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Daughter of the moon and other stories

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Daughter of the Moon and Other Stories

by

Shannon Zimmerman

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

All of the protagonists in this collection of stories are starving. The world around them buzzes with the electric hum of modern society, a siren song that tempts these girls and women with the promise of love, opportunity, affluence, and dreams. Instead, they find themselves lost somehow, left behind, victims of circumstance, confused by dysfunctional families, and romanced by the media. They no longer know themselves, and stumble in their quest for happiness. They are lured into competitions with imaginary adversaries, and sometimes lose. The less control they have in their own lives, the more desperate they become, often going to great lengths to satisfy their hunger for love, acceptance, and security.

A little girl wants nothing more than a normal, loving family in “Raylene,” and when she tires of dreaming her life were different, she decides to do something about it. The protagonist of “The Broken Lamp” is plagued by the desire to be free of her financial concerns, and loses herself in this desire to the point that her marriage is threatened. The pursuit of love, in “Management Material,” leads a movie theater employee to find happiness, although not in the way she expected. Old friends attempt to rekindle their

connection in “Common Ground,” desperate to regain the closeness of their adolescence. “Daughter of the Moon” features a woman with a family secret that she has kept since childhood, a secret that she now must dig up if she ever wants to move forward. And, in “Falling,” a woman longing for acceptance devises an unconventional plan to win the adoration that she has always yearned for.

The characters in these stories occupy the same psychic state. They are wounded, fragile, idealistic, and painfully self-conscious. Disillusionment with an impervious world serves only to resurrect repressed feelings, leaving the characters with a cognitive dissonance that they work tirelessly, if aimlessly and foolishly, to reconcile. Unable to satiate themselves, they cannot avoid feeding the darkest dreams that always lurk in the shadowy corners of consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

I was at the public library donating some books recently, and the woman helping me unload them, likely because of the eclectic mix and sheer volume, asked me what I did for a living. “I’m a writer,” I said. The librarian appeared impressed. Once I was in my car, I was horrified. I hadn’t been thinking; I’d just blurted it out. I hadn’t intentionally lied. I’d never said those words before, and I wasn’t sure why I’d say them now. Maybe it was because, in helping her sort through my books, the glimpses of so many covers and titles of beloved stories flashing before my eyes made me recall, in a matter of seconds, images, descriptions, and characters I’d been internalizing for years. Maybe I felt I needed to claim them in some way. Perhaps, in feeling possessive, it was my way of saying that I loved the stories so much that I could tell them myself if I wanted to, albeit less skillfully.

That possessiveness is what drove me to write when I was a child, although I wouldn’t have called myself a writer then anymore than I would have said that I was an actress because I played dress-up. Lying was bad, and I had to learn early the difference between telling a lie and using my imagination. Fortunately, I was off the hook from lying about what I did because that wasn’t a question asked of kids very often. If asked what I liked to do, however, writing was always at the top of my short list.

My mom likes to recall that my first word was book. Well, technically it was a confusing mispronunciation, but it was clear what I wanted. Each night, at bedtime, she read from Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* or Shel Silverstein's *A Light in the Attic* or the popular 70s anthology *Free to Be You and Me*. And each night, after she turned off the lights and closed the door behind her, I closed my eyes and recreated these other worlds these artists illustrated with their words and drawings. In that way, I made them mine.

My goal was to extend that imaginary life that I so cherished beyond bedtime hours and attempt to communicate my interior, imaginary world. Though I was unaware of this at the time, I began to write. The years when I was in kindergarten and first grade, my school adopted a whole-language approach to learning, so my reading and writing was encouraged there as well as at home. I was given assignments to write poems for Mother's and Father's Day. I made up stories and drew pictures of my friends and me holding hands. Once even, with a little bit of guidance, I did some performance poetry at my elementary school. I was the wind and I made "the sails go." I was the wind and I made "the clouds blow." In my pink leotard and cape, streamers taped to my back and an elastic unicorn belt fastened at my waist, I recited my lines unself-consciously, twirling and twirling, dizzied by the spotlight and attention and the fun of telling a story that I made up myself.

My mother is a smart woman, so before my younger brother was born, she had me write and illustrate a book about how babies were made. I titled it, aptly, "Baby," and included crayon drawings of what I thought life inside a uterus would look like. When

my brother came home from the hospital, it felt as magical as the performance had. Once again, so I felt, my writing seemed to produce real results. Disappointment only set in years later, once I got to know him.

Having the imaginary seemingly actualized and having been given such positive reinforcement about my own writing made it impossible for me not to seek it out again and again. So by the time I was in high school, wearing combat boots and sporting pink hair, it was too late. All throughout my teens I tried to escape to the safety, solitude, and joy I experienced when writing so young. I wrote poems for other boys to give to their girlfriends and notes to different friends every class period, confessing everything I'd gotten away with over the weekend. I wrote stories about characters who lived hard and died young, a mix of the gothic and personal of equal immaturity and flimsiness. I didn't know it, but I was like a drug addict chasing that first elusive, exhilarating high. And, like a drug addict, but because my life had become complicated beyond what I could control, it was never the same. The writings were just empty gestures.

Still, I persevered, even at the onset of panic that comes with adulthood. So it was, finally, in my mid-20s, I made my way into USF's creative writing graduate program. And, although those first few stories weren't much better than the things I wrote when I was a teenager, even I began to see that my writing got exponentially better. I had support again and positive reinforcement, both at home, from my husband, and at school, from my peers and professors. I had, though in a different context, a firm structure to work within. This time, I had true artists to guide me along the way.

So far, the few things I've sent out have been accepted to online literary magazines and a locally owned web site. The MFA program has given me more to work with than just my desire. I'm satisfied enough with the skill that I've developed to keep pursuing my writing, because this is where I think it really begins. I was finally able to escape for a while, in Cooper Hall, and allow myself to be consumed by the imaginary a few nights a week. The years I spent earning this degree helped me relive the thrill I experienced reading and writing as a kid. My husband and I will be the first two students to earn an MFA from USF's creative writing program. I do feel like I can stop chasing — a future in writing is within my grasp. While I may not be able to say, as I did the other day at the library, that writing is what I do for a living, I don't think the answer I gave is completely untrue. If the librarian had only rephrased the question slightly, asked me just whom I thought I was, I'd have been telling the truth.

Falling

I wasn't going to make the same mistakes that everyone else did. I wasn't going to worry too much about how still Eros could stand while the judges were groping him or how perfectly he could walk in a circle. I wasn't going to go apeshit training him the way some of the handlers do, because I believed that if I did let myself care too much about any one thing, then tragedy would strike, like when the Challenger blew to bits or when the Smurfs went off the air. I just reminded myself of what I read in the paper the year before: This popular female dog trainer—the girl Cesar Millan of Florida—spent too much time teaching her bichon frise to catch the ball. I imagined that dog's whole life was invested in catching that fuzzy little ball. That's why, when the trainer's four-year-old nephew came over to her condo one afternoon and threw the ball out the window, Pauly the bichon went after it without hesitation. Right out the window and down four stories. They found the ball wedged next to the tire of a parked car.

I knew something else, too: that winning best in show was never about the dog. Watching Glory Ann Sibet on cable after I was fired taught me that. She was the golden girl winning all the circuits, and she looked like a pageant queen. She wore her dark hair in a teased bun and had long red nails. The camera always stayed at least ten seconds longer on Glory Ann than on her dog, and the close-up was on *her!* Always, the broadcast

ended the same way. The camera would focus on Glory Ann as she waved to the crowd, panning down just long enough to see the blue ribbon draped over her dog's head, and, inevitably, the sunlight would catch in the jeweled brooch she wore on her lapel, washing the whole scene in a momentary kaleidoscope of color until fading into a burning white. Who could help but be a believer? She was dazzling. She commanded attention. Glory Ann, with her white-stockinged, muscular legs and long, straight neck. All confidence, all charm. She could make a Chinese crested look good. You could tell that Glory Ann Sibet had not grown up in a retirement community with parents as old as grandparents, playing shuffleboard on Sundays. You could tell that she didn't have to bleach her mustache, that she probably didn't even have a mustache. Her days may have been spent in salons and boutiques (among the living!), but she still ate and slept and shit like everyone else. This is what I told myself.

All I needed was forty-seven dollars total. Twenty to register Eros with the American Kennel Club and twenty-seven to sign him up for the Lake Wales All-Breed Regionals, a televised event one month away on a Saturday. That's not counting the five-hundred dollars I spent on Eros, the bargain price the breeder sold old studs for.

When I was in first grade, I decided I wanted to be a nurse. I was given an outline of a nurse and a box of crayons. I wrote my name and "nurse" in wobbly letters, across the top of the page, and I did my best to color inside the lines. My mom was surprised when I brought it home. She said she thought I wanted to be an actress. Didn't I want to be on stage? Didn't I want adoring fans? No, I said. This is about the white dress.

Wasn't long, maybe immediately afterwards, that I forgot all about chasing that white prettiness. That is, until high school, when I started watching soap operas and saw nurses who only answered phones and brought people water and an endless flow of square-jawed men with feathered hair, helpless in a hospital bed. Six months after graduating—forget the two to four years I'd have to put in if I wanted to be an actual nurse—I was a patient-care technician. This means that I collected people's fluids—their blood, their urine. It means I was paid \$10.47 to hold forkfuls of congealed gravy and turkey in front of former teachers' and priests' toothless, seismic mouths. It meant I had to mop up the stinking sludge from a ninety-year-old's cooling diaper and then massage body lotion onto his hollow butt cheeks. Until recently when my boss, who's named Kat with a K and who wore a wig ugly as the hair around a whale's vagina, fired me for calling in sick too often. And anyway, all of us—even the nurses—wore scrubs.

Eros was tall as I am standing on his hind legs. He had green eyes that reminded me of agate marbles like the ones my brother used to collect when we were little and, mostly, sienna-colored, shaggy fur—though there were some places above his eyes and on his muzzle that had gone white and that I'd later been able to blend in with a little bit of hair dye. He sat with a proud chest, mouth hanging open and ears back. Until I got him home, back to the double-wide in Saddlebag, a 55+ community which my parents had owned since the early eighties and left to me when they died. (Michael had his own townhouse and wasn't interested.) Maybe it was because I had so many boxes around and he was feeling claustrophobic, or maybe it was just the shock of being with someone

new, but I had to hold Eros off by putting my foot on his neck or else he would lick, lick, lick obsessively, and even then, he nibbled my toes.

I began to worry that, instead of walking around the ring at the show, he might just throw his paws up on my shoulders and try to hump me. But when I did a practice run—even though everything is shaped like a rectangle and you have to step over some things—he stayed by my side and sat when I asked him to.

It was the day I brought Eros home that I put on the rhinestone and tulle dress I'd bought just for the dog show. In the mirror I could see that I'd made the right choice. Looking at myself with the sunlight streaming through the vertical blinds, my insides leapt in triumph. I could outshine even Glory Ann.

My brother Michael called my dress a get-up. As in, no one would be caught dead in that get-up. He came by after work, his girlfriend Tina waiting in the car, supposedly to borrow a serving bowl. When he saw Eros in his crate, he pinched the sides of his nose and shook his head, as if my getting a dog somehow complicated his life. At J.C. Penney, where he's manager, he likes to start every training going over the company motto "Honor, Confidence, Service, and Cooperation." He even has it framed in his office like one of those motivational posters you see in classrooms and telemarketing centers across the country. He also likes to tell new hires that he shares a birthday with the founder, James Cash Penney.

"Where's the big bowl with the yellow flowers on it?" he asked.

"You mean the one with the oranges on it that mom bought at some crappy yard sale? Why?"

“Tina and I are getting married. She wants it for the bridal shower, which you are invited to, of course. Do you mind?”

“Not everyone needs a stupid piece of paper to feel like a grown up.”

“I meant, do you mind about letting us borrow the bowl. And grown up? You’re wearing some hideous old prom dress and you’re covered in dog fur. And you haven’t even finished unpacking yet. Go ahead, let’s talk about growing up.”

“Should I be more like you, walking around like I’m some kind of frat boy who never got spanked as a kid?”

“Shelly, I’m not your competition. I just came to get the bowl and maybe a congratulations. You could at least pretend to be happy for me.”

“Bowl’s in the third cabinet on the left, top shelf.”

I didn’t tell him that this was *the* dress, as in a dress of some significance that he will probably come to remember for the rest of his life. I didn’t say that Eros was an investment in my future. I didn’t tell him that I had found something to care about.

That day I didn’t know what I know now. That I was falling through open space, finding nothing to hold on to because I was looking for all the wrong things and that the end, cold and hard as concrete, was coming fast. That, despite what I thought, I’d become like Pauly, the bichon frise who died trying to catch the ball.

On the day of the competition, I was still oblivious. All I was thinking was how simple a thing it was: your dog could win best in show, and your entire life could change. Take Glory Ann, for example. She wins a show, and the next day her name is in the

paper, then, the next week, her picture. She buys a special shelf for her first trophy, and, in a year's time, she has to buy another shelf. After shows she stays for autographs and then climbs into her luxury sedan, away from the gleaming brightness, and touches her brooch, a soothing reminder that she has arrived. This is her new life and it's all that matters anymore. No one knows if she was tortured in high school or if she has embarrassing habits or how many boyfriends she's had. And no one cares. Because she has created a change of observable significance, causing her past to collapse into her present, the way one ocean wave breaks into the next and is only distinguishable on the rise, topped by that white riff.

I got up to my alarm clock on the day of the competition. I wanted to practice the moment the judge shook my hand, the moment the storm of applause and camera flashes began. I would win, probably only a certificate or a ribbon at this point, and then I'd be ready to advance to the next level. I'd dominate the local, regional, and statewide circuits and eventually end up at Westminster. By then, all the contestants would know my name, my signature look. I'd be a local celebrity, recognized at the grocery store.

A book I read about becoming a handler recommended that women wear neutral makeup and business attire—skirt suits and scarves. There was nothing about personal touches, like jeweled brooches or rhinestones and tulle. But this book was written by a former award-winning AKC handler from New England, and you can't trust someone who's had a cut-throat agenda creeping around in her head for fifteen years. A winner is someone who stands out. Glory Ann had figured that out on her own, and now I would take it one step further. This was America and that meant there was room for more than

one winner. All I wanted was to put on my dress and unfurl my curls from their rollers and practice saying the words, “We are expressly grateful today for the opportunity before us.” That’s what I was doing—mouthing the words to myself in the mirror—when I noticed a gag smell, like stinkhorn mushrooms, coming from my kitchen.

It had to be Eros, who was asleep in his crate. He was on his side, his long legs poking through the grate, and I thought go ahead, live it up now, ‘cause you’re not going to do anything but what I tell you later. I had to crouch down close to that reeking mouth of his in order to slip the leash around his neck, and that’s when I saw it. What looked like a king-sized Gobstopper lodged between his gums and upper lip. The way it stuck out made him look ridiculous, all his red whiskers poking up like broken antennae, as if he were a snarling Elvis impersonator. I thought I could massage the lump away the way I do with my abdominal fat, but he yelped a little when I touched it. I knew he probably wouldn’t stand for it, but if I could squeeze just once and hard, it might pop and dissolve by the time we made it to the show. He was wide awake now, rattling his teeth, his eyes locked on my hand. There was no way I was getting anywhere near that thing again.

Plan B of my dream went a little something like this: Eros and I cross the field to the grooming tents, where all the pooches are perched on their grooming tables, only seconds before the show starts. The other handlers look and feel sorry for me because I barely have time to run a brush through his coat when our number is called. In their head they write me off as an amateur. Out there, in the ring, my skin prickles under the crowd’s gaze. We do our lap and it is like we are so in sync, our legs moving at the exact same moment, two completely separate creatures impossibly occupying the same space in

the same way. When they look up and see, around us, that spectra of light from the thousands of rhinestones on the bodice of my dress, everyone under the tent emits a silent gasp because, even if they can't quite articulate it, they know, at a certain level of consciousness, that they are seeing the physical embodiment of fate. And after I shake that judge's hand, I pull a Ziploc baggie from my purse and hold it up. In it is a knotted ball the color and texture of wadded bubblegum. I'll say, "This almost prevented us from being here today, but we were able to overcome it, as we will overcome all that stands in our way." It will seem, to all who hear it, a small thing. But soon reporters will realize my story is marketable because it's a story about perseverance for children and old people and hard-working people down on their luck.

