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Teeth and Other Tales

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TEETH AND OTHER TALES

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in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Alexandra Handwerger

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To: Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Alexandra Handwerger, and entitled Teeth and Other Tales, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

_____
Debra Dean

_____
Bruce Harvey

_____
John Dufresne, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 6, 2012

The thesis of Alexandra Handwerger is approved.

_____
Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

_____
Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2012

DEDICATION

To my mother for emboldening me to enter the creative writing program and pushing me to finish. I could not have done this without the countless hours you spent caring for my children so that I could write. Thank you for your strength, sacrifice and persistent encouragement.

To my father: you helped me at the most paramount time, lending your sharp, critical eye and your vast knowledge of literature. Thank you for impelling me to strive for the best.

To my children, Jakie, Ben and Shaya for helping me put things in perspective and making me laugh every day.

And finally, to my husband: thank you for always believing in me. Your dedication, drive and creativity are inspirational. This would not be possible without your constant support, patience, and most of all love.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

TEETH AND OTHER TALES

By

Alexandra Handwerger

Florida International University, 2012

Miami, Florida

Professor John Dufresne, Major Professor

TEETH AND OTHER TALES is a novella and a collection of short stories that explore the blurry lines between illusion and reality.

Teeth, the novella, is narrated backward in time, chronicling the life of Lucy from the age of sixty-five back to seventeen. After years of surviving an oppressive marriage, Lucy escapes her husband, but in doing so abandons her three children. In order to rationalize her decisions, Lucy uses selective memory to create her own reality to the extent that she comes to believe her own delusions.

The four short stories in the collection feature protagonists who create their own personal myths and struggle to protect their distorted truths, with mixed results. These struggles between the "real," as conventionally defined, and personal fictions are complicated by elements of magical realism and surrealism. The stories were influenced by the short fiction of Nikolai Gogol, Franz Kafka and Haruki Murakami.

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In Vivo Veritas

As his foot descended, Michael Saltonstall noticed that a small square on the sidewalk lit up just before the sole of his wing-tipped oxford touched down. This very spot on Lexington Avenue where he set his foot had been heavy with the pedestrian traffic typical of 5:42 p.m. on a Thursday evening. Shined and shabby shoes scuffed over it, cigarette ashes rained down upon it, mushrooms from Sbarro's Pizza dropped onto it. Yet it swallowed only Michael.

Before he could process the image and alter his step, Michael felt himself drop. He experienced a floating sensation, as if he were levitating. Whirling strobe lights blurred his vision and an eerie silence bloomed. A voice emerged from the quiet, at first softly and then booming with an exaggerated inflection that reminded him of his fifth grade Latin teacher, Mr. Henry. The voice catalogued his life—his measly accomplishments, his failures, his lies and revelations—a sort of a judgment day without the convenience of death.

When her husband failed to appear at his usual time, Harriet Saltonstall at first imagined some mechanical breakdown on the Metro North railway line, but as the night wore on her thoughts turned to muggings, abductions and terrorist attacks. At midnight she called the police and filed a missing person's report, explaining that something terrible must have happened to her usually predictable husband during his evening commute between Manhattan and Scarsdale. This was far from the truth.

Rather, Michael had simply vanished from the world as he knew it, without a soul taking notice. Just as quickly as he had disappeared, he found himself back again on

Lexington Avenue in the dark, an empty sidewalk at three a.m., cabs and delivery trucks streaming by.

Michael basically realized that life as he knew it sucked balls. That's how the voice in the shaft had said it. Just like that: *Your life sucks big time, it sucks balls*. Everything you've ever done that you're proud of is total bullshit, the voice told Michael. Except for providing the sperm that created your son—that's definitely something to be proud of, but let's be honest here, all you did was ejaculate, and when it came to raising him the only good thing you ever did was get him into Dartmouth. The voice was a little hostile, Michael found. But, he figured, it had to be to wake him up, so to speak.

Was his life that bad? Michael had entered the mysterious shaft thinking he was one of life's titans, or at least one of its respectable good guys. His life was fine, thank you very much, perhaps not a stupendous monument to the art of living, but he did no harm, he did nothing to muss the world up. He was a loyal worker at the law firm of Pennington, Endicott & Fairchild, faithful (well, mostly!) husband to Harriet, father to Drew, member of the Scarsdale Golf Club, and vice president of the Compassionate Council to Curb Gophers because those gophers, while cute, were so darned pesky, devouring gardens, digging tunnels through yards and pooping on lawns.

Okay, so he hadn't found the cure for cancer, but every once in a while he performed a random act of kindness. Why, just this past week he'd granted his driver another five days of vacation—a kind act, a benevolent deed. Though he had to admit to himself, his motive was partly selfish. The longer his driver was out, the more time Michael had to ride the train to and from work. His colleagues and neighbors abhorred the dirty, screeching contraption that hauled the masses to and from their pedestrian jobs.

His wife despised the close-up mingling of the multitudes and did everything she could to avoid the train on her periodic forays into the city. Michael wouldn't admit it to anyone at the firm, and especially not to Harriet, but he secretly enjoyed the train.

He enjoyed the stale, leathery smell, the uniformed ticket takers with their little beige caps, the other passengers in suits scrambling for seats, opening the paper, sipping their coffees, the women in stockings and heels, crossing their legs and rummaging through their purses for lipstick. It was a brotherly and sisterly gathering of fellow commuters, everyone moving forward down the tracks to enter the city, make money, return home and do it again. A gathering of compatriots whom he didn't have to charm or impress. He could just sit and observe.

And all the different towns! Michael knew the tall majestic oak trees of his Scarsdale neighborhood, flocks of them lining the streets, the colonial homes, the quaint Tudor style village center with its strict zoning laws. And he knew the high, dark towers of Manhattan, its concrete, its bustling eateries and dimly lit bars, the way the buildings touched the clouds. But here on the train he caught a glimpse of other worlds— a stucco, red-shuttered building at the Pelham stop featured an overflowing trash can and a lone skateboarder looping the ramp. In Mamaroneck, past the station he could see Sal's Diner encased completely in silver and shaped like a submarine. At Mount Vernon, below the raised tracks, a bodega with a line of customers around the corner, people coming out holding tiny paper cups of espresso.

