. Her own mother would never stop long enough to leave a note for her daughter; even one

that recited a lyric her mother used to sing in their station wagon. But that was when things were better, before the accident, and besides, it seemed like Liberty had plenty of money.

A month into their friendship, Georgia trusted that Liberty had accepted the limitations of what Georgia could provide to their relationship in terms of small comforts, and invited her over to her apartment. Georgia and her mom and lived on the very edge of Northwest; their nearest neighbor—a steel foundry—sent up plumes of metallic smoke at regular intervals. Liberty didn't say anything when she walked in that first time, just sunk into one of the beanbags and lit a Camel Light like there was nothing strange at all about the apartment. And for this, Georgia was forever grateful to her new friend.

“When's your mom home?” Liberty asked.

“Technically? Never.”

“I wish my mom disappeared once in a while.”

“It's better that she's at Jim's condo. He's a drag.”

This apartment, well, perhaps not this exact run-down brown carpeted pit exactly, but its *location* was a fulfillment of her mother's dream: an expensive neighborhood where creative people lived. Georgia knew that they'd landed at this apartment—its every corner smelling of burnt toast and turpentine—only to prove to her mother's married boyfriend that she didn't need him after all.

This apartment was going to change things, be the magic telephone booth they could step into that would fix everything. Only problem being the apartment achieved very few practical solutions to their living situation. For one thing, there was only one small bedroom and Georgia's mother seemed so bewitched by the affordability and

location that she never mentioned to her daughter that she'd be sleeping on the living room floor. And at first, her mother's enthusiasm for their new place made it tolerable for Georgia to bear the indignity of keeping her clothes in black milk crates and sleeping with her face inches from the brown carpet that most certainly hid the microscopic traces of skin cells of so many previous residents. Her mother even attempted to decorate by salvaging a neon yellow bookshelf from the garbage pile down the block and providing the color inspiration for the rest of the apartment. Soon after, posters featuring geometric shapes in bright primary colors were push-pinned to the drab walls of the kitchen and living room. The final touch were the electric blue beanbags facing everywhere and nowhere; her mother's only explanation was that after all she'd invested in the apartment, she just couldn't afford a couch.

It'd been a few weeks since she'd seen her mom to ask for money and even longer since there were groceries in the apartment. Georgia made dinner for Liberty by adding water to a box of pancake mix and cooked waffles. For her part, Liberty seemed excited at the novelty of breakfast for dinner. Georgia opened the windows just as the wind came off the Willamette and down the corridors of Northwest streets like a gale from the Pacific, ridding the air of the pungent industrial smell Georgia had grown familiar with. It seemed like a momentary reprieve to Georgia and she wanted to stay beside Liberty forever. Liberty lit a joint and the two girls slumped low in their beanbags, watching the pink sunset fade behind the graying arches of the Fremont Bridge.

Liberty called her parents to tell them she was staying over, ending the conversation with an obligatory I love you.

“Do you think they knew you were high?” Georgia asked, genuinely afraid that Liberty might have to leave.

Liberty’s lovely face fell. “Oh, shit, they totally knew didn’t they?”

“Did you tell them that my mom isn’t here?”

“They never asked.”

“Right.” Georgia lit a cigarette, feeling slightly more at ease. “Why would they even suspect that?”

Late into the night, after all fears that Liberty’s parents might appear any second to save their daughter had dissipated, the girls curled together under an afghan on Georgia’s mother’s bed. With another person in the bed, Georgia found that she couldn’t sleep. As a child she never thought to cuddle with her mother in the mornings, to warm her tiny feet on her mother’s calves. It just wasn’t done. Instead, awake beside Liberty, she listened to the cars for what seemed like hours with cars drifting by on the lonely road outside and draped her arm around Liberty’s waist, waiting for her exhalations to become deeper and acknowledging. Liberty wasn’t asleep and she wasn’t awake. Georgia’s hand floated closer to Liberty’s stomach until her fingers rested on the waistband of her jeans. She found the place where her friend’s shirt was lifted enough to expose the smooth skin of her stomach and pressed her palm gently beneath her jeans with an urgency that scared her.

“I don’t want to lose you as my best friend,” Liberty said. Her voice was so quiet Georgia almost couldn’t hear her. Georgia curled her arms together in front of her chest and waited for the night to turn to day.