Michael and Tina will come by to return the serving dish. By this time my wall art will include two framed blue ribbons and newspaper clippings. Each will have the word "winner" on them in bold lettering so they can be read by someone across the room. I won't have to say a thing because right then the seed will be planted. The seed will grow and tell Michael, in no uncertain terms, the difference between a winner and a manager. He will come to know that a manager is something you work for, while being a winner is something you're born with. One is only a possibility, while the other is just a matter of time. I will not rub this in. I will not name-call. I will not invite a group of friends over and then lock him out. I will love him because he is my brother.

I was left in the nippy waiting area, shivering with all the mutts, while Eros was hauled off to an examination room. I told the vet, "Cut this thing out and make sure you

use that see-through thread.” There was a hush in the room, even though I was surrounded by at least ten broken-down dogs and their owners. That’s why I didn’t get up—because my dress and stockings made too much of a crinkling noise when I moved, like someone opening a bag of chips in an auditorium—and I wanted to wait and let someone else go for the peanut butter cookies that could’ve been dog treats on the fold-out table that I’d been eyeing since I walked in.

I got a canker sore when my mom made me run for class secretary in fifth grade. It was huge and white, and I couldn’t stop touching it with the tip of my tongue. It was big enough to make my bottom lip jut out just the slightest bit so that when it came time for me to give my speech, I was so conscious of it that I slurred my words. Even a week after the election was over and my defeat was forgotten, the sore was still there. I remember I was so mad at my mom then for causing me to have this sore. I knew I would have never made a fool of myself if she hadn’t put so much pressure on me. This is what I was thinking about, about how I caused Eros’s canker sore, that it was an example of transference, my anticipation becoming his anxiety, when the vet came out to talk to me.

He had on a lab coat over his scrubs and a clipboard that he read from before he spoke to me. He said, “Eros needs surgery. I was lucky to have caught it so early. The cancer spread to his jaw, and part of his jaw will need to be removed. He’ll be fitted with a prosthetic and good as new.”

I asked him to repeat himself.

He asked, "Would you mind staying just a few minutes longer until all the paperwork is done?"

It was not really a question. He took me by the elbow back to my chair and said that reception would call me in just a few moments.

I knew without the vet telling me that there would be no dog show. Eros may not even be able to leave until the next morning, and by then it would be too late. I took a hard look around me. People sitting, absently clutching their dogs' leashes or stroking their dogs' heads, pretending to read some article in *Dog Fancy*. A puddle of urine pooled in the corner next to the scale. Some little terrier dog whimpered, its skin patchy with mange and its head trapped inside a plastic cone so that it looked like he was wearing a bullhorn. The dog across from me had one of those squished-in faces, and when he looked at me, I saw that one of its eyes was milky blue and clouded over and leaked fluid into the folds of its muzzle. Nearby, a big mutt dressed in a cheerleader's outfit farted audibly, so that everyone had to pretend not to smell it.

Look at all these dogs, I thought, and all these people. Broken, needy, and smelly, and Eros no different. I exhaled the air that I'd been holding in my lungs, closed my eyes, and brought my hand up to my forehead. I was thinking that here I was again. I thought I had left the hospital to do something different, to find my calling, but here I was again, different sorts of patients, but still the same smell of disinfectant and shit. I must've looked saddened, because the woman next to me said, "I hope your kid's okay."

I looked at her, a middle-age woman with fake blonde hair wearing a blue tracksuit, like she was just in from a jog. "What?" I said.

“I hope yours is okay. I overheard the vet.” The little dog by her feet whined, and she picked it up and held it on her lap, stroking it. “You know, my baby had his penis amputated.”

She said this as if it were supposed to be some sort of comfort. I couldn't help but look down at the dog on her lap. She held its chest in one hand, keeping the dog upright while she rubbed its belly. Her other hand moved slowly down, all the way down, until the loose flap of skin that used to hold the dog's penis played between her fingers, and she brought it back up.

I was disgusted. I fought back the urge to gag. Who were these people? What was it that made them think this kind of behavior was okay? No one else seemed to notice. They were all lost in their attachments to their own animals. I couldn't help but wonder if this is what the big dog-show handlers were really like. If they felt what these people felt. If that's what it takes to be a winner.

When I stood up and started walking out the door, the receptionist called my name. “Miss?” she said, “Miss, what about your dog?” I heard her, but I kept walking until I was out the door and into the hard light of day.

Throb

Raylene's mom called them sun worshippers. She didn't move her hands when she spoke, like she usually did, but stayed perfectly still in the chair, her chin pointed toward the sky, her eyes closed, behind her sunglasses. Raylene knew her mother was referring to the hundreds of people scattered all along the shoreline, as far as she could see, almost all of them, by this time of the afternoon, collapsed face down onto their beach towels.

Her mother's legs and arms were covered with beads of baby oil that refused to melt into her skin. Raylene could smell it just by thinking about the clear plastic bottle; even that was enough to give her that disoriented feeling, like she had just come off the tilt-a-whirl. In the morning, she'd had to pull the straps of her mother's bikini top down and rub the oil into her back and shoulders, picking out the pieces of hair that got stuck in the mess. "Watch it," her mother warned.

Raylene hated the way it felt, the oil dripping down her arms, slipping beneath her fingernails, making her hands so sticky that she couldn't touch her face or eat any of the snacks they brought until she could find a bathroom with soap and water to wash them in. To curb the nausea, she tried to pretend she was smelling maple syrup instead, the kind she and her family collected in the Adirondacks every winter before they moved from

Lake George, New York, to Florida, a year ago. She tried with other things, too, hoping that if she imagined the sand were snow or the ocean were the lake that she would feel as she had before they moved, happy.

A boy bobbing in the ocean. He was too far away for Raylene to see his face, but she hoped it was her brother, Henry, whom she was supposed to be keeping an eye on.

“Where do they all come from? The sun worshippers?”

“Canada. New York, mostly, same as us. You can only put up with those winters so long before you go crazy.”

Raylene privately disagreed. Sun worshippers were people who upset their whole lives to live near the beach full time; most of the people tanning themselves were only vacationers. Recently, when her mom called Raylene and Henry’s father to find out where the child support check was, she’d said, “Actions speak louder than words.” She’d heard her mother say it many times, but this time something clicked. What her mother said was true; Raylene didn’t need to remind her mother how much she’d loved the winter months, the ice-skating, the snow cones, the sleigh-riding and tubing they did at the Rosencrantz’s farm each year. She didn’t have to point out that she wasn’t like her mother, or Henry, or all these vacationers on the beach; she wasn’t a sun worshipper. This was new, this separation from her family, this independence. It was exciting, the way she felt she could slip it on at will.

She’d only discovered it hours before they left for the beach, once she realized she could do as she pleased. Raylene was changing in the master bathroom she and her mother shared after the divorce, when she saw an old tube of her mother’s lipstick in the

trash. Raylene had always wondered what the violent shade of purple would look like on her, so she plucked the tube from the pile of tissues, looked on the bottom to make sure it was Throb, the shade her mother wore on a daily basis, and opened the cap. The stick was worn down to almost nothing, just a steep-sloped, greasy-looking nub. Still, there was enough for a few uses, if she was careful. With the lipstick on her eyes looked more green, her skin more creamy than pasty, her hair shinier.

“What are you wearing?” Her mother had been paying more attention to Raylene’s habits lately, smelling her breath after she brushed her teeth, looking inside her underwear before she folded them.

Raylene asked if she meant her swimsuit.

“I mean on your face. Are you wearing my lipstick?” She set the cooler with the sodas and ice down.

“You threw it out.” Her mother always put on lipstick before she got out of the car, even if it was only to go into the post office or the grocery store. Even if she had no other makeup on or hadn’t combed her hair, she would always take the lipstick from the console, twist the rearview mirror so she could look at herself, and apply it in three quick strokes. It was only fair Raylene got to wear it once in a while.

“I’m talking about what you’re doing. Are you looking for attention?”

Raylene resisted the urge to be defiant, to shake her hair off her shoulders and pout her lips the way she’d done in the mirror.

“No,” Raylene said, simply.

“Then don’t wear lipstick. Little girls don’t need to be made up.”

Raylene had the same feeling now, on the beach, as she did then. She'd had a glimpse of her mother's own limitations, her inability to understand her, and she wasn't going to feel guilty or even explain. She only had to tolerate the lecherous heat for a few more hours before she'd be back at the beach, this time at night, with her father at his rundown studio apartment, where she and Henry spent most weekends.

At the Old King Cole Motel, where her father lived near the boardwalk, she could walk around unsupervised. She'd done it many times before, getting milk for morning cereal from the grocery store, once even buying a pack of Winston's for her father from a vending machine in one of the bars. At the beach, she noticed, people looked her in the eyes. As they walked down the boardwalk, in and out of shops, restaurants, hotels, their heads were always turning, looking, at the ocean, at the sky, at the seagulls, at each other.

When her mother dropped them off at the motel, after Henry climbed out of the car and shut the door, her mother took hold of Raylene's arm and warned her that she had better be prepared to give her a full report the next day. "He won't do it here," her mother said, nodding toward Henry, who was looking very grown up with his hands in his shorts pockets, leaning against the stairs, waiting. "God forbid your father would have to clean it up." Henry had begun wetting the bed again. Raylene helped out by getting Henry showered while their mother changed his sheets. "Nope," she continued, "that kind of thing is reserved just for me." She was right. Henry didn't wet the bed on the nights they spent with their father. Of course, that could be because they all had to

sleep in the bed that pulled down from the wall, and maybe he tried harder to be considerate. She kissed her mother on the cheek and said goodbye.

Raylene stayed in the pool with Henry longer than she would have on any other day. After all the sunbathers, lying on the lounge chairs like filets, smoking and drinking from plastic cups, had drifted off, she and Henry continued playing fish out of water and taking turns trying to knock each other off a raft someone had left floating in the pool. She only got out once the sun sank low, stalling on the horizon, a bright orange smudge hanging in the haze.

It had been enough, these hours of play, Raylene thought, because Henry did not protest; he did not make her chase him around the pool trying to catch him in the towel, flung open like a cast net. Instead, he stood there, clenching his jaw to stop it from chattering, his wrinkled fingers clasped beneath his chin. Most of the time people probably didn't think he was her brother, or that she was her mother's daughter, for that matter. Her mother and Henry both shared the same stormy green eyes, the same blond hair, though her mother's hair was Raylene's own blackberry shade at the roots.

But here in the languid light, with Henry holding still for so long, she could see they had the same thick lashes and that his chin bunched up the way hers did when she tried to keep her mouth shut.

"All right, come on," Raylene said, consciously softening her tone so she wouldn't sound bossy.

"Where are we going?" Henry asked, teasing.

Raylene wanted him back in the apartment, wanted the darkness outside to settle, and her father in front of the television so she could be alone.

“We aren’t going anywhere.”

Once Raylene showered, she sat on the floor with her hair draped over the air conditioner, letting it dry. She’d wrung the bathing suits, slung them over the shower curtain rod. They’d be forgotten in the morning unless she was there to stuff them into her bag during that mad rush to gather their things while their mother punched the car horn. She had a vision of the forgotten bathing suits left hanging, the lone window in the shower stall going light then dark then light again, as if the sky beyond the glass were held hostage, caught in a battle, the swimsuits gone stiff and stale.

A speck of something staggered along on a stream of artificial air before landing on her shoulder. It was nothing, just a piece of paper lifted from the cigarette ash piled high in the heavy ceramic ashtray her father rested on a pillow between himself and Henry. But it was enough to bring her back to this moment, to wonder for a fraction of a second whether her father might say no when she asked him if she could go out by herself. She might wonder more, plan her interactions with him more carefully, if her family were still together under one roof, or she might just do it anyway. At their home in New York, everyone had their own room. No one sat together in a confined space, in this concentrated way, for twenty-four hours or more like they were here at the Old King Cole Motel.

What would Raylene know about her father then? She probably wouldn’t know that he’d rather eat peanut butter sandwiches than cook or that he fluttered his eyelids

without seeming to realize he was doing it whenever he spoke about his adolescence or got irritated. Back then, he was a permanent fixture, but he lingered always in her periphery, a comforting warmth next to her on the couch, a bulky, friendly shadow in her bedroom doorway at bedtime. She might have had to be more careful then about asking what she could or couldn't do. But now she knew he would say yes.

“Dad, can I have some money? Just a few bucks for some candy and soda? For everyone?”

“I want chocolate milk,” Henry said.

Raylene thought she saw her father's eyelids flutter as he looked away from the television to reach into the pocket of a pair of jeans lying on the floor. He flattened a five-dollar bill and handed it to her.

“Are you sure you want to go by yourself?”

Maybe Raylene had been wrong about him letting her go so easily. He looked at the slated window, at the opaque nothingness staring back because it had gone completely dark outside.

She reminded him that she'd gone alone other times.

“Your mother won't be too happy if she hears about this.”

Now she understood. “It's only seven o'clock. Besides, Mom stays out past midnight when I'm babysitting Henry.”

“Is that right?” He took a sip of his beer and lit a cigarette, suddenly exhausted by the conversation. “Well, your mother's an adult; she can do as she pleases.”

Raylene hesitated just a moment longer, unsure of whether or not she had permission. When Henry added that he also wanted Pixy Stix, she left.

Enough light played across the surface of the pool that Raylene could see her reflection in the chrome handrail to apply the lipstick. As soon as she left the motel and started walking down the boardwalk, she felt differently, as if the tide had changed and the air and the crowd and the tumbling waves were pulling her forward, as if she could tuck her feet under and be carried forward, all the way to the end.

If only she could just “give it up,” as her mother would say, and allow herself to be swept along, but her first instinct was to prickle over in defense. Instead of feeling excited by the whole fantasy beach scene, she felt threatened, distracted, irritated by what she saw: long-haired boys not much older than herself, with their hats flipped backwards and mocking grins; women in bikini tops and denim jean shorts, showing off their tans; tattooed men, with sun-bleached chest hair, pulling up to the bars on their motorcycles; people sitting on benches, speaking in unknown languages; and raspy singing and whiny guitar seeping out of a bar, the door of which was propped open by a broken pool cue.

What she needed to do was close her eyes and concentrate on Lake George before she lost all memory of it completely. She needed to somehow ignore the incessant suck of sand and shell—the ocean’s hiss, as she liked to think of it—and remember the stinging cold and crisp taste of the lake water. Raylene knew, of course, that the ocean was far vaster than the lake and, in her mother’s mind, superior. Her mother had argued the point on one of their first visits to the beach after moving to Florida. “Can you see anything there on the other side? Or there?” her mother asked, pointing, antagonistic.

Raylene looked, hoping she would see a perimeter, a bank, a clump of trees, anything besides the torn white cloud and rippling waves.

“You can’t imagine its size,” her mother said, and she’d been right—you could die trying to swim to the other side. But, in Raylene’s own mind, though, the ocean could not compare to the lake’s depth, its stillness.

Fantasizing about Lake George was a relief, but the more she was bombarded by nothing and no one familiar, the more difficult and less satisfying it became. If only she could somehow return. She wouldn’t have her old life back exactly, she knew, and someone else—a widow, her mom had said—moved into their old house as soon as they’d left, but she could go back to her old school, her old friends, get a canoe, maybe live with a family friend as a daughter.

A few months before, Raylene had attempted to run away. She’d been caught wheeling her bicycle out of the garage. Her mother was accusatory. “You’re going to follow your father’s footsteps, is that it? Are the two of you trying to punish me?”

Raylene spent the rest of the night apologizing, rubbing her mother’s back as she lie next to her in their shared bed, listening to her cry. “I didn’t even know the way. I couldn’t figure it out. I would’ve only made it around the block and back.” It was true. Raylene had consulted a road atlas, but she couldn’t untangle the highways in her mind and had given up. She’d left that night as planned anyway, in the hope that something would happen. She didn’t know what for sure; maybe some kindly strangers would help her along or loan her some money so she could buy a plane ticket instead.

Running away wasn't the answer. It would take too long, for one thing. There were other dangers too—she might have to sleep on the street or a park bench until she could find someone else to pick her up and take her farther. She'd have to find her own food, and she'd risk getting lost. If her parents sent the police looking for her, she might get picked up before she even made it to New York, and there'd be nothing she could do to prevent them from taking her back.

Maybe there was another option. Maybe she could vanish like those girls on the milk cartons. Officer Daniel, the junior high's resource officer, said the girls who were kidnapped never came back. They were taken against their will by lonely people who wanted them for themselves. All the girls wanted to return home, to their families, who never forgot them. Raylene would have to be careful not to get mixed up with the wrong people. Her disappearance would be voluntary, so long as she could live in Lake George. She lifted her arms as she walked, so she could let her armpits air out without being noticeable. The prospect of being taken was enough to make her sweat.