In the evenings he had taken to buying a beer in a bag at the convenience store just outside the station. Surreptitiously, he'd sip it on the way home, as he had seen his fellow commuters do, making it last until the train slowed into Scarsdale. At first he felt

guilty about drinking in such an uncouth manner, but soon he learned to relax and take in the scenery. If he sat on the left he could watch the sun's rosy glow descend through the mining yards. On the right, he'd watch the dying light glimmer off the windows of the station houses, passengers disembarking fluidly.

Tonight, though, after spending half the night involuntarily encased in a beam of light beneath the city, Michael had missed the last train until the morning. Entering Grand Central Station, he weaved his way upstream through the head-down flood of early risers and boarded the train for his reverse commute home. When he finally returned, Harriet leapt up from her vigil in the double-wide arm chair and practically jumped on top of him, terrier-like. Michael couldn't help but smile. His hair stood at attention as if he had been electrocuted. Two shirt buttons were missing. The bottom half of his tie was singed. And here was his wife, actually happy to see him.

"Where were you?" she yelled out, squeezing him, then pulling away and holding his hands. She seemed concerned, but a little suspicious.

"I had an accident."

A bit dazed, he looked over her shoulder into their home. Beyond their foyer with the Oriental rug, antique umbrella stand and glittering mirror, he could see the tan granite of the kitchen, its sleek cabinets and steely Subzero fridge. To his left the formal dining room with the brick-red walls and mahogany table. And he found himself wondering what the hell his wife did here all day alone, and if she were even lonelier now that their son had gone off to college.

"I think I was struck by lightning," said Michael.

"What?" Harriet dropped his hands suddenly as if she too had been shocked.

Michael knew he had not, in fact, been struck by lightning. There had been no rain, thunder or meteorological phenomenon that day. He had been swallowed by a sidewalk and lectured by a disembodied voice. He could not even attempt an explanation.

"I'm fine now. I was just slightly shocked. I think I passed out in an alley for the night."

"An alley?" She pulled Michael toward her and rubbed his head. "My poor baby," she cooed. "You smell like an ashtray."

He couldn't remember the last time she had held him so tightly. Perhaps the time in Aspen when she thought she saw a bear outside the cabin.

"I'm going to make you some tea," she said running into the kitchen. It was her cure for everything. Not in a maternal way, more as an evasion, so she didn't have to deal.

Michael was left standing in the hallway, his seared briefcase still in hand. As usual the briefcase was empty. Michael just carried it back and forth to work for show. Sometimes he would put the newspaper in it, but rarely did it carry anything of significance. He flung the briefcase across the room. It hit the wall with a loud thud. "That feels good," he said. He wondered if a new Michael would now emerge. A Michael bold in action and thought. A Michael to shock and inspire those who knew him. A Michael who threw his briefcase against the wall, damn it!

Just as he was starting to enjoy this notion, a hot blast of blood rushed to his head, flushing his face and wobbling his knees. A flash of a headache pulsed through his head. Steadying himself against the wall, he caught sight of his reflection in the hall mirror. A middle-aged man with the look of a steady drinker and over-indulger of gourmet food

stared back. The face was splotched with red, the eyes puffy, the hair graying and the gut protruding. He turned and faced the image. “Ouch!” he said. “You’re looking quite weathered, my friend.” His equilibrium returned and he smiled in appreciation of this new-found capacity to talk back to himself. An unfamiliar sense of exhilaration mushroomed from within, a slapdash freedom that had eluded him for most of his adult life. And he knew then that a move even bolder than lobbing his briefcase against the wall was now necessary. The voice must be appreciated. He had to repair things with his son.

Drew was a sophomore at Michael’s alma mater, Dartmouth, and seemed confused about what he wanted to do with his life. First he was pre-law, then political science, then pre-law again. Lately he was taking theatre classes, trying out for plays, hanging with a dicey crowd, Michael imagined. He really had no clue what Drew was up to, since any and all information came filtered through Harriet, un unreliable cipher at best. Drew and Michael were hardly speaking, due to the fact that each one found the other to be a complete enigma. As soon as Drew left for college it seemed an apt excuse for two people with nothing in common to conveniently avoid one another. When they needed to communicate they texted. Michael decided it was time to move beyond texts. It was time for some face-to-face interaction.

Michael called in sick, collapsed into bed, and woke a few hours later at eleven a.m., ready to drive to Dartmouth to see his son. Before leaving, he hurried outside to the tall lush elm tree in the center of their square patch of lawn, its bushy plume of leaves like a bad wig. He climbed the ladder leading to the tree house he had built over a dozen years ago with his son. He stuck his head up through the hole in the floor and took in the

musty smell of rotting wood and listened to the chirping of the birds nestled into the branches above. Long ago, he had fastened a fancy coat of arms inside the doorway. Now faded, it hung loosely from a rusted nail. Michael pried it off with his hands, tucked it under one arm, and descended the ladder. He would take this to Drew as an emblem of their first and last good time together.

Drew had been eight when he and Michael spent the summer building the tree house together. The elm tree featured two thick limbs that sprouted in opposite directions from a singular trunk—a distinction, Michael said, that made it perfect for a tree house. Michael ordered a do-it-yourself kit from Oregon and called on the basic carpentry skills his own father had taught him, but that he had rarely used once he left home. Drew and Michael worked together under the shade of the elm, hammering planks and boards together until they formed a single, sturdy platform which they secured between the two diverging limbs. Then, they framed the four wall sections, carving out square windows on each side, and topped it off with sheets of plywood for a roof. Wood slats nailed to the trunk served as a ladder.