Georgia had never had a best friend before and didn't know what being someone's best friend entailed. She was terrified that she'd ruined everything by trying to alter (even if just for a moment) the relationship, and held out hope Liberty didn't remember anything at all.

On the bus in the morning, Liberty leaned her head sleepily on Georgia's shoulder. Georgia could smell the remnants of perfumed laundry detergent on her best friend's denim jacket. It was a smell that was familiar to her, not from any detergent that her mother ever used, but rather the scent of clothes belonging to girls who were well cared for, whose shirts and pants had been washed and folded by their mothers. She thought of her misreading of the night before and coughed into her hand, signaling Liberty to lift her head.

Liberty yawned and said, "Want to skip first period?"

"I can't. I've got a test."

"In ceramics?"

"I have to throw a vase or a bowl, I can't remember." Georgia pulled a lock of hair into her mouth. "Plus, I kinda like this boy in my class."

Liberty turned her head away. "Who."

"No one." Georgia had never felt so foolish in her whole life. She didn't even have the courage to ask Liberty to buy her a sandwich at lunch and instead went hungry that day in atonement. There had been so many times before this morning that Georgia wanted to tell Liberty about Brock, but even mentioning his name aloud seemed like the Light as a Feather Stiff as a Board game that girls played at parties. Once the game began, the collective belief that a person could levitate defied all reason and truth. It was

the closest thing that any of these girls came to religious ecstasy. Georgia believed—with a measure of fear and optimism—that together, she and Liberty could will Brock to them. But that was as far as her imagining went; there was no endpoint. Instead, the two spoke little between classes and wordlessly took the bus to Georgia's apartment in a habitual way that they both understood as forgiveness. By day's end they were back in each other's arms, stoned and asleep under the woolly afghan.

“Can I borrow something to wear for school?” Liberty opened up the drawers of Georgia's dresser, its contents uniformly black and unwashed.

“None of it's really your style,” Georgia said. She turned back to the mirror where she was applying charcoal eye shadow with a tiny sponge on a stick.

Liberty frowned at herself and pulled her thick hair into a ponytail. “I don't know what to be.”

“How about this?” Georgia held up a black shirt from the floor, its front covered with an enormous picture of Siouxsie Sioux peering out like a serpent.

Liberty sniffed the shirt. “It smells like cigarettes and body odor,” she said, but put it on anyway. “Do my makeup.”

The two sat face to face on the floor with little black pots of powdered eyeshadow and stubby eyeliner pencils laid out before them. Georgia skimmed a layer of white clown makeup and warmed it in her palm before adding a drop of foundation. Then she spread it on Liberty's face with her index finger. On Liberty, though, it seemed too stark and deathly. Liberty nevertheless looked at herself in the mirror and cocked her head in approval. “I want all of that black eyeliner and red lipstick shit, too.”

Afterwards, they both stood in front of the mirror looking at each other. “Now we’re monozygotic,” Liberty said.

In Ceramics, Georgia pulled her blackened raku-fired ashtray out of the kiln and set it before her on the cooling rack. It looked like a blowtorched mudpie: yet another beautiful thing she’d made ugly. She watched Brock on the other side of the ceramics studio hunched over his wheel with muddy clay squeezing through his fingers. Georgia hugged herself and thought of Liberty’s pretty face.

Every night for the next week, Liberty called her parents from Georgia’s to tell them she was staying over, always ending the conversation with *I love you*. Liberty gave herself responsibilities around the apartment: emptying the previous night’s ashtrays, washing red lipstick off the rims of chipped coffee cups, spending her allowance on cigarettes and Dominos pizza.

“I think we’re out of money,” Liberty said finally.

“I’ve got quarters for laundry.”

“No, I mean we need money for groceries. Like normal people.”

“I know that.” Georgia had no access to any extra money. She remembered the letter that had arrived from Jim’s law firm with three crisp one hundred dollar bills and a yellow sticky note from her mother. *For the rent*, it read and nothing else. If that money was spent, where would she and Liberty go?

“No big deal,” Liberty said. She put her hands on her hips and looked like a good approximation of an adult. “I can get it.”