A sign with the words ice cream painted in blue, frozen-looking lettering was set a few steps away from a free-standing snack shack. A small line waiting as the man behind the cart dug around inside a cooler. A boy younger than Henry, maybe four years old, tugged on his mother's shorts. "Peanut butter," the boy said. A man with the same gelled and spiked hair as the boy picked him up and pointed to a menu, reading the boy the available flavors.

The mother was fair-skinned, and she wore a sleeveless polo shirt. She held a shopping bag with one hand and lightly scratched her husband's back with the other. They seemed perfectly content waiting their turn.

One step to the left, and Raylene was away from the crowd heading south and next to the line for ice cream. She pressed her lips together, reassuring herself that the lipstick was still there, and put on an angelic smile—something Shirley Temple might wear—and hummed the only tune she could think of, a jingle for breakfast cereal.

Her eyes wandered past the public shower, the steel-barreled trash can, the dozens of sandaled feet moving past her. When the family left the line, the boy looking nervous about dropping his cone as his parents led him away, Raylene stepped in behind them. She was just going to see what could happen—that was all. Waiting and wondering were doing her no good.

After she'd followed the family for more than a block back the way she'd come, the mother stopped short, causing Raylene to catch herself by her toes.

“Everything okay here?” the mother asked.

Raylene was close to answering, but waited as a Hispanic couple had maneuvered their way around them.

The dad spoke before she had a chance to respond. “Are you lost?” He picked up his son and put the boy on his hip the way he had in line, this time in what Raylene saw was a protective gesture.

Despite their questions, there was a definite hardness in their eyes, unmistakable annoyance. Raylene had never considered the possibility that she would be bothering

them. She was already turned around, walking fast in the opposite direction from where they stood, back toward the 7-Eleven, where she planned to buy the snacks. The mother called after her once, something about finding someone to help, though it could have been imagined; it reached Raylene as a whisper.

Embarrassment did not come, nor anger, nor sadness. The family was no one to her, and Raylene hadn't pushed it too far. Relief came, a trickle of sweat down her back, cold even in this humidity. Once, at a carnival, she spent almost all her ride tickets on the ring toss. She'd gone home with a stiff, oversized stuffed dog. Now, passing beneath the light posts, hearing the buzz of electricity, the panic of moth wings, catching snatches of strangers' conversations, in all their various pitches and tones, made her feel the excitement she'd felt when she won the carnival prize—she felt lucky.

Everyone who passed by noticed Raylene—all of them either returning her smile or nodding, hello. She was busy thinking of what she would say to show someone she was worth taking along. She might say she was an orphan, that she could earn her keep, that they should be able to tell she didn't belong here. She might have to pretend she was someone's daughter or niece; she might be given a new name; she might never see Henry again.

Her mother would have to start unloading the dishwasher herself. But the bedroom would now be hers; she could clear out the three dresser drawers Raylene used and the closet space, too, where she kept her school clothes. She'd save enough money on food and gas, she could buy that denim jacket she saw at the mall or the Rod Stewart concert tickets for the show in October. Henry wouldn't have to wait until next year to

start Little League baseball. Nothing much would change for her father, as far as she could tell. She hoped her portion of the child support went to Henry, and that her dad wouldn't keep it for himself. They might all feel a little bit sad, things might be a little lonelier for a while—she had a side-by-side image in her mind of both her mother and father, each in their homes, eyes glazed over in front of the television, the rest of the rooms dark, Henry hiding underneath the covers with a flashlight.

The gas station was only a block away. She had only to turn down one of the side streets, cross through an alley, and then use the crosswalk to get to the other side of A1A. Then she'd decide whether she wanted to keep walking the boardwalk, or maybe even just stay on A1A so all the cars passing could see her. She wasn't ready to give up.

To make her way to the convenience store, Raylene had to pass behind a Greek restaurant. A car, a shiny black sedan, sat alone in the nearby parking lot under a sodium lamp, its motor running, exhaust snaking from the tailpipe. Raylene walked behind it, almost without noticing the license plate—New York. The lot was deserted, so when she stopped, she was able to stand within view of the driver's side window without being too close.

A sapphire blue tint on the glass gave the car an expensive look. With the light on inside, Raylene could just make out that the man had dark curls and a collared shirt. The boardwalk was still in sight but far enough away that all sound was muted, leaving only the engine's reverberation.

She waved so she wouldn't seem rude. The man did not wave back, but the window came down an inch in response. Raylene wasn't sure what to do next. The man

was watching her. She had his full attention, yet he did not smile or lift his hand to invite her over. Her muscles tensed in anticipation—it was his move. The car door did not open. It might even be locked. Raylene stepped closer.

At this angle she could see his head and shoulders and chest. She was close enough to see him blink, although the tint and light distorted his features, part of his neck and shoulder eclipsed by shadow. Her own reflection was there in the window, too, from head to toe, the image much smaller than she felt, longer, thinner. She could hear a slight rustling from within. Maybe the man was moving some things out of the way, making room, but he didn't look away. Then the window came down some more, just another inch. It was faint, but she could hear the unfriendly motorized sound it made, her heartbeat gaining speed as his forehead and nose came into full view.

There was danger in standing close enough to be touched. Heat came from the car's fender, making her leg tingle. She touched her lips with the tip of her tongue, remembering the lipstick. She moved forward as the window came all the way down.

He'd lifted himself off the seat. His pants were undone, the black leather belt lying like a gash across his white, hairy thigh. He arched his back. Raylene saw that the cords in his wrist were strained against the skin. His hand was pistoning up and down, gripping his *thing*, which was swollen, purpled. His eyes were still locked on hers, but he looked angry, as if he would bite her face if she stepped any closer. Sweat stood out on his forehead, despite the cool air coming from inside. A breeze lifted the hair off her shoulders, carrying with it that slick smell. Baby oil. It was enough to make her stomach lurch, and she turned away.

Raylene didn't even look, racing across the street to the gas station without waiting for the signal to change. Car horns sounded from somewhere behind her. She thought the man in the car might call after her, or pull into the parking lot, waiting for her until she came back out. He might steal her change or put her in the trunk, shove his tongue down her throat or put his sticky fingers all over her body the way she'd seen the afternoons her mom watched her "stories" on T.V. The thought of it made her head hurt, the pressure building all over her skull, a throb working its way down the nape of her neck. She would scream. There were people all around—the cashier, someone on the payphone outside, two teenagers by the magazines. She wouldn't allow herself to be taken, not like this.

Once she was back at the hotel, when Henry asked what had taken so long, she could say, "Something has happened." Her dad would not want her to call the police. "Talk to your mother," he would say. He wouldn't want to hear. On Sunday, the next morning, when her mom came to pick her up, she could show her the alley where the black car was parked and tell her what she'd seen; she could ask her mother to pull in to the gas station and talk to the cashier. "This is my daughter," her mother would say. "Did you see her here last night?"

They wouldn't find the man in the black car, though. By then, he'd be gone. Far away, back in New York, creeping around the shadows, waiting for other girls on their way somewhere.

Back at the motel, Raylene sat down by the pool. She unwrapped the chocolate bar she'd bought herself, but after a few bites, set it down. She could still feel a tingling remnant of the black car's heat on her thigh. If she closed her eyes, she felt fear creep into her body like oil that stained her bones, but there was something else, too. Another feeling pushing forward that was not fear but caused her blood to quicken just the same when she imagined the curly-haired man looking at her, those eyes so blue and empty.

No one hung around the pool at night at the motel, but the underwater light was always kept on. It made the pool shine brighter than everything else, almost bright enough, Raylene thought, that you could forget about the shabby plastic furniture, the discolored stucco on the walls, the junker cars in the parking spaces. She got up, went to the steps, kicked her sandals off. The water was cool on her feet. She'd go in up to her legs. Her dad and Henry were probably on the pull-out bed watching wrestling. Her mom would get mad at her for getting her clothes wet, but she wondered if her dad would even notice. Sometimes, he fell asleep watching TV just after the sun went down.

Raylene went in deeper than she'd told herself she would. The water lifted her, and, as she lay floating in the pool, she closed her eyes and held her breath. She could feel her heartbeat, slow and steady in her chest, but now she did not see the curly-haired man or anything else, just a faint blue light from somewhere on the other side of her eyelids.

It was hard to tell how late it was or how long she'd been gone. The beach was surrounded by city, so there were lights all around, dulling the night sky, tingeing it with color. Near the ocean everything was so dark, it'd be easy to get turned around and not

be able to find your way back to shore. To think, just the weekend before, she'd considered taking Henry night swimming. She should have known better; Henry was still too young.

When she opened her eyes again, she noticed something floating, shining in the stream of the underwater light, lost near the filters along the wall. She reached for it, but it wasn't quite close enough to grab. She swam to get it, and once she had it in her hand, she knew what it was. She must have dropped it before she left. She took the cap off, afraid the tube might be full of water, the little bit of lipstick that remained broken off or dissolved. But it was intact. She could use it again, if she wanted.

Management Material

A psychic at the annual Renaissance Faire told me my fortune. There, underneath the oak tree canopies with her finger on my palm, she said, “By December, you will make your heart known and be richly rewarded.” This was in March. My heart felt the same as it always did, sticky with jealousy, leaky with longing. So I decided to help fate along a little. Gina, my Wiccan roommate, and her knight/jousting boyfriend, Kevin, were engaged. The flyer for the annual Britton Plaza Theater Christmas Party had been taped up in the break room. Just down the street from where I worked, the 1.5 mile-long mall and 16-screen multiplex with digital projectors was being built across the street. And, I believed, it was clear to everyone that Jew Baby was Management Material.

I do not call Jew Baby “Jew Baby” inside my head. In my head, I call him Ira, because that’s his name. His full name is Ira Goldberg. Out loud, I really don’t call him anything at all. I just start talking when I’m close enough. If he is wearing one of his homemade nametags, then I call him Casey Ryback or John Hatcher or Mason Storm. I’m only calling him Jew Baby now because that’s what everyone has called him since middle school, and you wouldn’t know whom I was talking about if I didn’t.

I did not go to the same middle school as Jew Baby, even though we are about the same age. I know how he got the nickname because we both work with people whom he went to middle school with, and those people told me that that’s when everyone found

out that his favorite food is baby food. Plus, he's Jewish. I don't know about back then, but he doesn't mind the nickname now, and he doesn't hide the fact that he likes to eat baby food, because he is secure with himself. He brings a lunch bag full of jars of sweet potato and apple and chicken dinner mix on his first shift of the week, and stacks them in his locker. He also has a picture of the Dalai Lama in his locker, even though he wears the Star of David around his neck. I did a Google search and the action hero, Steven Seagal, is a Buddhist. Everyone knows Jew Baby is management material because of his confidence and because of his skills. He's worked the box office, playroom, projector, arcade, security, and concession, and there is no one faster or more customer-friendly or with higher sales than Jew Baby. Not even Chet. Jew Baby is the only employee who can sell Ponchets — our pocket ponchos for rainy days. Jew Baby can get through a line at concession fifteen deep in under two minutes, without one voided order. Everyone says Chet is manager because his uncle owns the theater. Chet and Jew Baby are arch enemies, which is why I was surprised that Jew Baby was planning the Christmas party.

Chet was having the Christmas party at his parents' house because he still lived at home. They would most likely be there. This would be the only year the Christmas party was held there because Chet would be going away to college in August. Then, there'd be a new manager, and he'd be in charge of planning the Christmas party. I'd been to two Christmas parties because that's how long I'd been working at the Britton Plaza Theater. The first year we had a party in a gazebo at Hillsborough River State Park. Last year, we had a party at the bowling alley. When you live in Florida, you have to get over the idea of it being cold in December. You won't even need a sweater until January, and even

then, you can get away with a T-shirt most days. So I pictured this year's Christmas party poolside, on Chet's screened-in patio.

Jew Baby's hero is Steven Seagal. He loves all of his movies and even named his band "Under Seige." He wears his kinky hair pulled back in a ponytail so tight that it gives his eyebrows that devilish leading-man arch. It's not really so strange. Everyone who works at a movie theater loves movies. And everyone has a favorite genre. My favorite type of movie is romance. Movies like *The Notebook*, *Titanic*, *Ghost*, *Ever After*, *A Walk in the Clouds*, *A Walk to Remember*, *Pretty Woman* — in that order. My movies are about happiness. Back then, I figured it was a tie, between Jew Baby and me. Even though he had fake nametags with Steven Seagal's characters' names on them and I didn't, even though I'd heard a rumor that Jew Baby beat up the #1 Jean-Claude Van Damme fan, just because. Still, I figured our devotion to our favorite movies was equal. And I knew from my favorite movies that overcoming internal obstacles (like taste) was just part of the path to falling in love.

Gina and I hatched the plan one night when Kevin wasn't over. He dropped off a "Blessed Be" sign to hang on our front door, and then he went over to a friend's house. They were the same, and that's how I knew they wouldn't last. Sure, they were madly in love, but everyone knows—even if you aren't educated about romantic movies—that opposites attract. That, and the fact that they were set up on a blind date and, in order to fall in love, your meeting has to be a chance encounter. So, even though I was listening to Gina and letting her think that she was helping me, what I was actually doing was suggesting the opposite of whatever she said, when it was my turn to talk. I did this

discreetly, and I don't think she noticed. One of her suggestions was that I just ask him to be my date for the Christmas party. She said that girls asking guys out was what the whole sexual revolution was for. I said that I thought it was so women could have careers and not have to stay home with a crying baby. Gina thought romantic movies were too predictable. I knew because she told me once a long time ago. You would not expect a best friend to say your name in the same disgusted way that she tells other people to get real. I remember that I pointed out to her that someone so critical of predictable outcomes should not have the *Book of Spells* on her night stand. This ended up being one of our fights that went nowhere. I knew that Gina, like most other people, was just in denial. She was not admitting to herself the truth about life. One: That humans are dependent upon predictable outcomes in order to have successful social interactions. (This is not a direct quote, but I heard this, more or less, from a scientist on the Discovery Channel.) Two: (This is a direct quote from *Ever After*) That "a life without love is no life at all." In a romance movie, chivalry is key. That's how I knew what needed to happen.

Jew Baby was in the break room eating from a jar labeled Banana-Orange Medley. I figured he must be on dessert. I sat down, forgetting to get my lunch out of the locker first. I'd packed the usual that morning, ham and cheese sandwich, Doritos, Coke. I never packed a dessert. I didn't know this morning, when I was packing my lunch, that this would be the day we'd plan the party, and I didn't know that Jew Baby would be in the break room during my half-hour for lunch. This was our chance encounter, and we had to act quickly because the party was only two days away. It was time to *carpe diem*,

which is another prerequisite to falling in love. I got up from the table twice before I started talking, once for my sandwich and again because I forgot my Coke in my locker. Jew Baby said wolves were cool. He hadn't noticed my French braid, but he'd seen the picture of the white wolf howling at the moon on the back of my sweater. This means he was watching me when I got up. Watching me when I wasn't looking was a clue that he was interested. I asked how the party planning was going. He told me he was being groomed for manager. He said that was the only reason he agreed to plan the party in the first place. He said that if you want to be manager, you have to be willing to do things that aren't your responsibility. He said the party had to be a success. And he called it a holiday party, not a Christmas party, so I did too.

Jew Baby planned to serve only Cheetos and Mountain Dew. He wanted to host and play in a "Steven Seagal: The Final Option" video game competition. His band would perform Motley Crue, Def Leopard, and Poison covers. He was against decorations. This was expected, like a lover dying at the end of a romance movie. What was I waiting for? Seduction, more or less, means rescue. I told him we would grill hotdogs and hamburgers. We would string Christmas lights all over the screened-in patio. I would bring my *Celebration Party Mix Volumes I and II* because the music is neutral. You'd think, from the way he leaned back in the booth, crossing his arms and shaking his head, that my suggestions were outrageous and not, more or less, ideas I'd stolen from the Christmas parties of the previous years. Finally, he uncrossed his arms and pushed the jar of baby food out of his way so he could lean in close.

I smelled coconut, which could have been either pomade or suntan lotion. I guessed this was when he was going to ask me to be his date. I would have to act surprised and say that I'd have to think about it, because in the movies the girls always reject the boys at first. This motivates the boys to become more persistent and to recognize the strength of their feelings for you. But he leaned in just to tell me that if he didn't get manager, it would be my fault. Then he did ask me to go to the party.