Michael relished the thudding echo of their hammers, the masculine duet, and the way Drew's eyes lit up when Michael said, "Let's get to work, Buddy." His tightly coiled, brooding son had come to life. The sweat dripping down Drew's freckled face, the sun glinting off the gleaming hardware making him squint, the breeze fluttering the cowlick in the back of his head—all such delightful sights for Michael to behold. And then, after four weeks of sweat and muscle, Michael and Drew looked upon the product of all their work. The quaint wooden structure they had built was nestled so snugly in the elm that it looked like it was a part of the tree. A bounty of branches shot up over their

fortress, holding the massive green cloud of leaves. It looked fit to grace the cover of a children's storybook, thought Michael. He and Drew looked at one another with a tacit understanding. Creating this tree house together had linked them in an everlasting way.

To finish it off, Michael ordered a coat of arms from England and nailed it to the inside of the tree house. A wooden plaque in the shape of a shield, it featured three gold leaf fleur-de-lis surrounding a rearing lion on a field of crimson and blue, and the Latin phrase, *In Vivo Veritas*, written in gold script. Meaning *In Life There is Truth*, it was the teetotaler's version of the original Latin expression, *In Vino Veritas—In Wine There is Truth*, though Michael was no teetotaler, that was for sure. The Latin words became their secret password to gain entry into the fort. *In Vivo Veritas*, they would whisper as they reached the top of the ladder and poked their heads through the hole. Only they were allowed into the secret fortress that they had made with their own hands. *In Vivo Veritas*, Michael found himself uttering throughout the day at work and as he hurried home, eager to join his son in their private perch, nine feet above the ground.

They spent the remaining weeks of the summer sitting Indian style in the tree house, sipping lemonade in the evenings and engaging in games of Go Fish and War. Drew gradually opened up to Michael, revealing that he was lonely at school, sending Michael's heart into a morass of frustration and sorrow. He didn't know what to tell his son, but he resolved to do whatever it took to make sure Drew found friends once school started again in the fall. Yet, just as September rolled around, Michael was promoted and given new duties that required longer hours at work. Their time together diminished and then faded to nothing. Neglected, the tree house first filled with fallen leaves, then was

covered in snow, and eventually thawed into a home for squirrels and birds. *In Vivo Veritas.*

Michael glanced at the forgotten shield on the seat as he drove up to Dartmouth. The crest was dull and faded, the blue and red paint rubbed thin by time and the elements, but the gold leaf of the fleur-de-lis and the Latin inscription still sparkled in the sun, reflecting light in uneven patterns. He kept thinking of that magical time with Drew and the months and years that followed as the shine of their time together steadily wore off. He'd held so tight to the memories, but after more than a decade of massaging and caressing and manipulating them, he now wondered if any of them were real.

He hoped, at least, that Drew would appreciate this souvenir of their time together. But as soon as he reached campus and spied the expansive green of Dartmouth, he worried that Drew might laugh it off. He decided to leave the coat of arms in the car, to perhaps mention it to Drew. And as he made his way across the quad, he thought maybe they should do this by phone, this reunion thing. Maybe he could call Drew and plan to talk to him when he returned home for Thanksgiving. That would at least give him some time to figure out what to say.

He turned around and started back to the car, admiring the autumn trees surrounding the green like torches, taking in the crisp air, the smell of gravel and leaves and fresh paper. Students played Frisbee and lounged on the grass. The only sound of machinery, among the birds and voices and patches of silence, was the soothing hum of a distant lawn mower. He saw the library with its red brick bell tower and green copper weathervane extending from the roof, remembering the time that he and his fraternity brothers, the virtual rulers of the school, had attached a pledge to the end of the

weathervane by his belt loops and left him hanging for three hours. Drew, he imagined, would not be such a prankster, but Michael hoped he would be able to enjoy a party or two, perhaps flirt with a cute, argyle-sweatered female as he pumped her full of keg beer.

He saw his car glowing like a beacon in the distance, pulled the keys out of his pocket, and then—the oddest occurrence! The path spontaneously spidered out in different directions, sprouting new appendages. Michael felt his knees quiver as a sharp pain pulsed through his head. His palms and forehead went clammy and his stomach queasy as he struggled to suck in deep breaths and calm himself. *What is happening?* And then the bright lights flashed furiously, like he was standing too close to a passing train that roared and strobed past him, until all other sound and thought was obliterated.

When his consciousness resurfaced, he found himself slumped in the driver's seat of his car, the lowering October sun slanting into his eyes. He was strangely calm, even refreshed. All he could remember of this peculiar dip into an alternate universe, or whatever it was, was Mr. Henry's demanding voice instructing him, *Stop being such a coward, Michael. Either man up, or give up!* The coat of arms caught his eye, black and green freckles of mold crawling across its surface, the tiny flecks of red and blue paint that still survived. Well, hell, he'd made the drive. "If there's truth in life, let's go check it out, shall we?" Michael said to the coat of arms, tucking it under his arm and heading back across the campus.

He made it safely to Drew's dorm, Judge Hall, a brick Georgian structure with green shutters, not unlike Michael's own house. He entered through a side door propped open by a pile of books, and navigated his way through the carpeted halls, past open doors blasting rap, laughter, the tapping of keyboards (Face-booking or Twittering,

surmised Michael), until he found his son's room, the door open a crack. Without knocking he pushed it open.

Well, there Drew was, looking the same as he had when he left for school, perched on his bed Indian style, dressed only in his underwear and a sweater, sandy hair a bit shaggy, the same as always except he had a glow about him, a flush like he had just come in from the cold. Drew looked at his dad and pursed his lips. A sort of paralysis, it seemed, had taken over. Michael figured if his son had been doing anything clandestine like masturbating or having sex or firing up a bong, he would have locked the door.

"Dad?" Drew cocked his head to the right. Michael stood in the hall, waiting for an invitation to enter.

"I was in the neighborhood on business," he said. "Thought I'd pop in for a visit."

"Uhhh." Again, the paralysis.

Michael stepped into the threshold and was able to take a closer gander at his son's sweater. The base of the sweater seemed appropriate enough—a thick burgundy shaker knit, a warm and cozy cover for those cold New Hampshire nights. But adorning the sweater's surface, the strangest thing—multi-colored strips of leather in long squiggle shapes—all over the sweater! It looked like an explosion from a leather factory. It could have been considered a designer piece in a small Slovakian town. The sweater was clearly a cry for help.