It was hard to begrudge Liberty her sense of entitlement because it benefited Georgia. She envied her friend's steadfast belief that everything was going to be fine because in Liberty's experience, everything always was fine.

They slipped into Liberty's house after school. Her mom was wearing leather gloves and snipping at her houseplants in the window with tiny scissors. "I made a caprese salad if you're hungry," she said without looking up. They'd already made it up the stairs and into the study where Liberty's dad kept a coffee can filled with emergency cash. Georgia stood guard at the doorway, terrified not that Liberty's mother would find them filching money, but that she could unravel everything.

"I'll just tell him that I had to pay for an abortion." She stuffed the money into the front pocket of her jeans and walked out.

"We could double this," Liberty said. All laid out like dead soldiers on Georgia's mother's bed, the wrinkled bills added up to two hundred dollars.

"Why? We could pay the rent and use your money to buy groceries for months."

"You mean pancakes? I don't think so. Let's have a kegger." Liberty's face was flush with the possibilities. "We'll charge five dollars per cup and make more money than you've ever seen in your life."

Word circulated through Lincoln so quickly that the sheer momentum of the event itself overpowered any hesitation Georgia might have felt. During study hall a kid Georgia didn't know stopped at her desk and whispered that his older brother could buy the keg for the party. It would cost us three cups and a twenty. Georgia nodded her approval like she was some kind of Godfather and he walked away.

By nine o'clock on Saturday night, the apartment overflowed with Lincoln kids in a lather to get drunk. Liberty took money at the door and dispensed red plastic Solo cups while Georgia filled a black Hefty bag with emptied ashtrays and cups of freshman girl vomit. She tried to remind herself of why this party was necessary but wanted, more desperately than she wanted the money, to have the serenity of the empty apartment returned.

Pimpily and longhaired kids Georgia had never spoken to at school occupied every corner of her home, standing in tight groups talking loudly and blowing smoke in each other's faces. Even the bathroom was packed, though it cleared out when someone rushed in to puke in the toilet. After a while the toilet stopped up so they just stuck their heads out the window.

"Who lives here?" Georgia heard someone say.

"Who cares?"

When floor space ran out, the party spread to the fire escape where honking horns told Georgia that Lincoln's finest were flashing their white asses and tanned boobs at passing vehicles. Georgia caught Liberty's eye across the living room and she flashed the wad of cash, smiling. Just then, Georgia had heard the tell-tale shaking of a spray can from across the apartment and arrived only to find a giant peace sign in red spray paint covering a wall in the living room. They were animals, all of them.

Georgia dragged her full garbage bag over to where Liberty helped a popular senior girl fill her beer bong; those were also Liberty's idea and cost the drinker an extra \$15.

"Everyone's gotta go," Georgia said.

“What are you talking about? The keg is still a quarter full.”

“Don’t you see? They are ruining everything.” It was true: holes had been kicked in the flimsy drywall, kitchen cabinets hung by single hinges, cigarettes burned holes in the carpet where they’d been put out.

Liberty looked around and Georgia could tell that they were looking at different people. To Liberty, these were the children she knew in classrooms and soccer fields, Saturday art classes and private swim clubs. These were her classmates who lived in quaint Nicaraguan villages over the summer to learn Spanish while thanking God that they lived in America. Georgia recognized in that moment that Liberty was just like them: she only knew how destroy and never be destroyed. “We got their money, didn’t we?” Liberty said and threw her arm around Georgia’s neck.

Out the street-facing window in her mother’s room, Georgia crawled out to the fire escape, where it was cold and damp. She found a boy with his hand on the exposed nipple of a girl from her geometry class. “The cops are here,” Georgia told them. A few minutes later, Georgia watched from above as groups of Lincoln kids came skittering out of the building’s front door. She hung over the black cast-iron railing that enclosed the fire escape with her head low, looking and hoping to see Liberty among those leaving. She let a bit of saliva drip from her mouth on to her fellow students. Brock came around the corner on the street below, his head down and hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans. He looked up at her, an ugly Juliet on the balcony.

“Hey.”

Brock pulled the iron ladder down and climbed up to the fire escape with one hand in the manner of a gorilla. He jumped on the landing and smiled as if he'd accomplished something amazing. There were some jocular exchanges with boys on the sidewalk below about another kegger at Witch's Castle and Georgia waited with sideways glances for Brock to leave again.