He said, "We need to be there early to set stuff up."

I slipped my glasses off and cleaned the lenses with my breath and the corner of my sweater, pretending that I hadn't heard, that I hadn't even registered his suggestion that *we* go to the party together, because I wanted to show I didn't care for coy.

"Trust me," I said. I excused him for not knowing the script. After all, he was wearing his Mason Storm nametag. I was happy to help with the party; I was happy in knowing that my moment to fall in love had only been postponed. I knew that sometimes you had to be patient.

The day of the party. Our co-workers filled their plates with chips and dip and baby carrots. I saw, from the knots at their necks, that the girls had bikini tops on under their clothes. The boys wore board shorts, even Jew Baby, but no one was swimming yet. They sat next to the pool on lawn chairs beneath the twinkling Christmas lights and made small-talk. Chet worked the grill. His parents stayed in the living room and out of the way, manning the stereo. Jew Baby was eating Cheetos, one by one, from the serving bowl, shifting his weight from leg to leg, almost in perfect time with the music. He was watching everyone. I was watching him. It occurred to me, when the tablecloth swelled

in the breeze as if on cue, that this was the perfect time to give him the opportunity to thank me, to share his true feelings for me. I'd been complimented at least three times in the last hour on the whole setup. There was no denying the party was a success.

My flip-flops slapped against my heels as I walked towards him. He watched me. He smoothed his hair.

Betsey Carlisle, the new girl with lots of freckles, tugged at his T-shirt sleeve when I was just close enough to hear. Now Jew Baby was looking at her. She said something that ended in "party" and he said something that sounded exactly like my idea. Out of nowhere his head jerked forward, the way a lizard's does, and his orange lips mashed up against hers. I didn't see their faces afterwards because I was underwater.

I heard someone calling "Mindy! Mindy!" from far away, like the other end of a tin-can phone line.

If this were a romantic movie, I thought, Jew Baby would jump in after me, pull me to the shallow end, and out of the water, so he could make sure that I was okay. He would wrap a towel around my shoulders and wedge his fingers in my wet hair. All of the onlookers—including Betsey Carlisle—would blur into the background. He would say, "I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. I was afraid of screwing it up." I would say, "Have a nice life with Betsey Carlisle," and start walking away. He would say, "Wait. I was wrong. Don't leave like this." I would say nothing, but I would stay and "Love is a Holiday," by Michael Bolton, would get louder so the audience could listen to the words. The twinkling lights would make my eyes and hair shine, and I

would not have my glasses on. He would kiss me, and the camera would spin around our heads, mimicking the swirl of love each of us was feeling inside.

Even though you may think so, I did not jump into the pool on purpose. I do not even own a bathing suit, even though I have lived no more than an hour from the beach my whole life. But, once I was down there, suspended in the water like Alice in the rabbit hole, I counted to thirty. No one came in after me. Whoever had called my name, stopped. Because my life is not a romantic movie. So I frog-swam to the steps and climbed out. I stood there on the pebble patio dripping, the blue dye from my jean shorts and the ink I'd used on my inside thigh to pen "I♥Ira," for good measure, streaming down my legs, until Chet's mom handed me a towel.

The interesting thing about working in a movie theater is that you get to see people's faces as they go into and come out of the movie theater. And if they have something on like plastic heels that light up with every step, or if they have something that stands out physically, like a strawberry-shaped birthmark on their forehead, well, you remember. Sometimes people have an excited face that makes all of their face muscles tight before the movie, but when the movie ends, they are walking fast towards the door, not even looking up. Or sometimes someone is holding the hand of someone else, busying themselves by checking their cell phones or looking over their shoulders while their boyfriend or girlfriend does all the work, like buying the ticket and getting the snacks. But when they come out of the movie, they are smiling at their boyfriend or

girlfriend and leaning in close. What I'm saying is that even when they pay to see the movie that they think they will like, it is not always what they would expect.

My mom gave me a book for Christmas by a professor of psychology at Harvard. He claims that humans are terrible at predicting what makes them happy. Our brains, apparently, have not evolved for that purpose. Our brains only evolve to help us find food and make babies. When Kevin broke off his engagement with Gina, she couldn't have predicted that she'd find new love within a week. Turns out her new love, a pug named Merlin, would never leave her to go on tour with the Ye Old Times Acting Troupe. Turns out that putting ink on your skin is poisonous. There was once an eleven-year-old girl whose body turned blue and whose mouth and nostrils produced a purple froth from ink poisoning.

Once the Royal Palms Mall and Movie Theater was complete, Jew Baby went to work there. Chet went off to school, as planned, but Jew Baby wasn't picked as the new manager. If someone had asked me a few months ago if this would make me happy, I would have said, "No." Now, though? Turns out, there was someone else who was Management Material.

Common Ground

I picked Ruby up from the airport. She was wearing a white crepe pantsuit and scarf with glowing red beadwork, and she was looking out of the arrival garage at an overpass, one hand resting on her suitcase and the other on her hip. She was a little heavier since we'd last seen each other, but I was too. She was flying in from San Francisco because an aunt and uncle were renewing their wedding vows. I'd suggested she come down a couple days early; we could stay with my mother, who still lived in south Florida where we grew up, and catch up on the last ten years.

I imagined she was wearing the outfit she planned to wear to the ceremony later in the week. Though I wasn't as glamorously dressed as she was, I understood wanting to look nice. I'd been careful to wear my most slimming jeans and high-heeled shoes. We'd last seen each other over Christmas break our freshman year of college. Ruby, the talented artist who'd lived down the street from me on Daffodil Lane, who thought of me then as her best friend, whose real name, the Chinese name she'd been born with and that was currently on her voicemail, was Mei-Lin. Now things were different. She was engaged and working at a trendy shoe store. I lived six hours north of where we grew up and, though I had no best girlfriends, I had a husband. We'd become adults, just as we'd longed for in high school, with responsibilities, intimate relationships, success.

Already things weren't going as planned. Before I left for the airport, my mother told me she'd mistakenly invited out-of-town guests to stay the same weekend, and I'd accepted an interview back home, at the last minute, on what was supposed to be mine and Ruby's last day together. I told myself she had family in the area, that we were such old friends she'd understand, that we still had the day together.

I'd brought along an old photograph I'd found of Ruby and me on Ft. Lauderdale beach our senior year of high school. We were each wearing a dress and holding a drink, just soda. Our hair hung to our waists, our backs were arched, and we gave the camera a sly smile. I'd chosen the picture because I loved how long and muscular my legs looked in the short dress, the glint in my eyes that revealed how thrilled I was to be exactly where we were now—in an adult world. “God, we look so stupid!” she said, handing the picture back.

I saw my mistake. One of Ruby's eyes had been closed, making her look more foolish than sexy. What I'd thought of as innocent desire was actually desperation. I no longer flushed with embarrassment when I thought about high school, but it was true: most everything I said and did then was born from desperation. I even told my mother I was converting to Judaism my freshman year so I could go to Sabbath dinners and temple with a group of girls I'd met. Now, I avoided certain movie theaters so I wouldn't have to hear teenagers squealing or watch all of their self-conscious posturing.

Let their peers share in their mortification.

I had moved on.

I merged onto I-95 and accelerated toward the left-hand lane. As I passed the exit for Griffin Road, which had been given a new number, Ruby fidgeted in her seat, rocking back and forth so she could smooth the material she was sitting on. “Where are we going?” she asked, looking out the windshield.

“I thought we could go to Las Olas so we could sit outside and people watch. Get something to eat. You must be starved. I know they didn’t serve you lunch on the plane.”

I regretted not thinking more carefully about what we would do during our visit. Ruby wouldn’t want to go shopping or to the movies. Too pedestrian. At least being hungry was common ground.

She flipped down the visor to look at herself in the mirror. She wasn’t wearing any makeup, and with her sparse eyebrows and pulp-colored skin, she looked almost featureless. “I’m kapha dosha. I went to an Ayurveda specialist and had my mind-body-spirit composition analyzed.”

“Oh?”

She slapped the mirror shut. “I went to a Hindu practitioner. Basically, I found out that damp foods, like cheese and pasta, aren’t good for me. Oh, and that I’m supposed to learn to let go of people.” She laughed, “I guess I’m good about some things.”

Her head was twice the size of mine. Large, but not freakishly so, like actresses on television. I’d never noticed before. She had no wrinkles around the eyes or mouth the way I did; her skin was just as doughy-smooth as it had been when we were fifteen. I

wondered if people often thought she was younger. I imagined it'd be nice to be mistaken for younger than you were, even if it meant you weren't always taken seriously.

I shoved the photograph into the console. I didn't want to be reminded of all the other pictures from that day at the beach. The one where we posed barefoot in the waves, kicking playfully, as we'd seen women on commercials do. Or the one where we put our hands on each other's necks, pretending to kiss. It felt like a wall between us, even though it was just a 4 X 6 piece of paper. So, instead, I was taking in the mannequins and racks of clothes propped up in front of the boutiques along Las Olas Blvd. as I drove, looking at a headless mannequin wearing a couture-looking, mother-of-the-bride gown, in silver, with lace bodice and a ridiculous, flared upturned collar on the jacket, and, the next store over, a rack of overpriced distressed jeans and slashed T-shirts being picked through by a girl sipping from a grandé coffee cup. The entire street was filled with high-end shops, galleries, and expensive restaurants. I'd only been there a handful of times.

"We should go to the beach afterwards," she said, staring at me with that blank face.

"To do what? Swim?" I'd have to borrow my mother's bathing suit.

Maybe Ruby didn't remember the other photographs. Maybe she didn't remember that I never returned the purple silk scarf she'd lent me or that I'd given my phone number to the guy in her art class whom she had a crush on. Maybe she learned not to brag so much or be so bossy. Maybe she was tired of masking all of her emotions with a smile, the way she used to. We'd have to take a new photograph during our visit,

one where we didn't try so hard to look desirable, one with our imperfect bodies displayed out in the open.

“Do I look any different?” I asked her as I pulled in to a parking space.

She cocked her head to the side. “Not really. You still have bangs.”

Not half a mile from where we parked were three cafés, side-by-side, each with green awnings stretched over clusters of plastic patio tables and chairs. Two of the restaurants had a few scattered customers and appeared to serve the same traditional fare — expensive burgers, seafood, giant salads, overstuffed deli sandwiches.

I decided to be generous. Pick one, I said. She looked at the three and right away I saw my mistake. She would choose the empty restaurant, the one with the name I couldn't read. She would pick that one to show that she was up for anything, and saying no would expose my empty gesture, my weakness for cheap and uninspired American cuisine.

“I pick the Armenian restaurant.”

We looked over our menus while listening to the static and pipe music coming from a radio somewhere inside. Ruby saw what she wanted immediately and slapped her menu shut. I settled on a chicken pilaf. For a while we talked about what had become of people we went to high school with. Neither of us kept in touch with anyone from our graduating class, yet we'd managed to have vague ideas via the internet about whether they'd gotten fat, if they had children, where they were living.

A breeze swept in from the ocean, lifting my hair off my shoulders, and I let myself lean back in my chair, stretch my legs. How nice it was to relax, to have someone

to gossip with, someone with whom I had a history, who knew me in a way others couldn't. How nice it is to be known! We munched on pita bread and hummus, our hands brushing against each other in the basket, sipped our waters and watched a homeless woman who'd been sleeping on one of the many sidewalk benches throw off her blanket, flail her arms and shout at the passing cars. We shook our heads; we didn't know what she could be so angry about. Our food came on two heavy-looking plates, and we were each handed a linen napkin and a knife and fork. The waitress mopped up the puddles around our glasses with a hand towel.

Ruby clapped. "Delicious!"

As she ate, putting oily pieces of mint and parsley in her mouth one at a time, she talked about how glad she was that she'd had the presence of mind to move away when she did. She said she'd forgotten how much she hated the tourist traps and chain restaurants and the pressure to always dress up and be tan. She'd forgotten how redneck it was here. I followed her eyes to the bar at the restaurant next door where a heavy man sat alone drinking a beer and watching television.

She was right, of course. There were a lot of elderly citizens in south Florida, and they did tend to vote more conservatively than people in California might. And nowadays, politics and religion went hand-in-hand. I'd always felt as if I'd grown up surrounded by diversity, a real mix of cultures, the way that cosmopolitan people do. But I imagined what it must be like in California. I didn't even need her to tell me, but she did, each word painful as if she were poking me with it. She said that in California, comfort is key. She talked about farmer's markets, independent bookstores, sophisticated

palates, and bike-riding everywhere. I said, “That’s cool,” every time she paused, and I meant it.

She whispered that people walking by had been glaring at the lesbian couple who’d come in after us all morning.

“Really?” I said, surprised, and then, with a derisive sniff, she said, “Probably.”

We went back to looking at our plates. It was clear she was proud of herself. She’d made the right choice in moving to California. It was clear we couldn’t help but feel like rivals. I watched her take in the wide sidewalk, her fork suspended over her plate, seemingly distracted by her own thoughts. Then she resumed eating, stabbing at her tabbouleh as if stabbing at Florida, its ugliness, flatness, high-rises, colossal condominiums, and obnoxious theme parks. She chewed each bite with relish, grinning as she cleaned her plate before I was even halfway through my meal.

She felt guilty about it, but she said she loved working in a shoe store. She said she’d been promoted to manager. The store was close enough that she could walk to work, and she got a sixty-percent discount. She said shoes had become her weakness. She hadn’t painted anything in over a year, and sometimes she thought about going back to school. She and her fiancé planned to marry once she returned from a six-month teaching job in Beijing where her sister had moved. I admitted to hating my job, which I’d told myself I would not do, and she encouraged me to see more of the world, to be more adventurous, more fearless. She was so insistent that I found myself getting excited, imagining myself on the back of a camel crossing the desert in some far-away land, until I realized that she was really ordering me to be more like her.

Ruby got up to go to the bathroom, while I watched the people walking by. It was a sunny, cloudless day. We'd sat at a little wrought-iron table and I'd aimed my back at the sun. It was March, still cool enough to wear pants, but hot enough that sweat would leak through your dry-cleaned shirt if it stayed in the same place too long. Somewhere close by, someone was smoking a cigarette. I breathed deeply through my nose, savoring the heady smell, even though I'd quit, for good.

"Hey, did you do something to your teeth?" she said, returning from the bathroom. "They used to be more rounded."

I felt self-conscious, talking to her. Being aware of my teeth made me want to keep my mouth closed, which only made me want to laugh, exposing my teeth. The question shocked me, as if she'd asked me if I'd killed someone. I couldn't think fast enough. "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? Either they're different or they're not."

I lied. I told her a dentist had filed them straight. That it was so long ago, it took me a second to remember. "Didn't even ask me. Just went on ahead and did it." I couldn't tell her that I'd done it myself in college. With an Emery board. I didn't want my friend to thinking I was vain.

She raised the corner of her mouth in a pitying smirk, then shook her hair off her face like she was shooing a fly. "I shouldn't have asked. I was just curious."

"Did you really need to go to a medicine man to find out that you shouldn't be eating too much pasta or cheese?" I was leaning in so that the table's edge pressed against my chest uncomfortably. "I mean, is something like that not obvious?"

We spent a few more minutes there so she could finish her tea, listening to bits of the conversations going on around us. I hadn't taken into consideration that she wouldn't jump on me out of sheer excitement when I picked her up from the airport, the way she did the single time we reunited in college. I hadn't considered that she wouldn't smile anymore or that she'd clear her throat all of the time or have such a severe haircut. I didn't know if we could be friends again. Even without the eyeliner and lipstick she always used to wear, she had that wide, familiar face, a face no longer familiar because I'd been waiting ten years to see it.

The waiter brought the check.

She took her bank card out of her wallet and put it in the bill holder. The waiter swept it up before I even had a chance to take out my own card or ask him to split the check. "I'll pay you back," I said.

"It's fine."

We started walking. The homeless woman was being led by the arm by two uniformed police officers, and I unconsciously stopped for a moment to watch. She was quiet and her head was down. I thought it odd that someone who'd been cursing the world a moment before could become so suddenly shy. She looked up briefly from beneath her wild tangle of hair, and our eyes met. It was like looking into the eyes of a ghost. "It seems like there's so many homeless people down here this time of year," I said.