"What are you wearing?" he asked Drew, pointing to the atrocity.

"It belongs to Lars."

"Who's Lars?"

A toilet flushed. From the bathroom emerged a tall, red-cheeked blonde male wearing jeans and no shirt. His hair was long in the front, swooping down in a "V" over one eye, and closely cropped in the back. Michael could definitely see this guy wearing the sweater.

"Hello," said Michael sticking out his hand. "I'm Drew's dad. You can call me Michael, or 'Drew's Dad.' Whatever's easier."

Lars gave him a cold fish handshake. His hand was so limp, Michael felt like he was cupping a dead tadpole. Plus it was sweaty or wet; he couldn't tell which. It definitely ranked up there with the one of the worst handshakes Michael had experienced in his lifetime.

"Yes," Lars said in an accent so thick, it sounded fake. "So nice to meet you, Drew's Dad."

Michael stood still in the threshold of the door.

"Lars is …..," and here Drew gulped, "a friend."

What was with his son's strange behavior and even stranger apparel? Was Lars a coke dealer? No, he looked more like a hashish dealer. Was his son doing exotic European drugs?

"Where are you from, Lars?"

"Dartmouth."

"Oh, nooo." Michael laughed. Laughter was always best in these situations. "I mean what country? I'm detecting an accent there."

"Finland."

"Ahhh." As if everything suddenly made sense. But it didn't. None of it.

“Dad, let’s go grab some lunch. I'll show you around.” Drew reached under his bed, grabbed a pair of jeans and pulled them on.

“No, I’ll show you around, son. Remember, I used to own this place, buddy.”

“Oh, yeah. Big Man on Campus, huh?”

“Now it’s up to you to follow in my footsteps,” Michael said, winking at Lars, trying to let him in on his sharp, sarcastic humor.

“Drew’s Dad is so funny,” he imagined Lars saying through rings of smoke, sharing a cigarette with some other students in the dorm, wearing the leather sweater, of course. But Lars just raised his shoulder in an indifferent shrug. He turned away from Michael and began rummaging through Drew’s bureau.

“Would you like to join us for lunch, Lars? My treat.” It seemed paramount to keep him from leaving the room before gathering more information. Lars pulled a fitted yellow shirt over his toned chest.

“I have to study.” He delivered a sideways glance toward Drew who kept his head down. Lars picked up a leather satchel from the floor, slung it over his shoulder and stepped toward the doorway. Michael didn’t move from the door.

“Perhaps the Big Man on Campus can step aside and make room.”

Lars reeked of smoke. The smell had apparently embedded itself in his body and was now leaking out, invading Michael’s nostrils.

“Perhaps the young Finnish gentleman could move aside and let me in the room.”

Lars squared his stance and locked his eyes with Michael’s. “Perhaps, you should wait for the owner of the room to invite you in.”

Michael looked over Lars's broad shoulders into the room to see his son, frozen in the corner with a petrified look in his eyes. "Well, then, I invite myself. I own the room. Owner is the one who pays for it. Ya?"

Lars shifted his balance. He slowly removed the satchel from his shoulder and placed it gently on the floor. "'Ya', is Swedish," he said. "Not Finnish." He expanded his chest and inched closer to Michael.

Michael resisted the urge to clock Lars with the wooden shield, which still remained neatly tucked under his arm. He reminded himself he was here to make amends with Drew, not to stir up a confrontation. He mustered up his best forced smile.

"Just kidding, Lars." He gave him a hearty pat on the arm, then stepped out of the way.

Lars's face remained stoic, as he regarded Michael for several seconds in silence. He shrugged with one shoulder, picked up his bag and walked out. *Stay away from my son*, Michael wanted to scream at him as he sauntered down the hall.

Michael turned back to face Drew. A strange silence gripped the room, as Drew took a long moment to stare at the carpet. Michael stepped through the door and upon closer examination, saw that Drew looked quite different from when he had last seen him two months ago. The same light smattering of freckles anointed his thin nose. The same pale blue, lucid eyes stared back at him. But his normally pinched face looked like it had opened up somehow, like a lotus. And Michael spied a meager patch of stubble gathered at the point of Drew's chin.

"I'm glad you have a friend," Michael said, not knowing really what to say.

“What's that supposed to mean?” said Drew, thrusting out his chin like a pointer finger.

“I’m just glad you’re not alone.” Michael noticed a pack of Marlboro Reds sticking out of the pocket of Drew’s pants.

“What’s that?” Drew pointed to the shield tucked under Michael’s arm.

“Oh, this? Well . . . Ta-da!” He held it up in front of Drew. "*In Vivo Veritas*!"

“What is it?”

“A relic from the past. See?” he handed it to Drew.

“Is this something I made in kindergarten?” asked Drew scrutinizing the shield.

“It’s our coat of arms. Don’t you recognize it?”

“Since when do we have a coat of arms?”

Michael let out a snort of laughter. “Remember? From our tree house.”

“Tree house?”

“The one we built together. We put up this coat of arms in it.” He pointed to the insignia. “*In Vivo Veritas*. It was our password, remember?”

Now it was Drew’s turn to laugh. “That is so cheesy! I remember some old tree house in the back yard. That’s about it.”

“Do you remember building it together? And spending time in it?”

“Did we actually build it? Maybe we spent about a minute in there and that was it. I considered it one of those things you buy a spoiled child. They love it for a day and then it just sits there.”

“We never spoiled you. You weren’t spoiled.”

“Wasn’t I?” Drew raised his shoulders in a dramatic shrug.

This was not going the way Michael had imagined. He took the coat of arms back from Drew and looked studiously at it, thinking hard about what to say next.

"Why did you pop by, anyway, Dad?" Drew made quotation marks with his fingers when he said the word "pop." "Since when do you have business in New Hampshire?"

"Caught!" Michael proclaimed, throwing up his arms. "Truth is, Drew, I just wanted to see you."