"Mind if I hang out? I just shoulder-tapped a forty."

Georgia nodded.

He looked at her with one eye closed. "Don't we have a class together?"

"Ceramics."

"Right." He leaned against the railing and crossed his legs. Georgia couldn't look him in the face and instead considered his Levi's, his black Converse sneakers. "I've always wanted to ask you, how'd you get that scar?"

Georgia touched her thumb to her lip and thought of the amazing possibility that he'd noticed her before this moment and had taken note of something significant about her. "It was an accident."

"A dog bit you or something?"

"Something like that."

Now that the big question was out of the way, they had nothing more to talk about. It wasn't that Georgia didn't want to have a conversation with Brock, but she didn't at that time know how to engage a teenage boy in conversation, that she would have to draw him out and ask questions. In all of the imaginary scenes Georgia had so carefully scripted between herself and Brock, she'd always given him the most charming lines. Instead, she was surprised that in this moment, she didn't want to talk. She wanted

him to leave too. She wanted to be warm, to go to sleep, but someone spray-painted the wall and it was Liberty's fault. "I'll show you my apartment."

She went inside to her mother's room. Brock followed her. She sat on the bed, wrapping the afghan around her shoulders.

"Is this it?" he asked.

"Yeah, this is it."

He looked from one side of the room to the other. There was nothing on the putty walls, nothing in the closet, no sheets or blankets on the bed. Brock sat on the edge of the mattress and wedged his 40 between his thighs. "You want some?"

"I'm good."

"That's cool," he said. Georgia wanted to hold him in her palm forever. She curled up on the naked bed and felt the cool polyester covering against her cheek. Georgia closed her eyes and wondered if, upon waking, the room would contain only smoke. When she did open her eyes again, Brock had his penis out and was working it up and down. It was ugly, pink, and mushy.

"Go down on me," he said.

She thought about leaving the room, but there was nothing on the other side of the door. She pulled the afghan over her head and put his penis in her mouth.

A knock at the bedroom door interrupted Georgia, but she found no reason to stop. All sounds belonged to that world outside. She heard it again, this time louder, and she pulled the afghan off her head and held Brock in her closed fist.

"No. Finish me off first."

The door opened, then. Liberty stood in the doorway, one hand on the knob, her white makeup and red lips stark and garish. Georgia wanted to go to her, her twin, the one she loved.

“It’s all gone,” Liberty said.

Georgia moved to the other side of the stripped bed. “What’s all gone?”

“The money,” Liberty said. For the first time she looked at Brock, and seemed unsurprised to find him here with his pants open. “There was a huge wad of bills—maybe a thousand dollars.”

“Jesus, Liberty! What did you do?” Georgia said, rushing for the door, out into the ruined living room.

Liberty slumped low in one of the beanbags, its tiny white-balled innards seeping out from a cut in the side. Georgia had never seen her so defeated—and for what? This wasn’t even her apartment, or now the shell of an apartment, its essential parts dismantled by savages.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do now?” Georgia said. She wanted to scream and laugh at the same.

“Don’t you mean what are *we* going to do now?”

“I don’t really care.” And she didn’t. She looked at Liberty, still so pretty and assured. “You can always steal more from your parents, right?”

“That’s right, Georgia. It’s just money.” Liberty tried to reach for Georgia’s arm, but there was too much distance now.

“Go home, Liberty.”

Sierra Thompson may have started the trend at Lincoln of wearing cowboy boots with denim skirts, but the look metastasized through the school so quickly, everyone could reasonably claim to have been an early adopter. After she and Georgia stopped speaking, Liberty agreed to a shopping trip with her mother, an event that placed a kernel of hope in her mother's heart that her daughter still needed her for something. Liberty was very clear regarding the exact color of the skirt (dark indigo) and its length (mid-thigh) as well as the heel height and decoration of the boot (two inches with white stitching on caramel leather).

Her mother nodded with approval at her daughter's outfit and gladly paid \$426.95 for the boots and denim skirt; her daughter looked so lovely again and the bohemian elements of the ensemble reminded her of something she might have worn herself in the 1960s, in fact.