"Oh," she said, "Does that bother you?" As if it never could bother her. As if she was never frightened by anyone approaching her for change. As if she didn't even see

them as people who needed some kind of help. As if she saw the homeless as beautiful yellow sunflowers sprung up from the cracks in the sidewalk upon which they slept.

“I meant to tell you,” I said. I had to consciously slow my pace to keep with hers; I’d be escaping soon enough. “I have an interview tomorrow and my mom has some guests coming into town.” I told her the sudden change of plans was unforeseen, last-minute.

“That’s fine. If you let me borrow your cell, I’ll call my cousin. I doubt it’ll be a problem.”

She tried twice as we walked, but no one answered. She called an aunt instead and was told that she would have been welcome, if only she wasn’t already housing half of the wedding party. We passed Ocean Walk, the big pink hotel with a food court, arcade, and shops in the lobby that were open to the public. Ten years ago we would have stopped for a frozen yogurt. I followed Ruby inside. All the stands in the food court but the pizza place had been boarded up. Pigeons were flying around the elevator shaft. Even though it was a relief to be in the air-conditioning, I didn’t have the patience to look around at all the old shops, shops I knew were long gone. Without thinking, I ducked out of a side door and back onto the boardwalk. I waited for Ruby, but I did not go back inside. She was there when my phone rang.

She talked to her cousin from the hotel to the car, speaking in Chinese, a language I’d never attempted to understand or even ask about. I felt that familiar hot flush that I only knew as shame. It wasn’t shame for having to go back home early, but for something else. I propped up the photo I’d brought along to show her the night before on

the gearshift. On second thought, the photo wasn't the problem. There was no desperation in the sexy pose, only excitement. My seventeen-year-old self had felt very grown up that day. And that's what was most important then, because if I was grown up, I could have everything just as I wanted, and I would be happy forever. The wide eyes. The arched back. The desire to escape the constraints of childhood. At some point after college, though, the career, the marriage, the suburban house that I had anticipated had robbed me of the freedom that had so attracted me to adulthood in the first place. The scramble to pay bills every month dominated my concerns and left me with no time to connect with other people. Not in the way I had when Ruby and I were young. Not like in the picture.

I knew the meaning of desperation.

Ruby couldn't stay with her cousin tonight, but he could pick her up at noon the following day. I offered to cancel the interview, knowing that she would insist I go. I said we could stay with my mother again, only it would be tight with these other guests. Finally, I got to what I'd known was our only option all along—the nearby Super 8. We stopped by to pick up our suitcases, to tell my mother she didn't have to worry. She'd been cleaning, even though I'd cleaned the house myself only the day before. She looked relieved when we told her, although she insisted her old friends wouldn't mind. The more the merrier, she said.

Our room had double beds and HBO. I turned the TV on. I couldn't think of anything exciting to do. I hoped she'd agree to a drink downtown or, better yet, that she would agree to see a movie after all. Ruby took off her shorts and T-shirt and carried a

toiletory bag to the bathroom. Back in college, she'd been a nude model for her fellow art students. Now she stood in an unflattering pose, heel turned out, belly relaxed, a pose that could only say I'm comfortable being naked. "This isn't my fault, you know." She said she came all this way; she shouldn't have to worry about finding a place to stay at the last minute. I'd come a long way too, but I'd been wrong about a lot of things and I knew it. "You're right," I said. "It's not your fault, but here we are."

The Broken Lamp

The night he broke the lamp, I'd been sighing as loudly as I could and jerking my legs around trying to wake him up. If he woke up, I might not say anything because it might just be enough to have him feel uncomfortable, on-edge, unsure of why I was waking him up. Because what I wanted to say was It's Your Fault, You Need To Fix This. When he woke up, he just said, I'm awake, like he knew what I was trying to do. I said: We might as well give up dreaming about sipping margaritas in Jamaica or buying our first house because it's never going to happen for us. There are times when you make critical choices, like the time you quit as manager at the A&P and it took you three months to find a job, or the time I spent five thousand dollars on a degree in marketing and then never even finished; we made the wrong choices. We're wasting our time, this planning, this asking people for favors. Everyone else made the right choices, and we didn't because we're stupid. Everyone else has it easy, and we don't because we were meant to struggle. We might as well burn the wish list. That's when he broke the lamp.

Our lamp had a compact fluorescent light bulb in it. We bought it because we thought of ourselves as environmentally-aware, not because we wanted to save money. Our motivations weren't entirely pure, though. Buying things like special light bulbs and recycled toilet paper made us feel like we were problem-solving, making us feel better

about our current situation, which was that we didn't know how not to be poor. But this light bulb was one of only two because we didn't have enough money to buy them all at once. Nothing in our apartment had ever been thrown against the wall before, and I thought the lamp made an impressive crash. There was even a cruel black smear marking the site of impact. The shards were not as sliver-thin as the old light bulb would have been. The compact fluorescent light bulb had an opaque coating unlike the old, regular light bulbs, so when I swept it up it just looked like I was sweeping up broken shells.

The first time I realized I could garner sympathy through hardship was when I was five. I made up an elaborate lie that got me into trouble. I'd made up lies before, but this was the one that left a little scar. I blame it on the movie *Annie* and the show *Little House on the Prairie*. I didn't know much, but I knew that hardship warranted a lot of attention.

I was on my way to the bus stop, and I saw, partially covered by dust from the dirt path, half of a pear-shaped piece of glass with a metal base. It was automatic, the way I started hopping on one foot. I hopped all the way across the street with the glass in my pocket. My fellow school bus passengers had been watching my approach, so by the time I got there, their faces were concerned. When one of them asked me why I was hopping around, I said because I had a piece of glass in my foot. On the bus, someone asked me why I didn't have crutches. I said because my family was too poor. Then a girl named April said her brother's old crutches were in her basement, and I could probably borrow them.

When I got to school, I told my teachers the same thing. All day things were handed to me—the lined paper, the box of crayons. I didn't even have to ask. When it was time for music, I got to leave five minutes before everyone else and hold Ms. White's hand. I was drunk with power.

The first thing I heard when I got home was my mother saying my first, middle, and last name. She'd been on the phone. One of my schoolmate's parents wanted to know if I'd like to borrow her son's old crutches. My mom said she was beyond angry. The next day, I was told, I'd have to tell the class I'd lied and apologize. I don't know if I felt like crying, but I know that I didn't.

I knew why he broke the lamp. From the age of three until the time when I moved out of the house, my mother said that I was impossible. I could have just as easily said, I love you. We'll work through this together. My being impossible was a choice, which meant that I didn't mind the outcome. It meant I didn't care how far I pushed him.

His long body was bent in half like a straw and he was using his fingertips to get the smallest pieces of glass, the ones that even the broom couldn't get. He said: We can't have you stepping on any of this. A hospital bill is the last thing we need. I detected a slight quaver in his voice. I thought maybe his face looked the same way my mother's had all of those years ago: heartbroken. He wouldn't ask, but maybe what most stung, the way it had for my mother, was that I really seemed to believe that I wouldn't be taken care of. I didn't slip my arms around him. I didn't apologize. I just climbed back into bed.

Daughter of the Moon

Nokomis imagined that if she had ever come home to visit in the thirteen years since she'd left, her mother would perch herself at the end of the floral-patterned armchair in an effort to hide the worn piping around the seat cushion. Her stockinged, tortoise-thick legs would cross at the ankles, and she would hold a glass of lemonade in one hand, the other hand fluttering around her frosted and teased halo of hair. Lunch would be on the porch beneath the red umbrella that cast a soft pink tint over everything, making her mother's creamy face look younger, more exuberant than Nokomis's looked now, or ever had, for Nokomis had her father's swarthy skin, golden as the moon. *It's so stuffy in here! Let's sit outside, can we? Bet we can smell the jasmine with that breeze coming through.*

Her mother would ask if she was dating anyone, adding unreasonably, that it was high time she had a grandchild to spoil rotten. This would remind her of an anecdote, (the kind that she never shared around anyone but Nokomis, careful to never appear boastful in company) something about how she couldn't help but spoil Nokomis, her only baby, by always allowing her to pick out a treat from the grocery store before they left (whether it was a cookie from the bakery or a new coloring book). After all, she was just a young mother herself, not yet old enough to forget the sting of not having any new Barbie dolls

to bring over to friends' houses or being denied an ice cream cone whenever she accompanied her father into town, no matter if it was over a hundred degrees outside or that the Twistee Treat was right next door to the hardware store. *There were benefits of being a young mother, oh yes.*

It was impossible to deny that she'd been spoiled, for she knew now that she had, and that wasn't what she wanted to do anyway, was it? Make a case for her mother as a liar? No, not that. Yet, she couldn't do what her mother, Aveline Talbert the good Christian, wanted, either, what she imagined her mother often received from all her church friends. She couldn't allow herself to be pinned down or made complicit, and with Pepper, their Catahoula-shepherd mix, long gone and no other guests. There'd be nothing to distract from her mother's eager face and her solicitous nod but the sun-baked yard, looming constant in her periphery, the golden citrus woven like a strand of Christmas lights up and over the tree branches.

No. It was better to be alone in the empty house, letting her toes sink into the familiar heavy-cut pile carpeting, so lush (so extravagant in this tiny home built for Civil War veterans to live solitary, quiet lives) that visible footprints were left behind as Nokomis made her way from the garage entrance to the kitchen. Better to have the chalky air all to herself. (For Aveline preferred powdered cleaners and fresheners—Comet and carpet deodorizer—over the more popular sprays.) Better to hear nothing but the clanking of the vertical blinds as they brushed against one another, propelled by the air conditioner whenever it kicked on, like the swell of an ocean wave, the jangle of a wind-chime.

Better to take it slowly enough that she could think clearly, and work effectively, and get back quickly to her loft in the trendy “SoHo” district of South Tampa.

You wouldn't recognize Honey Springs, Nokomis. Come and see! You have to see it to believe it! Her mother had been right. Nokomis had sat in traffic for forty-five minutes, her leather seat slick with sweat, the back of her tee shirt and the seat of her shorts damp, despite the air conditioner strategically aimed at her face and sandals. In Florida, the afternoon temperature in mid-July easily reached one hundred degrees inland, and wading through the humidity was suffocating as breathing through a plastic bag. What had been pasture and orange groves thirteen years ago had been sold, leveled, and transformed into car dealerships, strip malls, and gated communities. She'd rubbed her eyelids, blinked painfully in an effort to soften her dry, crinkled contact lenses so that she could read the signs: *Publix, Beall's Outlet, Bill Shemp Toyota, Nissan of Honey Springs, Cardinal Cove, Lakeview, Oakwood Villas.*

Again and again, every few miles, she found herself stuck at a new streetlight or wedged helplessly in a left-hand lane piled dangerously with brand-new, fuming, luxury sedans and SUVs, their turning lights blinking psychotically, threatening to send her into an epileptic seizure as they impatiently waited to turn into their treeless, tidy, secure little utopia.

Now that her mother was gone, an accidental death during a routine surgery for carpal-tunnel syndrome, Nokomis has come back to Honey Springs, back home to the frame vernacular house with the milk-white jalousie windows that have to be cranked open by hand, to 6039 Abbott Rd. It is a relief to be in her mother's home, the place

where Nokomis lived from the age of six until the summer before she turned eighteen, without having to tolerate her mother's hiccupping laugh (one that Nokomis could not imitate without finding herself in a coughing fit), or a carefully laid lunch on the back porch set with nothing at all to look at but a rutted yard full of yellow prickly grass and an exhausted-looking lemon tree, its trunk permanently tilted to the north after a hurricane that hit when it was still young, reminding Nokomis of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and a pilgrimage of fire ants making their way to who-knows-where? Maybe a rotten knob of a gray limb or the tips of the sun-spotted leaves.

Despite the half-moon nicks her fingernails left on the expensive cowhide steering wheel, Nokomis preferred this drive home to the one she'd imagined. It was not as if she'd needed her mother to tell her that the Honey Spring staples from her childhood (the drive-in movie, Cassie's Bridal, Guthrie's All-You-Can-Eat BBQ) had been bought out or out-competed by chain restaurants and monolithic superstores. As copy editor of one of the largest newspapers in the Tampa Bay area, Nokomis often had written the headlines for the very articles her mother carefully clipped from the community section of *The Suncoast Post* and hand-delivered in a sealed envelope, sliding it across the tabletop at one of their favorite restaurants like a Mafioso commissioning a hit. *Such a shame. You remember Dottie's spicy sweet-potato fries at the Starlight Drive-In? Well, I don't have to tell you!* What she hadn't anticipated was the whole-body relief she would experience in finding her hometown so *urbanized*; it was as if this urbanization was somehow seeping its way inside her own body. She hadn't been fully aware of the steel

valve that had developed between her shoulder blades over the last week until she felt the handle gently lift five miles down State Road 54, releasing some of the pressure, allowing some of the stored-up anxiety to drain away.

What she imagined: driving fast down a one-lane road greased with diesel fuel and rain; overhead, smoldering clouds with splotches of lead gray blossoming at the center, staining the edges; centuries-old, wind-whipped oak tree limbs tangled in power lines all the way to Main Street; massive semi-trucks illegally swerving around her tiny Miata, their colossal trailers warping the wind, their tires tearing across the asphalt; and nothing but the resulting moan filling her head as she drives and drives and drives.

Well, not entirely. Her imaginings of what it would be like to return home were really just impressions; things felt but not fully understood. Though she knew that one day a return home was inevitable, the date seemed so distant, so far removed from her hustle and bustle, mildly glamorous life, that the full measure of her fear was as unknowable and terrible as the idea of herself as a bride, as someone's mother. *She a wife, but not a mother. Fair Nokomis bore a daughter.*

Instead, the fear of the drive home, of being home, flickered like candlelight shadows on the far reaches of her consciousness. Thirty-one years old isn't old, after all. And Aveline, just 47, too young to die!

I made the appointment, honey. I go in at 9 a.m. next Thursday. So you can stop hounding me. This is Mom. Playful messages on the answering machine always followed by the same sober reminder. Ridiculous! *I know who you are, Mom!*

Six days ago, Ms. Cade, a friend from Aveline's women's group at Abundant Life Church of God, who *still* gave Aveline hideous handmade elastic hair-ties with beaded and feathered tassels to give to Nokomis, waited for Aveline to be wheeled out into reception. Ms. Cade had been ready. She'd put away her knitting, tossed her coffee cup and wadded up tissues into the trash can, put her own purse strap over her shoulder, held Aveline's quilted purse on her lap, and stood, car keys in hand. It was twelve o'clock on the dot, a full three hours after she'd brought her friend in, and she still had to get her home, fed, and propped up in bed so that she could rest until the anesthetic had completely worn off. And she had grocery shopping and a trip to the drug store to make yet! "Soon. I'm sure it will be soon, Ms. Cade," the woman at the front desk kept assuring her.

Aveline was wheeled into reception at 12:06. She was groggy, tired, wanted sleep. She had her hand on her chest. *Even then, she did.* Ms. Cade had taken her home, propped the pillows behind her friend's head, taken the serving tray she used for casual get-togethers, just the plastic one with the bright red cherries and apples on it, from the trunk of her Oldsmobile, steadied a glass of water, a scrambled egg, and a piece of toast and carried it to Aveline, who'd kicked her shoes off and climbed into bed as she was told, but who was still wearing the Capri pants and button-down she'd worn into the hospital that morning, and who was, by this time, pressing on her chest, complaining that it hurt. *She needed to eat; that's what I told her. Eat and she'd feel better.*

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome was the diagnosis, from all of Aveline's years as a dental hygienist at Dr. Belton Dental Center, her fingers gripping aspirator cleaners and

drill hand pieces, arms aloft over ten, sometimes as many as fifteen, open mouths a day. The strain of keeping her hands steady so that she didn't make anyone cry out in pain, the repetition of having to apply just the right amount of pressure with her thumb, index, and middle finger so that the scaler didn't slip (this effort, over time, causing entrapment of her median nerve.) For a long time, she just thought her hand was falling asleep. Later, there were nightmares: her right hand torched like broom sedge at the end of her arm, her clammy hand quaking with fear in a steel-jawed trap as the seconds ticked by; an axe chipping away glass-thin shards from a frozen block of ice, revealing a bleary-pink hand, shapeless as an embryo, locked inside. Four days of work, out with no pay, trying to make a fist with the hand so red and swollen that her sapphire band and silver butterfly rings were tight as tourniquets.