"Oh, really?" said Drew, his face starting to redden. "All of a sudden, you want to see me? You're checking up on me, aren't you? I guess Mom told you that I switched my major to theatre."

"You're majoring in it now? You can do a whole lot more with pre-law, I promise you, than you can with theater. You never liked theater, anyway."

"You just don't know me," Drew emitted another shrug. Michael hoped he had not picked up this gesture from Lars, though it had a very Larsian insouciance to it. "I'm not the country club, madras pants-wearing, future wall street raider you always wanted me to be. And now that I'm at college, I can finally take off my invisibility cloak."

"Your invisibility cloak?"

"Remember how Mom and I read all the Harry Potter's together? Harry had a cloak that made him invisible when he put it on. That's what I had to wear around you. When I was visible, you didn't seem to like what you saw, and you forced me to do things I didn't want to do, like golf, The Vincents, and Future Business Leaders of America. It was much easier wearing the cloak. And now that I'm at college, I'm free."

“Drew, I never wanted you to be anyone but yourself.” Was this true? Michael looked down at the shield. *In Vivos Veritas*. Perhaps it wasn’t. Perhaps he’d only wanted his son to be another version of himself.

“That’s bullshit,” said Drew, calling him on it. “What the hell brought this on, anyway? This visit.” Again with the finger quotes, around “visit” this time. His son had become a champion finger quoter.

“What if I told you, funny things have been happening to me.”

“Funny, ha ha, or funny weird?”

“Weird. What if I told you, I fell down a hole, entered some giant shaft of light and realized some things. Like, yeah, my life looks good on paper, but that’s just paper. What would you say to that?” It felt good to unload this, even if he knew he wasn't making sense. Drew just looked back at him with a puzzled expression.

“I’d say it’s about time," Drew finally managed. "But maybe it’s too late.”

Just then Lars sauntered back into the room. “I left a book,” he said, lifting the comforter off Drew’s bed and feeling around under the sheets. “Sorry to interrupt this nice Drew-and-Drew's Dad moment.” The lilt in his voice gave off an angry irony.

“It’s fine,” said Michael, trying to control the prickly indignation riding up his spine.

Lars recovered the book and walked out into the hall, delivering a sly smile to Michael out of Drew’s view. It was a victorious smile, a triumphant smile as if Lars had just beaten Michael in some sort of contest. Michael followed Lars out into the hallway.

“Is there something you want to say to me?” he said softly, shoving his face up close to Lars’s.

Lars produced a patented shrug in answer. Michael seized him by the shirt with his right hand and pinned him against the wall with the full weight of his arm up across his throat. He held tightly to the coat of arms with his other hand.

"Get your claws off me, old man." Lars tilted his head and shot out an efficient ball of saliva on the floor beside Michael's shoes.

"Stay away from my son, you Eastern Bloc thug," said Michael.

"I'm Finnish, you idiot. And besides, I'm the best friend your son has. You, certainly, are no friend to him at all."

Michael felt a lightning bolt of pain strike his head.

"What do you mean?" he put his hand across his forehead as if that would stop the terrible throb.

"Drew tells me things I'm sure he doesn't share with you."

"Like what?"

Michael felt his body involuntarily begin to shake as the intensity of the light turned everything white. The shield clattered to the ground. He lurched forward, stumbling into Lars and pushing him against the wall.

"Get off!" shouted Lars. He fastened his hands beneath Michael's armpits and shoved.

Michael tried to take a step backward to regain his balance, but his legs betrayed him, fluttering to the ground like they were noodles, his whole body collapsing. He lay on the ground, his torso and head locked still while his arms jerked back and forth in sync with his shuddering, jolting legs. Michael stared at his uncooperative body in shock and resignation to the unseen forces yanking at his twitching limbs, like a demonic

marionette. "What the hell are you doing?" Michael tried to yell at his legs. And he wanted to call out to Drew for help, but his tongue was unresponsive, rolling around in his mouth worthlessly, in cahoots with his legs and arms. He heard Drew's voice shouting, "Dad!" He started to spin in a counter-clock-wise direction, his ears ringing and his vision blurring. He could just catch a glimpse of the barely visible words on the coat of arms beside him on the floor, flashing like a strobe light before his eyes slammed shut and everything went dark.

The intense white light eased away to a more mellow gray as Michael wallowed in the space between consciousness and dreaming. Hazy images wandered in and out of his mind—a man in white lifting him onto a stretcher; red flashing lights; a lamp blaring down on him; subdued voices and whisperings. His son and wife watching him from chairs, their faces sapped like they'd been rubbed with an eraser. A paper cup of pills tipped into his mouth; the pink sun rising through the slats of a blind.

He remembered the strange sensation of motion without his moving—the beige leather of his car's back seats; Drew's sandy blonde hair, the cowlick sprouting up like a fountain from the front seat; ribbons of smoke curling behind him. Strips of forest, a train track streaming alongside the trees; white clapboard homes lined with rounded hedges floating above radiant green grass.

The bright sunlight poured through the window and smacked him in the face, jarring him to full consciousness. He didn't know whether it was morning or afternoon, but after feeling he'd been away for a long time, he was now in his own pajamas, in his own home, in his own bed. He sat up. The headache returned for a moment and then

stopped suddenly like it had changed its mind. How many days had passed since he'd last been conscious? Michael had not been through such a series of changes since he'd hit puberty so many decades ago. Like that, this experience felt frightening, but strangely thrilling, like receiving a beautifully wrapped present from a stranger.

He caught a whiff of cigarette smoke and got up to look out the open window. A curl of smoke unfurled from the tree house. Through the window he could see Drew's freckled nose, his pale fingers ashing the cigarette outside and onto the lawn below. Michael rubbed his eyes, slid on his slippers and grabbed the shield from the dresser. He went outside, shuffling across the yard to the base of the old elm. Looking up, he took in the blue of the sky and the white of the clouds. He heard the birds and the rustling of the breeze in the trees and the hum of the planets. He wasn't sure if this were real or not. He placed a slippered foot on the first rung of the ladder and pulled himself up, whispering the secret password as he climbed.