The Psychic's Apprentice

The woman beside me on the bus keeps looking over at me, peeking at me from behind her coat's fox collar. I rest my purse on my lap and try to correct my posture, which is always too slumped. At every stop the bus fills with more morning rush-hour riders in bulky coats and swinging laptop bags, everyone jockeying for something to hold on to. I'm sitting in the aisle seat and the woman beside me harrumphs every time I have to move slightly into her butt-shaped side of the plastic bench to make room for other riders coming down the aisle. Our thighs momentarily press together, and I can feel my fat slide too far and overwhelm her. *Her father never loved her.*

Two stops later, Miss Fox Collar rustles her paper and stands up quickly. I feel her peering down at me with expectation. I do a quick calculation in my mind to gauge how much I will have to move into the aisle in order to give her room. No one moves aside; I don't know how she's going to make it to the door before it closes. I shift my body to the side so perhaps she can get by in front of me, but she is waiting for me to get up, to somehow move the masses with my girth. She's tapping her ring on the metal bar connected to the seat. The bus starts to pull away and suddenly she's yelling, "Move it fat ass!" That gets people's attention and a thousand eyes turn to look at me. The bus lurches to a stop while Miss Fox Collar mutters to herself and pushes sideways down the aisle before stomping out of the bus. It's still two more stops until I get to the office.

I take the wheel chair ramp down through the darkened underground garage to the accounting firm where I'm a CPA. Right away, I see Betty, our office manager. She's

climbing out of her beat-up Corolla wearing a champagne velour tracksuit with the word “Delicious” in glittering letters across her wide and flat butt. Of course she sees me and waves with so much effort that the excess arm skin surviving from her former fat self ripples from side to side. I do like Betty; but I like fat Betty more than I like delicious Betty.

“Went to the gym before work this morning. It was fantastic,” she says. When she smiles, I see her new bleached veneers. I liked her old teeth.

“Good for you,” I say. And I mean it. I feel no ill will towards her, why should I? We’re at the elevator now. Ting. Ting. I realize I’m slumped over again and try to right myself.

“I can be your workout partner if you’re interested Gina.” Betty looks intently at the red digital numbers counting down the floors.

“I walk to and from my house to the bust stop; that’s enough exercise for me.”

“Oh, Gina. We’re Golden Girls now, we’ve got to take care of ourselves.”

“I’m pretty sure that I’ve crossed over into aluminum by now, but I do thank you for your concern, Betty.”

Silver elevator doors smudged with a thousand fingertips open to allow us inside. Betty and I both step in and reach for the number four button. She squishes my fingernail with hers. “Sorry, honey. Didn’t mean to poke ya.” *She lost her mother so young, there wasn’t anyone left to care for her.*

When we reach the lobby, a woman I’ve never seen before gets on the elevator carrying a birdcage covered with a monogrammed towel. It’s a fancy towel with satin piping, the kind that people only bring out when company comes over. For three floors,

we're just three middle-aged ladies and a bird in the elevator. I study the bird lady from behind. She seems like the type of woman who couldn't be bothered with fashion, like me. Her clothes are flaxen and loose and her fat brown braid with a year's worth of gray ends halfway down her back.

At the third floor, the bird lady swings her braid around to the front and a brown and white two-toned tendril floats imperceptibly through the stale elevator air before alighting on my shoe. *She's a liar*. The bird lady pushes the cage in front of her and steps out.

"That must be the new tenant in that tiny office on three," says Betty as the elevator doors close. "I hear she's a real wacko."

I spend the morning cloistered in my cubicle distracted by the liar. What did she lie about? Liars are the worst kind of folks. I think about my neighbor's cat that was abducted and set on fire by some kids down the street and when the cops came, the kids lied through their rotted out teeth. The cat survived but looked unlovable evermore. I scold myself: This isn't normal, to obsess about what other people do wrong, to only believe in sad things, to mourn. Sometimes I think the only thing I do really well is mourn. I excel at feeling really, really sad about things that happen. People dying, trees that are cut down, a house demolished, an ant going down the drain, swirling, twirling, without any hope of survival. It ruins my whole day.

But the liar? I don't feel anything about her.