Nokomis looked up the procedure on the internet, explained it to her mother over a dinner of grilled eggplants and Portobello mushrooms at the lantern-lit tapas restaurant walking distance from the martini bar with the good-looking Italian bartender and her fifth-floor apartment. She'd be wheeled in to the operating room where she'd be given a choice of local or general anesthesia. An incision would be made at the base of her hand and her transverse carpal ligament would be cut. Afterwards, her hand would be stitched up, wrapped in gauze, and she'd be sent home, a little loopy, but otherwise just fine. She'd be back to work in a week, good as new. Nokomis paused, asked if she thought she could handle the minor inconvenience involved in getting back a hand that actually worked. Her mother had only complained, her lips puckered, the muscles above her cheekbones tightened, making her look like an old-Hollywood film star: *This is too*

garlicy for me, dear. She'd been surprised when her mom made the appointment, annoyed suddenly at the time wasted convincing her to do something so simple, so obvious.

Ms. Cade had been the one who had to call an ambulance to come pick up her friend, who was doubled over and moaning. She'd been the one who followed the ambulance back to Pasco General State Hospital, who had to dig through her friend's purse to find Aveline's cell phone and ask the receptionist to scroll through the numbers, looking for Nokomis. She'd had to wait until almost 5:30 p.m. when Nokomis arrived. "They're saying there's been a complication. When she was intubated. An esophageal—her esophagus, honey, they punctured it and now she has an infection in her chest—*aspiration pneumonia.*"

Nokomis was only a couple of hours into her shift and in the midst of editing `pascotchr053008`, a story on a teacher salary freeze in Pasco County. Abigail Haiss, the reporter for the article, was notorious for shifting between past and present tense (often within the same sentence!), mistakes which Nokomis and her co-workers resented because there were always a few missed by the line editors and because Abigail was either just sloppy or else, they whispered, arrogant. Anyone who edited her stories had to be prepared to scour every sentence and reread three or four times to check for consistency. Although it was more time consuming to edit one of Abigail's articles, Nokomis often reaped unexpected benefits. She was more relaxed, focused; she could work for longer periods of time without checking the clock or her watch every couple of minutes for deadline, the way she normally did. She was even less hungry throughout the

day and thought that she may even have slept better those nights. She was just more satisfied overall. Editing Abigail's copy, above anyone else's, put her in the zone. When she was in the zone, the words she read began to hold personal meaning for her, began to resonate with her in ways that they wouldn't otherwise. The speed with which she could scan the copy accurately would increase; each word appeared vividly, and each word equally commanded her full attention. Yet, as her scanning speed increased, her corrections began to occur automatically, reflexively.

She ignored her cell phone the first time it rang. She was deep in the zone. Words jumped out at her: *suffer, justification, entitled*. She recognized herself in those words. As if the words echoed her feelings, or created them, she wasn't sure which. She thought: *I'm having a bad day. I'll take a long bath tonight*. The second time her cell phone rang she became distracted and got stuck on the word: *responsibility*.

Aveline Talbert was moved to ICU after an unsuccessful surgery to repair the perforation, room 201C. Her eyes were closed. Mascara flakes dusted the tops of her slackened cheeks. She wore a sea-green hospital gown with a gray-colored design of vertical and horizontal lines, the kind popular on men's sweaters in the eighties. The effect of the gown, combined with the industrial lighting, was that she looked like the 3-D version of the computer printout from the heart monitor. She was unable to breathe on her own after surgery and had been hooked up to a ventilator. She had IVs, running antibiotics, taped to her wrists, an intravenous feeding tube snaked under her gown, and was out, completely unresponsive, the result of the medically induced coma given to ease

any discomfort she may have and to minimize any further damage, while the antibiotics worked to combat her pneumonia.

Nokomis's first thought: This is not my mother. Not with this dental-floss hair, these eyes with feather-fine creases, this sour-smelling catheter at her feet.

On second thought, however, something about her mother lying there, vulnerable, poised dangerously for death, looked familiar. The sashimi she'd had for lunch rose to her throat and her body stiffened with guilt. Hadn't she wished this? Maybe not this exact scenario, but certainly somewhere in her was a coil of rage that manifested itself in fleeting anxieties and feelings of depression. Despite her new car and hour-long lunches, there were the days when she locked the bedroom door in her empty apartment in an attempt to keep bitter disappointments in friends, boyfriends out of her mind. *Why don't they call? Is that what she thinks of me?* The way she screamed, "Fuck you!" so loudly that she shook when someone cut her off in traffic. The night recently when she drank too much and smashed three expensive wine glasses against the wall because she liked the way the moonlight turned the shards of glass into diamonds as sharp as her anger. The way every setback took on catastrophic proportions. Maybe that's why she felt her mother should suffer some for what she'd done. *For every action, there is a reaction.* Isn't that what she'd been taught?

And if her mother actually did die? Would that part of her that was her mother be free to go too?

The house where she grew up, where her mother had lived for twenty-four years, was, like the drive over had been, less frightening than she imagined. Cinnamon

potpourri in the bathroom. A neat drop of spaghetti sauce on the stove. A sheet of dust over the black T.V. screen. Cross-stitched blessings hung in the entry way and in the master bedroom. *I am humbled by the beauty of a flower in the breeze surrounded by an orchestra of softly buzzing bees.* The house was on a corner lot and every few seconds a passing car's headlights caught in the oak tree branches in the front lawn, throwing bars of light over the walls of the house, over Nokomis, making her feel as if she were sinking even though she was only walking in the dark between the rooms of the house.

Aveline said she loved poetry, even though Nokomis had never seen her reading any. Next to her collection of Precious Moments figurines was a leather-bound anthology of classical romantic poetry two-inches thick. And there on the end table was the book Nokomis bought at a yard sale, propped up by its open pages like a picture frame, given to her as a Christmas present. *The Song of Hiawatha* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The epic poem from which Nokomis had been named. She'd told her mother that she'd misunderstood the poem she'd so loved her last year of high school. Aveline liked to tell the story. *Mr. Staniszewski's English class junior year. Daughter of the Moon. That's what I kept hearing in my head for a whole weekend, and I had to run to his class on Monday morning and ask him because I couldn't think about it for another second. I burst in on him before the first bell rang. "Who is the daughter of the moon?" And it took him a while because he was startled, and he hadn't been thinking about the poem for days, like I had. When he reminded me, I named you right then, so I would never forget. Nokomis: daughter of the moon.*

Nokomis read the whole poem before she wrapped the book. She didn't like the way the drum-beat sound of the words stayed with her even after she set it down or that she couldn't help but read the poem as if she were editing an article. It annoyed her, the way the words clung to her, because she'd had to go back and reread whole lines and stanzas three or four times before she could shake them and force them back into the larger story. Still, she'd understood. Nokomis and her descendants were cursed. She wasn't sure who cursed her, although it stated clearly that it was because of "jealousy and hatred." *She fell Mom. Fell from the sky and then had a bastard daughter who grows up and has a bastard child of her own. That's the story of Nokomis, Mom. She's a fallen woman!* There was more. The poem was the story of the ill-fated Hiawatha; a cautionary tale against greed, desperation, power. The poem itself a last breath, an attempt to survive extinction.

Aveline had only smoothed the cover of the book as if straightening an apron and then she tapped her bangs, which were hair-sprayed into a fluffy arbelos. The lights on the Christmas tree Nokomis had wedged in next to the electric fireplace blinked like a neon sign. *Well. Keep your voice down.* That was it! No counter argument about Eve and how all women are sinners (which Nokomis had been prepared for.) And certainly no explanation, no discussion, no admission of guilt (which Nokomis had also been prepared for.) Not even a hand pat.

After her mother pulled out of the parking garage (honking her horn twice, the noise echoing embarrassingly), Nokomis realized her mother probably didn't understand the poetry she read, if she actually read any. She felt guilty for wanting to bring it up.

And on Christmas! Her mother probably knew what she'd been alluding to (this time, as well as others) and had chosen not to go down that road because it was too painful. Hadn't her mother been a church-going, punctual, generous, law-abiding, sentimental woman her whole life? A woman who teared-up with gratitude any time someone did something nice for her, even just opening her car door or sending her a card for her birthday; a woman who worked in a soup kitchen once a year; a woman who knitted caps and booties for friends' children and, later, grandchildren; who organized canned food drives for soldiers deployed to the Middle East; who gave Nokomis every doll, every dress she wanted while growing up; who helped her with all of her school projects; who saved every article she wrote; who bragged about her to her friends (*This is my daughter, the writer.*); who agreed to meet Nokomis in restaurants, coffee houses, bookstores, museums, to drive the twenty, thirty, forty miles to Nokomis' apartments over the years so Nokomis wouldn't have to go home? Hadn't she been a virtuous woman? The baby, that was only a blip in her life. But wasn't that just one mistake in an otherwise impressive job as a single mother?

Quickly came the resentment. A ruthless black sting that gripped her throat. Before she even had a chance to make it back to the elevator. By not admitting what she'd done, by never talking about it, never acknowledging what Nokomis had seen, she'd forced Nokomis to live with her secret, the silence causing her to always feel as if she was never being her true self with anyone she met. Keeping the secret and having no validation of what she'd seen had caused her to feel insecure, doubtful of her own

choices, always second-guessing her beliefs, even doubting whether she'd seen it at all, wondering if she'd just been hallucinating or dreaming.

The secret made her distrustful of others. For if Aveline Talbert, the devoted mother, could do what she did, then what were others hiding? Maybe people did good deeds as a way of creating a disguise. She'd grown up without a father, without any romantic relationships that had lasted beyond six months, with girlfriends with whom she could never truly relate, could never be carefree around. These girlfriends became quickly disillusioned with her (girls who modeled their personalities after women their age whom they saw on television and in magazines, deciding that she was pessimistic, critical, no fun). Because of all of those things, she'd *needed* to believe that her mother had loved her.

Yet every time she picked up the phone to call her mother so she could tell her about suspicions she had about a new guy she was seeing, or just to talk to her because she was feeling lonely, despite her mother's eagerness to spend time with her or her seeming pride in her "independent daughter," the feeling in her gut bloomed: *Maybe she didn't love me after all. Maybe there were times when she wanted to get rid of me, too. Maybe she wished she was rid of me now.*

At first, it was comforting for Nokomis to be able to recite the names of all of the medicines her mother was on and the correct terminology for what was happening to her. She could tell all of Aveline's visitors (Dr. Belton and her co-worker, Darcy; Jennifer, the cousin Aveline spent summers with in North Carolina until she was seventeen and

pregnant with Nokomis; her half-brother, David, nine years Aveline's senior; a border patrol officer from Arizona who'd only met Nokomis twice and gave her curt nods whenever they made eye contact; Ms. Cade, who looked more and more guilty every day, who brought with her get-well balloons and cards signed by the congregation at Abundant Life), with the same detached professionalism used by the doctors, that her antibiotics (Dexamethasone and Arisodaminum) were increased because sepsis had set in, that the inflammation caused DIC: disseminated intravascular coagulation. And they would all give her the same startled look because they wanted to ask, she knew, whether or not their sister, their friend, Nokomis's *mother*, was going to die. But they didn't ask. Instead, they congratulated Nokomis for being so strong, and, for the first day and a half that her mother was in ICU, she convinced herself that her mother was not going to die. She made a promise to herself that she would never again confront her mother, directly or indirectly, with what she'd seen twenty years before.

Even when the night shift doctor who'd been treating Aveline (a man with a nose lumpy as a potato) pulled Nokomis out into the hallway to discuss her options, she was clear-headed and spoke assuredly, not yet comprehending that her efforts for control, that her silent deals with herself, had failed. Stage three multiple organ failure, brain death was imminent. Her kidneys had failed first. Now bacteria were beginning to leak from Aveline's liver into her blood stream. Cells in the tissues lining her lungs, her liver, were dying, eclipsed by necrosis, and the blood in her circulatory system, strangled of oxygen, began to clot.

The tips of Nokomis's fingers purpled in Ms. Cade's grip as the nurse turned the ventilator's settings to OFF. Her mother's friend did her best to stifle an agonized whimper by throwing a liver-spotted hand over her mouth. Nokomis was looking at her mother lying in the bed, the IV's and feeding tube removed, thinking about a painting by a local artist she'd seen at the new gallery in Hyde Park the week before. Her mother's hair, brittle and stiff, looked like the cactus. Her face, tilted towards the ceiling, mouth open, looked as void as the spotless sand, her lips as white and insubstantial as the cloud slashed through the vast and terrible sky. She panicked when her mother made a painful snoring-like noise, the scar tissue that coated her throat causing her few mimicked breaths to sound like a saw ripping through the trunk of a tree. No one had warned her. At the end of the hall, a stairwell! *Nokomis? Honey?*

Uncle David left the phone number for a malpractice lawyer he found on the internet before he flew back to Arizona. *I'll be back for the service, and we can meet with this guy then. Hang in there, huh?* Ms. Cade offered to help box up her mother's things for charity. *My girls and I can get the house spic and span for you, okay?* Cousin Jenny's husband and sons flew down to stay with her at the bed and breakfast she'd found on Clearwater Beach (which was at least an hour from Honey Springs and made Nokomis feel as if they were using her mother's death as an excuse to vacation) until after the funeral. *There's room for you, too, so you don't have to be alone. And a pool!*

Instead, Nokomis had returned to her apartment with a handful of her mother's bills, made the necessary phone calls to her mother's job, her bank, Pastor Shelor, Whitfield Funeral Home (where she chose an urn for Aveline's remains through an

online catalogue, something in her mother's style: pink flowers and gold trim that sat on a pedestal and looked as though it belonged in a chateau in the French countryside), and Sunbelt Haven Nursing Home. There was no will, of course. No life insurance. She would let Ms. Cade clean the house. She would let her uncle deal with the lawyer. Those things could wait. She could arrange it so that she had only to return home once. Only for the photographs of her mother to display at the memorial service, to see if there was anything of her mother's that she might want to keep and to remove what had been buried beneath the lemon tree in the backyard so that she could put the house up on the market and be done with the whole thing for good.

It wasn't until her senior year of high school that Nokomis realized her father must've been an alcoholic. Aveline never kept any alcohol in the house (*Lead us not to temptation!*) and Nokomis never saw her drink, not even during communion where the blood of Christ turned out to be grape juice. (Although by the time Nokomis turned twenty-five, she'd order a glass of wine or sangria to sip on whenever they went out to dinner. *Cocktail time!*) She'd guessed that her mother's overzealousness regarding alcohol was more than just a product of her religious beliefs when she stumbled through the front door early one morning from a night of drinking with her friends to find Aveline in the kitchen. She'd barely had time to focus her eyes on her mother's pulsing face before she was she slapped (something Aveline had never done before or since.) *Get that demon off your breath.* Aveline sighed, letting her body sag against the wall. *I've worked too hard to have you turn out like him.* Nokomis had been too busy working up the nerve

to hit her mother back (though she knew the moment had passed) to find out what she meant.

Her father's name was Wayde Alexander Warren, a name which sounded, she thought, like the name of a conquerer, like someone with a biography she could check out from the school library. There was a picture of him, too. A close-up shot where he's dangling from a tree branch, shirtless, with a reckless grin and bushy sideburns. His snarled whiskers were so comical to her, and with Aveline always referring to him as a big fish in a small pond, she ended up growing up thinking of him as a catfish. When Nokomis asked where her father was now, Aveline's answer was always the same. *Wherever he wants to be.* The question was a game back then. She liked the way the tone of her mother's voice dropped and the predictability of the answer. Eventually, the lack of information she'd been given made her distrustful of her mother, and she saw the answer her mom gave for what it really was: pure stubbornness.

Her grandparents were another mystery. Aveline never explained why she had no contact with her parents even though they lived less than ten miles away. Nokomis knew that letters appeared every once in a while from her grandmother because, on those days, Aveline would take the mail straight to her bedroom, lock the door, and not come out for a long time. Once, Nokomis snuck into her mother's room and found a stack of the letters in her underwear drawer. She'd only had time to scan one of them (*Mary Helen had her baby! Daddy hurt his back and is wearing a brace now — Elise*) before she heard her mother's car in the driveway. That night while they were watching television, Nokomis decided to confirm her suspicions. She kept her eyes on the television screen

and made her voice sound as peppy as she could. *Mom, what's grandma's name?*

Luckily, Aveline had answered without thinking. *A clue!*

One Saturday when Nokomis was seven, her mother changed into a black satin dress she'd brought home in a garment bag the day before. The skin under her eyes looked irritated and dry. Otherwise, without the bright lipstick and teased hair, she looked elegant, like someone who belonged in a limousine. Aveline took her car keys from a hook she'd put in next to the telephone. She hadn't said anything about having a day off from work. Nokomis hoped the fancy clothes meant they would do something fun together, like drive up to Crystal River to feed the manatees. She'd already asked her mother twice in the last week. Instead of asking again, she decided to sit quietly at the kitchen table doing a crossword puzzle from an activity book her mother had bought her at the start of the summer vacation (even then, words had the power to calm her, to give her a sense of security), and wait to be surprised.