Girl Scouts

When I first moved to Andover, Massachusetts, I immediately began setting up my territory. As I had done in Topeka, Calusa and Kissimmee, I put on my Girl Scout uniform and walked door-to-door pretending to sell cookies.

"Isn't cookie season in the fall?" my first neighbor asked. It was the middle of June. She wore a short, white tennis skirt and a white visor. She tinkled the ice in her glass. It had to be a gin and tonic. I could tell by the clear fizzy liquid and the slice of lime.

"We're making the rounds twice a year now," I said. Behind her was a gleaming white marble floor with a tiny table in the middle holding a vase of pussy willows the size of a car. "The Girl Scouts really need the money."

She signed up for Thin Mints, of course, but then she threw me a curve ball.

"Oh, and that Dulce de Leche one."

I scanned the order form and failed to find the Dulce de Leche. The order form, like the uniform, was stolen two years ago from a Girl Scout in my former neighborhood of Bilboa, Louisiana. She must have been a model citizen because the green sash draped across my chest was covered with a ton of colorful merit badges and pins. Under the sash I wore a white collared shirt and a green pleated skirt.

"Will that be one box or two?" I said turning the form over to look for those Dulces de Leche. Apparently, the Girls Scouts had invented new cookies. They were a resourceful bunch, those Scouts.

"Oh, make it three, doll."

She disappeared behind the open door and came back with a purse.

I pretended to check off an imaginary box on the order form and put out my hand. "That's thirty dollars, please."

By the time she realized her divine de Leches weren't coming, I'd be in another town, in another state. Dad's job as a house-flipper meant we didn't stay anywhere longer than six months. I said goodbye to the mom and continued through the neighborhood. Thick, tall oak trees lined the street, their green plumes melding, forming a protective umbrella over the sidewalk. They were pretty, but made me miss the weeping willows in our last neighborhood of Savannah. There, Dad had restored a southern row house in six months and sold it for twice as much as he'd paid. Mom used to call him "Jesus-and-then-some" because he was a carpenter, a plumber and an electrician, all-in-one. The thought of the weeping willows made me miss Mom because I know she would've loved them. But I'd see her soon enough. Unbeknownst to my Dad, I was saving up for a bus ticket for Mom to come visit.

After successfully hitting a few other homes, I headed straight for the most beaten down house on the block—actually, the only beaten down house among all these pristine colonials and bright green lawns. This lawn was brown and yellow with a sagging front porch that looked on the verge of collapse. The house was a chocolaty brown with black shutters on the downstairs windows and none on the uppers, making them look naked. Sunflowers at least five feet tall sprouted in a clump on the side of the house. Beside the sunflower patch was a corroding, faded white car parked on the lawn. An assortment of debris covered the porch—a flock of rusty lawn chairs turned on their sides, a pile of sun-bleached clothes, a dirty, half-inflated inner tube and a ripped up red armchair, the

stuffing flooding out its sides. Cigarette butts and empty beer cans formed a carpet on the floor. The wall of the porch was lined with plants in cracked plastic buckets and above them, hanging plants. It looked like it had started out like the rest of the homes on the block—big and beautiful—but that something had gone terribly wrong.

I rang the doorbell several times, and finally a huge man with a dirty white t-shirt covering his bloated belly answered. His gray hair was close cropped in an old-style buzz cut. He breathed heavily from his mouth.

"Hi," I said, my nerve suddenly wilting in the shadow of this big man. He looked down at me with glassy eyes.

"Yeah?" he said.

"I'm selling cookies. I'm a Girl Scout. Do you want some?" My voice came out more high-pitched than usual.

"No." He started to close the door when a hand reached out from behind him and halted it.

"I want cookies." A girl about my age stepped in front of the man. A ponytail stuck straight up from the center of her head, like a sprinkler. She wore hot pink shorts, no shoes and a t-shirt that said "Sexy Diva" in gold sequin letters.

I had a feeling she wasn't actually going to buy any cookies, but here was someone I might be able to use for my next scheme: a lemonade stand.

"I'm Victoria Mathers," I said sticking out my hand. "People call me Vic." Instead of shaking my hand she slapped it five. Her two front teeth were missing, I could see from the smile that filled her face. Her brown eyes glowed with warmth and something else that looked like a hunger. The fat man had disappeared.

"I'm Annie. I just turned twelve and got a bike for my birthday. Want to see?"

She led me into her hallway. The house smelled of wet blankets. It was dark inside. Drawn shades and clusters of plants blocked out the sunny summer day. The small streams of light that managed to trickle through highlighted clusters of dust floating in the air. The thick shag carpet looked as if it were once yellow, but had turned a dark, dirty gold.

She took me into the kitchen, a maroon linoleum floor divided into rectangles to look like bricks. But the floor wasn't fooling anyone. The linoleum curled up against the walls and was missing in parts, exposing the wood beneath. Maroon cabinets made the kitchen dark. It smelled of burnt toast. The fat man sat at the kitchen table—a flimsy piece of wood with two long benches attached to it, like a picnic table. He drank a beer and watched a small TV set.

"Is this your friend?" he said without diverting his gaze. His voice was deep. His words wobbled a bit, like they were swaying in the wind.

"Yeah." Annie continued walking toward a back door.

"Tell her to watch out for the monkey."

"You have a monkey?" I asked as soon as we got outside. Her backyard was a jungle. Grass grew up to my waist in parts. Other sections were just brown and black patches, like little fires had been set.

"No," she said. "I'm the monkey."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm the monkey, my sister's the pretty one. That's what my Dad always says."

"Well, I'd rather be the monkey any day," I said.

“Look,” she said, pointing toward a small red and black dirt bike. It looked old, not like the new bike she had described, but I didn’t say anything.

She hopped on and circled me.

“So what’s this neighborhood like?” I asked. Her wide circles were getting smaller.

“Oh, it’s really stupid. Everyone here is a big loser.”

“Like who?”

“Well, Carla for one. She smells. Everyone except for Devin McKay.”