I take the bus home and of course it's full. I try hard not to touch anyone but a sweet-faced little girl thinks I'm her mother and takes my hand without looking. My daughter's hand felt so similar: impossibly small and yet fully capable. Where she is now,

I don't know. I grip the little hand and wait for my flash of understanding, of recognition of her pain, and nothing comes. She looks up at me and realizing that I'm not her mother, starts to cry. I wanted to believe that I had healed her.

During lunch the next day, instead of my usual thirty-two-ounce Mountain Dew and a Snickers bar from the commissary, I step off the elevator on the third floor and turn right, walking slowly to the end of the corridor. A freshly painted salmon pink door holds a gold placard: ESPERANZA JOHNSON. PSYCHIC. The bird lady. I wait for the door to open for me, for Esperanza to know I am there on the other side, waiting to be invited in. Perhaps she is in a meeting.

Eventually, I knock again on Esperanza Johnson's door. No one answers. I grip the polished brass doorknob and, feeling like a great explorer, turn it fully to the right. I expect to find someplace amazing, a magical environment befitting one who can talk to the animals, or claims to.

Her office looks nearly identical to our sterile office one floor up only on a smaller scale; same putty walls, rectangular florescent lighting, same dispiriting absence of natural light. Esperanza Johnson sits in a black mesh office chair behind a laminated wood desk facing the door. She doesn't acknowledge that I've entered the room, her eyes are closed and her silver ring encrusted fingers stroke a cockatoo the color of peach ice cream that is perched on her arm.

"Hello?" I say, pressing the door closed behind me.

Esperanza pets the bird three more times, opens her eyes and slowly leads the bird to its cage beside her desk, tenderly kissing its beak along the way.

“Homer unlocked his cage one night,” she says in a low voice. “He chewed through a window screen and flew around the neighborhood while everyone was asleep. Didn’t you, Homer?” The bird bobs its head side to side and shuffles its grey speckled feet on its perch.

“Is he your bird?” I ask not wanting to get too close to her or the bird. It’s a very small office.

“No, he’s my client’s bird. She feels Homer might want to leave her.”

“For bird? That seems natural,” I say, looking for a hint of “you know what I mean?” in the woman’s face. Esperanza closes her eyes again and interlaces her fingers under her chin.

Her eyes spring open as if she’s suddenly remembered me. “How can I help you?”

“Can you really talk to animals?” I ask.

“I intuit their language. Animals are quite expressive.” She turns her gaze toward Homer who nibbles at a silver bell hanging from his perch.

“I’ve never had an animal, cat, dog, rabbit. Nothing.”

“That’s unfortunate, they are very healing.”

“I’ve had enough trouble taking care of myself.”

“I can see that,” she says. I recognize her tone as one that thin women sometimes take when speaking to overweight women, usually followed by unsolicited advice about diet pills and bariatric surgery.

“Right. I don’t usually look like this; I used to have a nice figure. I’m sort of in a rut. Have been for a very long time in fact. But that’s why I’m here. I think, anyway. I

think I'm psychic too. I don't really know what else to call it." I felt a rush of relief in saying that out loud for the first time in my life. Maybe it was fashionable to be mystical when I was younger and the world cared about such things, but here I was, a middle-aged, fat, CPA and the truth was, I could do something special. "Maybe I could be your apprentice?"

"Oh, dear," she says, twisting her head from side to side in an exaggerated movement that Homer attempts to imitate. "What I do takes a lifetime to learn, a lifetime of honing extrasensory capabilities. It's quite complex, really."

"You're right, I'm too old to start something new." I look at my hands in my lap the skin, freckled and dotted with red age spots, had turned nearly translucent across my knuckles. I hoped I hadn't scared the little girl on the bus. "Maybe you could show me? Just for fun."

She softened a bit, perhaps understanding that I believed in her. "Give me something of yours that is significant, something that you love."

On my wrist is an old silver Timex with an expandable metal watchband. "This watch was my father's." I drop it into her hand without touching her.

"Your father has passed?"

"No, he still lives in Parkrose. Will he die soon?"

"I make it a policy never to mention if I feel someone's death is in the near future," says Esperanza with authority. "Even if I sense that death is imminent, I don't want to scare that person. They might, as you'd imagine, hurry the process."

"You mean, off themselves?"