Mommy needs to leave for a little while. Just stay inside, okay? And don't let anyone in. When it was clear Nokomis would be left home alone, she asked her mother where she was going. Aveline hesitated to answer. *To say goodbye.* She crossed the kitchen, leaving a trail of rose-scented perfume behind, and put her hand on the doorknob. *Again, I mean. For the last time.*

Nokomis checked the underwear drawer periodically after that, but there were no more letters.

Finding out that her grandparents had lived on the outskirts of Honey Springs was pure luck, too. They'd just finished grocery shopping and were pushing their cart across

the crosswalk in front of the store when Aveline stopped to stare at an old man with hair yellowed as an old photograph loading groceries into the back of his pickup. *Dad?* She raised her voice. *Dad?* The old man looked up and met her gaze, his mouth remaining stiff and flat as the horizon, before he unlocked the door and drove off. A car that'd been waiting for them to cross blew their horn impatiently. *Mom, move!* Nokomis took control of the cart, pushing it quickly across the parking lot, leaving Aveline to trail behind.

There was just one envelope from Nokomis's grandmother with a return address on it. It was a personalized label with a curly-haired angel cartoon, and Nokomis imagined that it had been a mistake, that her grandmother had been distracted and had sent it along with the rest of her mail. The address was still clear, even though the letter was shoved towards the bottom of the stack. Nokomis cut a neat little rectangle around it and slipped it in her pocket.

Nokomis was rejected by the two colleges most of her classmates were applying to: the University of Florida and Florida State University. She did her class work, never her homework, managed to pass enough tests (sometimes by cheating) to graduate with a 3.2 G.P.A. and mediocre SAT scores. It was enough to get her into USF, a third-rate state school in nearby Tampa, almost an hour from home. Her high school years (she hoped) were typical. She had some mid-tier friends, hung out with boys occasionally, and was allowed to spend the night at her best girlfriend's. Most of the time, though, high school felt terminal, filled with infuriating spells of misunderstood, repressed anger (that manifested in passive-aggressive sarcasm, sullenness, lies), boredom, longing. There were short-lived moments of ill-conceived inspiration (mostly at the start of her freshman

year and end of her senior year) that broke through the inertia, but no matter how she tried (a vainglorious attempt at popularity by trying out for the cheerleading squad, joining the yearbook committee), the inevitable pull into reality, to the life she hadn't chosen for herself, the life she had yet to have any control over, was too much to overcome. Unmitigated powerlessness prevailed and, most of the time, she was just depressed.

It was too late for her grandmother, but one such burst of inspiration led Nokomis to the address printed on the postage label she'd saved. The old man she'd seen all of those years ago at the grocery store was in the front yard, stooped over a honeysuckle bush with a pair of gardening shears. "Guess you wanna come in?" She hadn't expected the kind of tearful reunion you see on television or in the movies, but she'd anticipated shocking him, or, at the very least, having to chase him around the back of the house and force him to talk to her. Johanna, the friend who'd driven her there and whose Fiat was parked next to the old man's mailbox, practically delirious with excitement, ordered Nokomis to "cuss him out" if he wouldn't acknowledge her. But he looked so harmless! Loose, warbly chin, sweat-stained plaid button shirt, *gardening* of all things!

The house was a small bungalow (like most of the old homes in the town, like her mother's home) with eggshell-colored paint as brittle and faded as the old man's hair. She followed him through the musty smelling living room to the kitchen at the back of the house. The linoleum had turned a rust color around the appliances, but otherwise looked clean, like someone used a mop in a broad circle, careful to never touch the appliances. Used coffee filters and spoons with brown centers sat along the edge of the

sink. He moved a stack of dishes and newspapers from the kitchen table to an empty chair so Nokomis could sit across from him.

Nokomis opened her mouth to introduce herself, but the old man cut her off. “I seen your picture.” He grazed the edge of one nostril self-consciously.

When she’d decided to find him she’d been filled with the kind of self-righteousness that comes from a victim’s indignation. But now that she was here, she realized that she was only scorned by default. Aveline had been the real victim, though she couldn’t think why. Maybe she could leave herself out of it entirely and heroically defend her mother against the man who had rejected her. She could tell him that Aveline was a good mom — the best — and that she went to church and never said anything bad about anyone, even him, and that she didn’t go around feeling sorry for herself for being a single mom, and that she was still pretty, even though she was, at least, thirty pounds heavier than she was in the pictures she’d shown Nokomis of herself in high school; she had friends and lots of people really liked her. She could make him feel so guilty that he would spill his guts to her, his granddaughter that he’d unfairly denied for all of these years and go immediately to Aveline and apologize.

That’s not what Nokomis wanted, though.

“Who’s that?” Nokomis noticed a framed picture of a woman with short finger-waved hair and Aveline’s high cheekbones propped up amid the garbage on the countertop. She could easily guess that this was the woman with the graceful handwriting who wrote her mother letters, but she wanted to make him more uncomfortable than he already seemed.

“We were married twenty-three years. Not long enough.” He looked away from the picture and down at his thumbs.

“My grandmother?” This was what she needed from him. Information. Answers.

He nodded ruefully, then cleared his throat and straightened in the chair. “You don’t look nothing like your mother.”

“Neither do you.” Nokomis looked over his face for signs of her mother while he avoided her gaze. “Well, except your ears. She keeps hers covered with her hair, though.”

At this, he laughed, which then caused him to start coughing. When he settled down, he said, “I always told her she could sail away on them things.”

Nokomis noticed his dentures slide in his mouth as he spoke. She felt sorry for him, being in this house all by himself, having to take care of himself. Still, she wanted to push a little bit more, see if she could get him to tell her what Aveline had done wrong. “But she’s never been anywhere.”

He raised a wiry eyebrow. “Nope, not like your daddy.”

A buzzing started in Nokomis’s ear, and her foot began to twitch involuntarily. She felt there’d been a shift. She wanted to know about her father, of course, but she wasn’t going to let this old man tease her. She stood. “I’m going to college.”

The old man stood, too. “Glad someone’s going.” He brushed the palms of his hands against his jeans and reached out for a handshake. He was telling her to leave.

“Maybe I’ll give you a call sometime.”

Her grandfather gave her a tight smile, but was looking at the floor. “Gotta warn you, I’m not much for talking on the phone.”

Nokomis followed him to the front door. “Anything you want to tell my mom?”

“Can’t imagine there’s much she don’t already know.” He held the door open for her, and she stepped into the sunlight. She turned to face her grandfather, but in the shade from the awning and the veil of the screen door, she thought he already disappeared.

She’d intended to, but she never did call. Getting away from home was too intoxicating. Not having to be linked to her mother, to Honey Springs, to her past was better than she’d even anticipated. Her coursework was overwhelming, and her efforts to come across as someone with as uncomplicated and privileged of a home life as her dormmates and classmates appeared to have been blessed with, tiring, but, more than anything, liberating. She was finally in control! The more time she spent away from home, refusing Aveline’s invitations on the grounds of being busy, the more she realized that she would never have to go home again if she didn’t want to.

Aveline, unsettled by Nokomis’s distance, became anxious, impatient, and fought back with manipulative crying and melodramatic, self-pitying remarks. *You don’t love me anymore!*

Nokomis would not be swayed to return, but she did learn to make more of an effort to see her mother, to invite her out to play miniature golf, see a movie, kayak down the Hillsborough River, as long as it was on her side of town. Soon Aveline dropped the

guilt trip and began referring to their outings as their *adventures*. She loved her mother, and as long as she could keep their relationship on her terms, she felt safe.

One day her junior year of college, her mother had kept her waiting forty-five minutes in the mall food court. When she finally showed up, beaming and unapologetic, she confessed she'd been to see her father. He'd been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and after a car accident that left him with a cracked rib, her brother David had put him in a nursing home. Nokomis hadn't understood. Had they reconciled before he'd been diagnosed? Had her mother been forgiven? Had he told her about Nokomis' visit a few years before? Aveline's face was flushed; her hands fluttered around her head as she spoke, smoothing her hair back into place. *I can visit once a week, and we can have lunch together! We can catch up on things or just watch a movie or I can take him out on the grounds. The nurse says he'll have good days and bad days, but that's all right!* The more she talked, the clearer it became: if he was aware of her at all, he had no idea who she was. For a moment, Nokomis found herself caught up in her mother's excitement, even happy for her. She considered joining her, on occasion. *It wasn't too late!* Then, she'd understood; she wouldn't go. She wouldn't allow herself to get mixed up in their cowardice now. She'd been right to stay away from him these past few years, to not give him another opportunity to punish her the way he'd done so easily a few years ago, pretending she was someone else the same way her mother was doing with him now. She wasn't going to pay for their mistakes.

Gusts of wind tore across the Gulf inland, shifting sheets of rain across the glass front doors of the public library, leaving Nokomis standing helplessly in the front entrance, listening to the sweep of the storm, with two hard-covered copies of *Sweet Valley High* tucked under her arm, plotting an escape. It was late June, the summer before Nokomis entered fourth grade, and a week into hurricane season. Each day began the same way: by the time the sun rose high enough to clear away the last violet shadows, the temperature was securely in the nineties, the withered grass already unfurling, the air damp and heavy as a soaked pool towel. And each afternoon, when it was so hot that wading another moment against the rippling current of heat would put you at risk for heat stroke, the black-bellied clouds rolled in, leaving rooftops, driveways, and tomato fields steaming.

In the last week, a tropical storm and Hurricane Victor had been identified spiraling over Haiti, headed for Miami. Long-time residents of Honey Springs knew that local news' predictions about a hurricane's course were mostly wrong. This far west and away from the coast, people monitored the weather with only mild interest. Most ignored evacuation notices and left surplus plywood and water jugs on store shelves. The most anyone would do was drag in some porch furniture to keep it from falling over into the bougainvillea.

If she pedaled home now, Nokomis would have to keep the books under her shirt. They might slip out and fall into a puddle, so the best thing, she figured, was just to wait it out. For all of its bluster, this was no hurricane. She knew the storm would only last

another five to ten minutes and then, dripping but otherwise still, would return the breezeless, cloudless world, as if nothing had ever happened.

Lettie, a neighbor's granddaughter who visited every summer, was the one who'd recommended the *Sweet Valley High* series. She was in sixth grade, two years ahead of Nokomis, and supposedly smart, but Nokomis knew that even though she was younger, she'd be able to handle the longer chapters and smaller print. Aveline had encouraged Nokomis's reading from a very early age; every night Nokomis had curled up next to her mother and listened to bedtime stories. By the time she was in kindergarten, she could read her on her own. Lettie hadn't been impressed, though. She'd seemed to think nothing of it, despite the fact that Nokomis purposefully laid a towel out on the lounge chair at the municipal center pool and squinted in the sun reading while the rest of the kids splashed each other in the shallow end. Finally, Nokomis had had to spell it out for her. *I'm not even supposed to be reading this.* When Lettie's expression didn't change, she said it as clearly as she could. *I'm advanced.* Still, Lettie had only seemed annoyed. *I didn't come here to sit!*

They'd been to the municipal center for a week straight, playing video games, buying flavored ices and Cokes, jumping off the diving board, but today Lettie wanted to stay home. As soon as she'd seen the purple, sinking clouds, she stuck her swimsuit back inside her drawer and turned on cartoons. There were only a few places around town where Nokomis was allowed to go, and the public library, only a few blocks away, was one of them.

Something was different about Aveline this summer. She was working like she always did, but she acted like she was living in a bubble, like she was on vacation in Aruba and not stuck here in Honey Springs, in the long stretch of dreary, mosquito-infested days. She'd begun spending more time in her bedroom, taking long naps before dinner and bubble baths before bed, taking extra glances at herself in the mirror. Nokomis had caught her smiling at herself in the sliding glass doors, whispering something under her breath and nodding her head as if there were someone standing in front of her and not just reflective glass. She'd stopped eating breakfast in the morning, instead choosing to spend the extra time on her hair, still leaving in a rush, complaining that there wasn't enough time.

Aveline didn't notice how thin the blue material of Nokomis's bathing suit was stretched, how little balls of worn fabric covered the seat where it'd scraped against the pool steps and walls or how her tank tops cut into her armpits and crept up her belly every time she moved. She didn't say anything about how long and tan Nokomis' legs looked in her short-shorts.

But she'd been shopping. Over the last month, she'd carried in bags from J.C. Penney's and Sears, quickly tucking them in the back of her closet. Nokomis had seen a couple of the items: a pair of heart-shaped earrings with a few links of tiny pink stones that hung to her mother's chin, a pair of high-heeled shoes with a strap that fit around the ankle and an open toe. When she tried to look for more, to find out if any of it was for her, she found the bedroom door locked.

The rain had slowed to the point that it slid calmly from the library's roof over the wall of windows in smooth streams, as if melting away. The sweet gum tree and entrance sign came back into focus. Nokomis used her back to open the double doors and, once outside, wiped as much water off of her bike as she could with some paper towels she'd stolen from the ladies' room.

By the time she turned down Abbot Road., her legs and feet were wet and muddy from all of the puddles she'd been forced to cross through, and the back of her shirt was damp with sweat. It was the middle of the afternoon on a Wednesday; everyone was still at work. With almost everyone in the neighborhood gone (empty, oil-ringed driveways, the dark windows, the silence and strange yellow light seeping through the clouds), it was easy for Nokomis to imagine that everyone had vanished, gone forever. They might've been stolen by aliens, or they might've disappeared into thin air to make room for a superior alternate universe. She might be the only little girl for miles around. She could slip into the deserted homes without worry, eat all of their ice cream, look through all of their dressers and closets, find out all of their secrets, find out what it was about them that cost them their homes, their lives, maybe, while she got to stay, riding her bicycle in the middle of the street, slicing through the slick asphalt.

But she wasn't alone. Ahead, a shiny black Buick was emerging from the side yard, like it'd been parked out back in the detached garage. Guests never parked back there; they always stayed in the driveway, came to the front door, rang the doorbell. Maybe someone had sensed the neighborhood's desolation the same way she had.

Maybe they'd decided to take advantage and had chosen her house to break into, to steal secrets from!

The Buick was straightened out now, facing Nokomis, but not yet moving. She couldn't make out anything through the haze and steaming street but a glimpse at a vague outline, as a cloud passed over the sun. As the car approached, she dragged her bike between her legs, pulling off to the side of the road, next to a gutter, where the water was pouring like a faucet, to give the car room to pass. Nothing about this car stood out from any other car she'd seen at her house. It was big as a boat, a four-door, clean, just like most of the cars the men her mother's church friends had set her up with drove. Inside the Buick could be any one of the balding, fat-fingered men who'd taken her mother out once or twice, "gentleman friends" who'd tried and failed to win her mother's affection. Usually, Nokomis was introduced to someone her mother was "spending time with" right away, but it'd been a long time since a man had come by.

As the car passed her, she noticed that the man inside was wearing a pair of sunglasses, and even though he drove slowly, like people were supposed to when kids were around, he hadn't waved or lifted a finger in acknowledgement the way everyone else in town did. It hadn't registered immediately, but she'd also noticed a hangtag and a whistle hanging from the rearview mirror. White background, black bird with a circle around it. The Ravens! Her school's mascot!

Without the whistle, she still wouldn't have known who was driving, but suddenly she was able to picture who it belonged to. She could clearly see the line of school buses parked in a semi-circle along the front entrance to the school, their tailpipes steaming

black smoke; the brick façade set back from the sidewalk and courtyard; her classmates hopping onto the curb, their backpacks drooping to the backs of their knees. And Mr. Barrish, the school principal, the man in the Buick who'd driven out of her yard, with his arms spread wide, directing the students west towards the cafeteria, blowing his whistle in shrill, quick clips.

Was she in some kind of trouble? Was the school closing because there'd been a fire or some other accident? Was she being kicked out because they were too full? Nokomis knew she wasn't a perfect student, but she sat in her assigned seat and answered questions if the teacher called on her. Sometimes she used her notebook paper for making fortune tellers when she was supposed to be doing independent work, but she'd never been sent to the principal's office or had a bad report sent home. She couldn't imagine that a little game was enough to warrant a home visit from the principal, and over the summer!