“Who’s that?”

She pointed toward the cul de sac at the end of the street where my first customer, the alcoholic tennis player lived. The house stood on a small hump of land, like a castle overlooking its serfs.

“He’s hot,” said Annie. “I want to go all the way with him.”

“What?” I had never heard anyone my age speak this way. She pedaled faster and looped in and out, making tight figure eights around me.

“Don’t you think twelve is a little young?”

“No way. Twelve’s old. My sister did it at eleven.”

“That’s gross,” I said, wrinkling my nose.

“Not gross, great. She says it hurts at first, but then later it feels really good. She’s fourteen now and has been doing it for a long time.”

"Does your mom know about this?"

"My mom doesn't live here. Nobody knows where she is."

"That's so funny," I said. "With me it's the opposite. My mom doesn't know where we are."

"How come?" said Annie.

I didn't feel like talking about any of this, so I changed the subject. “Listen,” I said. “Maybe you’d like to make a little extra cash. I’m thinking of starting a lemonade stand in the neighborhood. You want in?”

“Lemonade stand?” she said with a sneer, pulling her bike in front of me. “Sounds like baby games.”

“You would think, but actually they’re quite lucrative.” I folded my arms across my chest.

“Lucrative? I’ll show you lucrative.” The way she pronounced the word—slowly and carefully—made me think she’d never heard it before. I hadn’t meant to let the word slip out. Getting the bulk of my education from traveling around with my smart Dad meant I didn’t know my fractions but I knew words like “lucrative.”

“Sorry,” I said. The way she curled her fists forward over the handlebars, making motorcycle revving sounds, made me nervous. “I meant, they produce a lot of money, the lemonade stands.”

Annie spun the bike around and popped a wheelie, rearing the wheels like a horse. She peddled madly, leaning forward, speeding around the house, disappearing for a few seconds then coming back around, and heading straight at me full throttle. I jumped out of the way just in time, not knowing if she would have stopped or swerved. She skidded to a stop and turned the bike to face me, a look of triumph smearing her face.

“I’ll help you make lemonade,” she said. “If you jump off my roof.”

“Forget it.” I started backing away, not wanting to take my eyes off her in case she tried to run me down again. Her fingers twitched at the edge of the handlebars. “I don’t need you for the stand.”

“That’s right,” she cried out, as I walked away. “Go get smelly Carla to help you.” And then as I crossed the street: “You’re just another stupid bitch!”

I felt a swelling in my stomach. I wanted to run back and pummel her. I hadn’t been that offended since Dad and I escaped Mom. And then it hit me—if I wasn’t going to let my own mother insult me, I sure as hell wasn’t going to let a toothless twelve-year-old pipsqueak call me "bitch." This girl was, as Mom would say, cruising for a bruising. I didn’t know how to get even, but I knew I needed to find the other kids in the neighborhood and recruit them to my side.

Carla lived next door to me in one of those Tudor style homes that look like a fake castle at a medieval theme park. She sat on her front steps with a bowl of soup.

“Hi, I’m Vic. I just moved next door,” I said.

She continued to slurp her soup. “Hi, I’m Carla.”

I sat beside her and looked into the bowl.

“Soup in the summer. Now that’s something you don’t see every day,” I said.

“It’s strawberry soup.”

Carla, I learned, was eleven and studying the cello over the summer. She wore her sandy hair in a bob with a red headband. Her voice was nasally and she had an overbite, so when her mouth was closed, she looked like a turtle. I eased close to her to see if she actually did smell funny. All I could pick up was the scent of strawberries. She seemed like the perfect candidate for a best friend. Besides, I chalked her up as one of those

easily-influenced, moldable types. Can't get enough of those when it comes to money-making schemes.

"Carla, how would you like to join me in a little business venture?" I said.

"No," said Carla.

"I'm setting up a lemonade stand. You could make a little extra cash over the summer."

Carla finished her soup and stood up. "No thanks," she said. "I have to go practice." She opened her door.

"What do I have to do to make this happen, Carla? What do you want?"

Carla turned around. Suddenly she seemed interested in me. "I'll tell you what I want," she said. Carla had come to life. "I want that bully out of the neighborhood."

"You have a neighborhood bully?" I asked. "What's his name."

"Annie Whitman. And she's been terrorizing each and every one of us from the day she moved here."

"Annie?" I pointed diagonally across the street. "That Annie?"

"She may look nice, but she and her weird family have been bugging everyone for the longest time."

"Well, what kind of things does she do?"

"Annie threw a bag of dog poop at us last Halloween. My mom opened the door and it hit her in the face."

Poop! I'd only seen that in movies before. "Tell me more," I said.

"Well, every time I go out into my yard, she just shows up and starts yelling mean things at me."

"Verbal abuse, okay. What else?"

"Last year someone broke into our house. All they took was my jewelry box and my sticker album, which I'd been working on for over three years. We were away on vacation and when we came back, we saw one of the windows had been broken." Carla's face reddened and her voice cracked. "They never caught the thief, but I know it was her, because I saw her wearing my charm bracelet." She was crying now. "Every time I bring it up she just laughs."

Breaking and entering! She was taking bullying to a new level.

"I know you can't make her move, but if you can get back my bracelet, I'll join your lemonade stand. But until then, this is as far as I go outside my door."

That was it, then. My revenge would be getting that bracelet back. That would take her down a notch or two. Plus, I stood to make money by gaining Carla as my lemonade stand partner. I could enlist that kid Devin who Annie thought was so hot. They'd help me with the stand, but I'd keep all of our proceeds, telling them they would be reinvested into our next venture. And then, Dad and I would slip away into the night at some point, on to the next town. Although I was sick of all the moving, it did make scamming people a lot easier.