"And I have been wrong. A few times."

She turns the watch over and over in her hands. Pops gave it to me when he went into the hospital a few years ago. He slipped it off his arm still warm and wrapped it in my palm, closing my fingers around it. Wearing the watch reminds me of him, of being a little girl chasing him, all memories which make me quite melancholy.

“Now, I want you to think of a question. It can be any question that has haunted you.”

“Should I say it out loud?”

“This is a sacred space.”

“Do I feel more deeply than others? Does it make me special?”

Esperanza runs her thumb over the leather strap of my father’s watch with her eyes closed.

“You feel deeply,” she says. “But it is not true feeling.”

“It’s not?”

“It is feeling, but it’s like a child crying over injustice. Tragedy is a part of life, it is not to linger over or rail against god over. It just is. And because it is, it can scarcely be called tragedy.” Esperanza sits quietly for an expansive, uncomfortable amount of time. Not even Homer, rocking back and forth in his cage like a mental patient, makes a sound.

Esperanza parts her thin lips, “Your mother—”

“—Is dead.”

“I’m smelling cigarette smoke,” Esperanza says. Her eyes remain shut.

I looked up to the intermittently rust-stained acoustical ceiling tiles. “Maybe it’s the vents, someone could be smoking outside.”

“It’s your mother’s cigarette smoke.”

A liar. "My mother never smoked."

Esperanza opens her eyes and blinks as if to put me in focus. "Was she a twin?" she says in an expectedly loud voice.

"No." This wasn't what I came here for, to talk about my mother or Annie. I wanted, just for once, to talk about me. "Sorry to have taken up so much of your time."

Esperanza says, "When you are ready, you will come back." She holds out the Timex, dropping it into my palm. Homer unlatches his cage and jumps on to the table before me, his puffy ivory wings pulled tightly to his sides as if he'd forgotten how to fly.

I pass Betty at the front desk on my way back to my cubicle. She's talking to Jim, the managing partner. "Betty looks great, don't you think?" He leans on one arm, his gut hanging over the waistband of dark brown slacks. Betty blushes and I remember a tipsy dance I shared with Jim around the conference table during the holiday party. *He hasn't made love to a woman in twelve years.*

Past the rows of cubicles and muted sounds of ringing telephones, I duck into my cube in the last row and sit down, the pneumatic lift of my office chair emitting a loud *piff*. She's not a liar any more than I am. I smelled the cigarette smoke too. A certain brand of cigarette, a brand long ago retired after crooners and cowboys died of lung cancer and kids moved on to cigarettes smoked by cartoon camels. It was my mother's brand. Being a psychic is not hard. I think of Esperanza's dramatic routine, as if she alone holds the knowledge of the universe and that's lie. Everything to know is right there when I look in look in people's faces, however masked with the everyday business of living. But when I touch someone, I can access the deepest sadness of a person's life and the accumulated despair of so many has lately been too much to take in. I'm the liar. I

don't want people to see in me what I see vividly in them. If they did know, it would just break their hearts.

I walk out of my cube and decide, just at that moment, that it will be the last time I'm ever in that office. Leaving behind the check registers and client ledgers, past the janitor whistling and sweeping dust from side to side, past the gentle, comforting hum of office machines and paper rustling, through the door that leads to the long corridor terminating at the elevators, one floor down and I arrive again at the door of Esperanza Johnson. Psychic. This time there's someone waiting in a chair outside her office: a very thin and worried man with red-rimmed eyes and a white rat on his shoulder. "She's with a client," he says in an exaggerated quiet voice.

I surprise myself when I reach out and put my hand on his knee. *She said she wanted someone who knew how to golf.* "It wasn't your fault," I tell him and walk in, this time without knocking.

"My mother is not my mother," I say before the door clicks shut behind me. "My mother did not raise me, is what I am trying to say."

Esperanza stands in the far corner of her office with a fawn-colored ferret wrapped cozily around her neck. She holds its tiny front paws in her hand, directly above her heart, while speaking nearly imperceptibly into its ear. Homer knocks around in his cage nearby.

"But the thing is, I don't want to talk about her. There's nothing left to talk about," I say.

"I think," Esperanza says into the fuzzy ear of the ferret, "she wants to speak to you."