Nokomis wasn't the only one home. Aveline's car was in the garage, nosed right up to the marker (a tennis ball hanging from a string), the Honda's internal parts clicking tunelessly like it was winding down. Inside, she was darting in between rooms, emerging from each with another item—purse from the bedroom, empty glass from the living room, keys from the kitchen. Nokomis stood in the hallway for a full minute before she was noticed. *You're home! Well, my goodness!*

Nokomis explained about the weather, about Lettie not wanting to go to the pool, raising her voice as Aveline continued to pace between the bathroom and master bedroom, watching as her mother sprayed on more perfume and fluffed her hair with a

pick and extra hairspray. She held out the two *Sweet Valley High* books, but her mom didn't seem to be listening, even though she nodded, *uh-huh, uh-huh*. Nokomis was tired of watching her rush around, tired of her wet ponytail pulling hard on her scalp, tired of wearing shorts that pinched her sides and shirts that she had to tug down over her belly, tired of being ignored.

Stop being like this! It came out much louder than she'd expected. It was enough to make Aveline stop for a moment, drop her arms, let her fingertips rest on the countertop, and meet her daughter's eyes in the mirror. *I know, honey, I know.*

In the fall of Nokomis's fifth grade year, she came home from school to find her mother lying on her back on the couch, her knees bent, panting. It was the only other time, apart from that summer afternoon, that Aveline was home unexpectedly. The blinds that hung across the sliding glass door were closed against the steaming sun, the air-conditioner was blasting, yet Aveline was sweating. Her mouth was open, the skin around her nose was pinched, her eyes only opened partially before closing again, every crease in her forehead and around her nose, mouth, and eyes, was strained.

"Mom! Mommy, what's wrong?" Nokomis dropped to her knees.

Aveline nodded at the sound of her daughter's voice, but didn't answer until Nokomis asked the second time. "It's okay, honey. I need you to go outside and play. This is what we talked about, remember? Go down to the church. Or to the pool."

"Tell me what you need." Nokomis felt a prickling sensation all over. She was aware suddenly of everything around her and felt like she could get things under control;

she didn't need to leave. Aveline had told Nokomis that sometimes adults did things that children couldn't understand. That if something were to happen sometime soon that Nokomis didn't understand, she just needed to listen and do whatever was asked of her, even if she felt scared. But Aveline had been teaching her how to play Solitaire at the time, and Nokomis was too busy trying to figure out which pile to put her jack of spades in to listen.

Aveline swallowed and shook her head. "No. Anywhere, honey. Really." She sounded tired, impatient. "Do this for Mommy. Just go somewhere and don't come home until after dark." Before Nokomis could stand, Aveline squeezed her hand hard, enough to make her fingers cross, reared up, away from the couch cushions, and grunted through her teeth. "And get rid of the fucking dog."

Nokomis had never heard her mother curse before. Pepper had only been licking the underside of Aveline's arm. She was a rescue dog, Nokomis's tenth birthday present, and she was still a puppy who licked, jumped, and nibbled on fingers. Aveline pulled her arm away from the dog's mouth, but Pepper just nudged in closer until there wasn't any escape left. Still, Pepper did that kind of thing all the time, and Aveline had never even seemed to notice.

Nokomis grabbed hold of Pepper's collar and dragged her into the guest bathroom, slamming the door in the dog's face, barely missing (she hoped) the tip of the puppy's twitching black nose. Aveline was sitting up again, and Nokomis could see her face clearly from over the back of the couch. She looked as if she were choking, her skin flushing red, the cords of her neck, engorged. There was a whimpering sound, a

strangled, heart-breaking plea. For a moment, she thought the sound was coming from the couch.

When Aveline's lips parted, her whole face slackening, her body sinking back into the couch, out of sight, Nokomis took a moment to catch her own breath. Her mother didn't want her here. What was happening? The only answer that came readily to mind was death, though she knew it couldn't be. Her mother had told her that no matter what something looked like, it wouldn't be as bad as she thought and that if she just did everything Aveline asked, it would all turn out all right.

"Get out." Her mother's voice cut through the scratching at the bathroom door, the whorl of the air conditioner as it kicked on again.

Pepper was whining.

Her mother was talking, so she was definitely still breathing.

It felt like an emergency. Like the time that boy Tommy, in the second grade, had fallen from the monkey bars and broken his arm. He screamed and cried, but the teachers had known what to do. They took him inside, got him to a doctor, and when he came back to school the next week, everything was okay.

Now her mother was hurting. If she disobeyed her mom, what would happen to the past several months? Nokomis couldn't recall a time in her life that she and her mother had gotten along so well or had so much fun together. If she would knock on doors, find a neighbor to help, would those fun times retreat again? Would her mom withdraw? Nokomis didn't know what to do; adults knew how to handle these things.

Mommy. It'd been a long time since Nokomis had called her that, but these last few months, with Aveline staying at home more and more, inviting Nokomis to bake cookies and brownies on the weekends, the two of them, mother and daughter, staying up past nine o'clock on a school night playing Scrabble and Uno, teaching Nokomis how to do a garter stitch, it'd come out naturally. And Aveline didn't seem to mind. In fact, it was almost as if Aveline were making up for lost time, time she'd spent over the spring and summer either out late or alone in her bedroom. Nokomis wasn't sure what had caused the change, but she suspected that her mother just needed a reminder of how much fun they had together and, once she saw what she'd been missing, couldn't get enough.

There were other changes, too. Aveline stopped dressing up for work, instead trading in her new pumps and jewelry for baggy shirts and pants with elastic waists. *I'm in a smock and a mask for heaven's sake!* Even though she insisted she'd gained a few pounds and didn't want the embarrassment of having to go up a size, Nokomis preferred her mother's sloppy appearance because she seemed more playful, readily laughing off a spill or drying her hands on her shorts. When she was sick (*just a bug!*), Nokomis brought her wet washcloths to drape across her forehead. When she was sore, Nokomis massaged her back and feet. The look her mom gave her, the way her eyes softened, was enough to make Nokomis oblige again and again. *What would I do without you? Mommy's little helper!* She began to answer the phone and sometimes, depending on the look Aveline gave her, would make up lies, telling friends from church that her mother wasn't home. She could order pizza without her mom's help; she learned how to run the dishwasher and washing machine; she could dust and make beds; she had a nappy calico

scarf long enough to trail behind her like a wedding veil that she'd made all by herself. She was needed, valued, appreciated. And Nokomis was rewarded for it. The shy, orange-eyed puppy had been a nice reward, but even better was coming home every day to find the car already in the garage, the curtains pulled back, the bedroom doors opened, the radio on, and Aveline, humming along in the kitchen.

On the other side of the glass, trimmed and layered with fresh mulch, was her backyard. It was just like any other backyard in the neighborhood, she supposed, a wide-paneled statesman, sun-bleached fence, bordering a u-shaped row of hibiscus, gardenia, jasmine, and lantana; a lemon tree, squat as a sumo wrestler, its soft-bellied fruit rotting beneath its canopy; an expansive red umbrella shading a wrought-iron table and four chairs, with matching cushions elevated on a concrete slab closest to the house. Standing there, so close to the sliding glass door that her breath clouded up her view, Nokomis couldn't imagine why Aveline had suddenly decided the yard was off limits, forbidden. Even Pepper wasn't allowed out there to run or go to the bathroom. Instead, she had to let the puppy drag her down the street to a grassy area next to a retention pond and carry around plastic bags so she could pick up after the dog. Aveline's explanation was that the "bug man" had sprayed toxic chemicals all over the yard. But that was a week ago. Nokomis couldn't imagine that, after all the rain they'd had, there was any danger left.

It was hard to tell if she'd made the right decision when she left her mother alone, gasping on the couch, for so many hours. She'd gone first to the playground at the municipal center and sat on a bench watching kids younger than herself tearing through the sand lot, grabbing at the backs of shirts as they chased each other, until she'd had

enough of the mosquitoes biting and the squirrels jumping on the bench next to her. She stayed at the library, twirling racks of mysteries and romances, leafing through children's books with photographs of bats, lions, monkeys, and sharks in the wild, until the sun sank low enough in the sky to trigger the streetlights in the parking lot. When she came home, the house was dark, the washing machine was running, and Pepper was scratching at the bathroom door. Aveline was in her own bathroom, behind the closed door, taking a bath.

It wasn't that Aveline appeared to be angry; in fact, she latched on to her daughter even more, taking her along on every errand, even walking out to the mailbox and back with her, as if Nokomis's loyalty would disappear if she weren't watching. She seemed nervous lately, her laugh coming in shallow and always a little late whenever Nokomis recounted something silly or strange her teacher or one of her classmates said. Nokomis did her best to reassure her each time Aveline stopped listening or watching the television, instead turning to look at Nokomis, her eyes filling, to question her.

Something bad doesn't always have to happen, does it? I'm a good mother, right? You keep listening to me, okay? You do what I say. Although she was glad that the attention continued, Nokomis missed feeling responsible, grown-up.

She opened the door just a crack, let the soupy heat hit her full in the face, and the cicada's tremulous thrum fill her ears. Pepper seized the opportunity, jumping off the couch, squeezing between Nokomis's legs, using her body to push the door open and out of Nokomis's hands. Pepper did a victory lap around the yard, kicking up dirt behind her, racing just out of Nokomis's grasp, ignoring the calling and hand-clapping of her owner. She finally came to a stop at the very edge of the yard, farthest away from the

porch and Nokomis, and stood wagging her tail, taunting her, lunging away from her to another part of the yard each time she took a step towards her.

Only seconds had passed, but already Nokomis was sweating from the humidity and the fear of being caught. She ran back inside the house and rummaged through a cabinet where the dog food was kept until she was able to find a stale treat in the bottom of an otherwise empty bag to lure the dog inside with. But Pepper was digging a hole beneath the lemon tree, concentrating on a scent she'd picked up and could not be distracted. Nokomis was desperate to have the dog back inside, the door shut, and the both of them on the couch before her mom finished her shower. It didn't matter that there wasn't any real threat in the yard or that Aveline might be a little more sensitive than usual. What was important was to avoid the weight of disappointment, so she could continue to feel the comfort and security of a connection with her only parent.

She had to take action and fast. She grabbed hold of Pepper's collar and yanked the dog back away from the hole. The dog threw all of her weight into her front legs. Nokomis had to tug as hard as she could, even hanging from Pepper's collar, until she finally gave up, trotted back through the open door, and Nokomis fell. She grabbed a handful of dirt, but before she could pat it back into place, she caught a glimpse of something half buried, protruding from the ground. Something bruise-colored, not brown like the rotting lemons scattered around the tree trunk. She brushed some of the dirt away, uncovering a pinched little face, a bald, swollen head. At first she thought it must be some sort of old, battered doll, but when she slid her hand beneath it, the entire length of the body reaching just past her wrist, saw the bent legs, the arms curled into a sunken

chest, the hacked off, blood-crusted cord thick and tangled as a vine, packed mud where the mouth should have been, and felt the wrinkled, cloudy skin slough off into her hand. She let it fall, panicking as revulsion clawed its way up her throat, torched her cheeks. She threw mounds of loose soil until the sickening girl-doll was out of sight and ran back into the house, locking the door behind her.

There were paw prints on the carpet, a diagonal trail leading from the door where Nokomis stood to her mother's armchair where Pepper was curled up, eyebrows flickering, trying not to fall asleep. Aveline was looking at the tracked-in mess, too. She stood with her hands on her hips beneath the ceiling fan, a towel wrapped around her head, and did not look up at Nokomis. Instead, she looked from the floor to the backyard, scanning the lemon tree, the loose pile of dirt at the base of the trunk. She stared without blinking, just nodding her head, and then she swallowed as if her mouth had gone completely dry. *Just stay out of the yard, honey. That's all you have to do.* Nokomis kept still. She watched as Aveline tightened her bathrobe belt, inspected her toes, then turned around and walked back into her bedroom, closing the door softly behind her. Looking at the sliding glass door from an angle, she could see that the entire glass was filled with smears from dirty hands and Pepper's nose, so she pulled the blinds closed, twisting each vinyl shade tightly shut so that only the slightest sliver of sunlight made its way into the house, too blade-thin to even cast a shadow, and then she cleaned the carpet, each paw print disappearing miraculously into the vacuum cleaner without Nokomis even having to scrub.

A shovel and a flashlight, she thought, shouldn't be too hard to find in her mother's garage. Aveline had kept everything neat and tidy, and her garage was no exception. The floor looked as if it had been swept regularly. Aveline's car, still a Honda, but this one a red two-door, sat in the center of the space. Nokomis couldn't help but think that this wasn't the car of someone who had anything to hide. There was no clutter in the corners. A few tools, including a garden spade, were hung on pegs on the back wall. The spade would have to do. A thought flashed through her mind. *Was this what she used? The same one?* She tried to force the thought from her head and closed her hand around the smooth wooden handle. The flashlight would probably be in the little chest of drawers next to the door that led from the garage to the back yard, along with extra batteries, just in case.

The spade in her hand, Nokomis made her way over to retrieve the flashlight, but as she did, she looked out the window in the door. The moon appeared to be just short of full, an oblong silver disc in the night sky, and it provided plenty of light. A second glance around the perimeter of the yard, and she noticed the neighbors' houses that she could see. There weren't any neighbors with two-story houses; still she could see the tops of a few windows over the fence. On second thought, Nokomis decided the moon would be enough light to work by. She wouldn't want to draw any extra attention from the neighbors by accidentally shining a light into one of their bedrooms.

Nokomis opened the door and stepped into the back yard for the first time in twenty years. The air felt warm and heavy, lying across her shoulders like a blanket. The lemon tree stood in the same spot it always had, although it looked bigger now. Her

mother had kept up with the yard, grass cut, everything manicured. Nokomis knew that her mother wasn't out here herself, pushing a mower or trimming trees, and she felt her face flush at Aveline's audacity. Why would she allow strangers, or worse yet, some neighbor kid, into her yard? A moment later, she calmed herself. Was it really that daring of her mother? Pepper had died years ago, and she had never gotten another dog to root around out here. Nokomis knew that Aveline would never have given anyone reason to dig any holes. It probably just looked normal to everyone else. The middle-aged woman living alone, needing her yard mowed. Nevertheless, Nokomis felt gooseflesh rise on her arms when she thought of some random kid running a mower over a grave he never knew was there.

She had been purposely avoiding thinking about the grave until now. Her task had been an abstract construct in her mind. Dig a hole. Take care of a problem. As she stepped forward toward the tree, however, a more concrete reality took hold. What was she doing? After years of silence, she was planning to unearth the bones of her sister. Sister. The thought sped her pulse, made her vision swim for a moment. Through all these years, she'd focused her feelings on her mother, building a resentment over the secret her mother had forced her to carry, and finally, building a wall around the resentment that allowed her to maintain a relationship with the only family member she'd ever really known.

Nokomis knelt at the spot under the lemon tree that she remembered. She tried to steel herself against the memories that kept coming. The discolored skin, shiny and

bloated. The way it shed at the gentlest touch. The mouth, toothless and open, full of dirt. She focused these thoughts and reformed them into anger at her mother.

She struck at the ground, tearing it open. Her sister would not be hidden any longer. She stabbed deeper. Roots popped under the spade. She would find the bones, put them in the urn with Aveline. Then everything would be out. “No more,” Nokomis heard herself say as she went deeper. Where were the bones? She had dug down right where she remembered. She couldn’t have misjudged the spot. She had looked out at it every day before she went off to college.

Nokomis tossed the spade aside. She plunged her hands into the hole she had opened, felt the dirt crowd under her fingernails. She scraped and widened the hole with her hands, feeling for anything that felt different, but everything was dirt, roots, twigs. Nothing else. As if the earth had swallowed up her sister, as if she were never really there. Nokomis knew better. She had seen with her own eyes, held her sister in her hands before covering her again in a betrayal she had never forgiven herself for. *She a wife, but not a mother.* She thrust her hands again into the hole, and pulled out fistfuls of dirt. Without thinking at all, she opened her mouth and shoved in the contents of her right hand.

She resisted the urge to choke, to spit out the mouthful of dirt, at once gritty and yielding between her teeth, filling the space between her tongue and the back of her throat. Nokomis swallowed. She felt a heavy clod slide down her throat and forced herself to swallow again and again and again until her mouth was empty, until she felt satisfied and full, until she no longer had to dig.