“The weasel?” I say.

“Your mother.”

“Are you talking to her right now?” I feel that old sorrow in my gut.

“In a sense,” says Esperanza. She sits in her black chair and unfurls the ferret from her neck. It rises up into a great stretch, flexing its tiny feet and arching its back into a fuzzy bridge and curls up into a circle on the desk blotter. “She’s been waiting for you for a long time.”

“You’re not an animal psychic, are you?”

“People will pay a great deal to have me tell them what they want to hear, my dear, but the dead? They have only the truth left and people don’t like to pay for that.”

“What the hell’s wrong with that ferret, anyway?”

Esperanza smiles and reaches out to the sleeping creature, petting him with one long fingernail between its eyes. “His parents are divorcing and he’s stopped eating. He feels guilty that he prefers one house over the other, the one without the cat.”

“I’m a good person,” I say. I wait for Esperanza to respond but nothing happens. “Tell Annie I’m not angry anymore.”

Esperanza goes silent, like a New Age sphinx. Her face cements into a contemplative mask with a slight smile, and I understand she can’t teach me anything.

I take the long bus ride from my office out to my father’s place. Once we get past 82nd Avenue, I’m the only person onboard besides a man standing in the aisle in front of me, not holding on. The camel fabric of his slacks brushes my nyloned leg lightly. *He lost his pitching arm and the hearing in his left ear in Vietnam.* His cell phone vibrates in the pocket of his overcoat and, as he tries to answer, his shoulder bag slips off and comes

down hard on my thigh. It hurts. I smile too broadly and say, “That’s ok!” He doesn’t acknowledge me. He’s my age, he should know better.

I stand up and tap him on the shoulder. “You have no excuse.”

He squints his eyes at me with a mixture of irritation and confusion, as if I’d trespassed on his concentration. “What?” he says too loudly and points at his ear that’s filled with a clear plastic hearing aide.

I want to tell him the one thing—the perfect combination of words—that will heal him but he’s already waved me away and stepped to the front of the bus, closest to the driver. For once, I’m not angry about the one-sided nature of our encounter, of my intimate knowledge and compassion for this man who would never think again about the purple welt seeping across my thigh. I think of something that my mother used to tell me: No one might ever know how special you are. That’s how it’s always been.

Pops tends to a yard full of roses in the same house he and Mama raised me. It’s a neighborhood in east Portland dotted with small houses filled with little old people. After the old people die, the little houses are replaced with Vietnamese restaurants and there aren’t many old people left. No point in calling ahead, Pops never answers the phone. He quite enjoys being surprised by the sight of folks coming by for a visit. He wears his same olive green overalls and clips at the roses with tiny shears, talking quietly to someone, maybe Mama.

“Roses are beautiful, Pops,” I say, kissing him on the cheek. *It’s not the war anymore; it’s her last breath.* His papery skin smells of chocolate syrup and fertilizer.

“How’s my girl?” he says, squinting at me through the sunshine.

“I didn’t know where else to go.”

“Running from the law are you?”

“No, nothing like that.” I smile to reassure him. “Had a hard day. I guess I didn’t know how Mama’s dying really got to me.”

“It’s been a tough few months.”

“The strangest thing happened Pops, I started thinking of Annie.”

“Annie, huh? Your Mama did everything she could for you but, Annie,” he pauses and looks closely at a yellow bud. He runs his fingers along the exterior to gather the aphids and crushes them between his calloused thumb and forefinger. “Annie did nothing but make trouble. Never deserved you as far as I’m concerned.”

“Maybe so, Pops.”

He searches the roses for black spotted leaves or canes with signs of weakness. “Wanted to tell you that I saw the darndest thing yesterday: a fox. Maybe looking for eggs from the coop or bird seed from the feeder, but red with a white tipped tail just as sure as I’m born.”

“Isn’t that something?”

“Don’t see those in the city much. Rare thing of beauty.”

There was that cigarette smell again and I walk around the rose bushes and across the yard, careful to step only on the path made of concrete feet. It was the smell of who I wanted my mother to be, who she had no intention of being. I close my eyes and take a deep, deep inhalation that carries the smoke far into the bronchi and finally rests safely though not inert in the alveoli. That’s where it stays.