I returned home just shy of seventy-two dollars in my pocket from the fake cookie sales. I needed another thirty for Mom's bus ticket, which I figured I could make from selling lemonade. I wasn't planning on bringing Mom to our house—that would freak Dad out too much. After so many years of trying to get away from her, he didn't ever want to see her again. But I did. Dad was great and all, but lately I wanted a mom around for mom things. I missed how she braided my hair and then coiled it up into two buns on

each side of my head, like danishes. I missed the smell of her—vanilla and smoke. How she'd paint my fingernails ten different colors. Stuff like that. I had such an aching for her I had to see her, even if only for a few hours. I figured we could meet at the bus station and then go to lunch somewhere. I hadn't thought out where she was going to stay or how she was going to get back to Florida, but these were minor details that could be worked out when she got here.

The second I walked through the door, and before I could stash my money, Dad whipped a pair of kneepads at me.

"Here, Tiger. Put yourself to work."

He was grouting the bathroom floors. I got down to help him.

"So, what do you think of the neighborhood?" Dad wet his trowel and dipped it into the grout.

I shrugged. I never really formed an opinion of the places we moved to, knowing it was pointless. "Fine."

"It's got nice trees, doesn't it?" He smiled, showing the scar at the corner of his mouth where a belt sander had flipped a nail up and cut him. "The public schools are the best in the country." He scooped up a big gob of grout and plunked it down for the both of us. I plunged my trowel in and starting smoothing the wet, mocha-colored paste across the tile.

"Good for the public schools." I looked over. Dad had stopped grouting to meet my eyes. Dad rarely stopped moving. He was always in motion, always working like he was some sort of a machine with a deadline.

"I wonder, Vic . . ." He looked down at the floor then back again at me. ". . . if you'd like to stay here a while."

I dropped the trowel, plopping it into a thick pile of grout.

"What? No! Why would I want that?"

"Because I'm sick of moving, and I know you are too. Because this is far away from Florida. She won't find us. We can't keep running forever."

"Omigosh." Tears streaked my face. I thought of all the money I'd made already, how I'd have to return it, how I couldn't bring my Mom up here because then she'd know where we were living for real, and she'd never leave us alone. "I don't want to stay. Please, don't make me."

"Whoa," Dad said. Both on our hands and knees, we were in an awkward position for a comfort hug. He reached over to pat my back. "It's okay. Just a thought. Do you hate it here or something?"

"No." I got a hold of myself. I couldn't let slip any of my schemes.

"Okay, at least think about it then."

I was nine when Dad finally won full custody, but Mom didn't seem to care or understand. She showed up at our house, banging on the door, screaming to see me. I didn't want to see her back then. I was scared of what she would do to me, scared she would blame me for abandoning her, scared she would hurt me again. We first moved from Lady Lake to another part of Florida to avoid Mom, but somehow she managed to track us down. We finally fled state, traveling all the way to Louisiana. And then, after Dad started to make money off his house flipping, we researched the best parts of the country to earn our living and stay on the move. We went from Louisiana, to Texas, to

Oklahoma, and then to Kansas, following the money. Wherever the market was ripe we were there. And even though I could see myself settling here in Andover, the knowledge that I was going to be able to leave was far more appealing than the idea of staying. I guess you could say I'd become addicted to the idea of an always available exit.

I'd have to convince Dad that I hated this place. If he believed that, he wouldn't settle here.

I finished my section of the floor and jumped on my bike to go see if Devin was home. He was the only other kid close to my age in the neighborhood, and I knew I needed him on my side to battle Annie.

My bike was shiny pink with white wheels and pink and white streamers flowing from the handlebars. I didn't mind the girliness of it so much, the frilly, frou-frou, princess powder puff look of the thing. It rode well, got me where I needed to go. Dad kept offering to buy me a new one, but this had been a gift from Mom, so I kept raising the seat and handlebars as I grew. They'd been at their highest for a while now, and the bike was too small for me, but I didn't care.

As soon as I got out onto the street, though, Annie peddled her bike up to me.

"Hi, Vic. I saw you talking to fart face Carla," Annie called out.

"Yeah, I was talking to fart face Carla. What business is it of yours?"

"I hope you don't gag. She smells like shit."

She started circling my bike.

"Will you move? I'm trying to ride here," I said.

Annie let out a roar of cackling laughter. It had this sort of high-pitched, donkey-like peak at the end. "You think you're better than everybody, don't you?" She parked

horizontally before my front wheel, so our bikes made a “T.” “There’s no escape,” she said, her voice lowered to a grisly growl. "For you or your baby girl, nursery school, Barbie doll bike."

“Get out of my way,” I snarled. I turned my wheel to the right and pushed, but she backed up to stop me again. I stared at the gap between her teeth. There was something depraved about it, as if her teeth hadn’t fallen out like a normal kid, but had been punched out in a fight. I turned my wheel to the left and she crashed her bike up against mine.

It felt like a balloon suddenly inflated in my stomach, floating inside of me, making me feel disembodied. I had to get away from her. All I knew was how to use my voice.

“Move!” I yelled as loud as I could.

She backed up suddenly, and I pedaled forward. But she recovered quickly and rode up to block me again. It was enough time for me to calm down, though, and my mind cleared to give me my getaway line.

“I know you have Carla’s bracelet,” I said in an almost whisper. “And I’m going to get it back.” I spoke firmly, like I was disciplining a dog.

For a second, her tensed body slackened over the bike, and the tight sneer of her mouth gave way to an open cavern.

“I do not,” she said defiantly, coiling herself up again, but her momentary confusion allowed me to pedal quickly away.

My fear of Annie felt so familiar, and as I turned to catch a glimpse of her behind me, straddling her bike in the middle of the street, I realized where the deja-vu came

from. It reminded me of the way I felt when I lived with Mom. I'd been nervous all the time, scared that one of her outbursts could strike at any time. She couldn't be so bad anymore, I told myself. Mom must have changed by now—less angry, less wild. The good mom, the one who heated up soup when I was sick and drove me to soccer practice must have taken over at this point. Isn't that what happened to people after years passed? They go up, not down, right?

I pedaled away from Annie and the thought of my mother. Heading over to Devin's house, I thought of ways to recruit him into my schemes. His mom answered the door again, this time in a sleeveless dress with tiny pink and purple flowers, a half-empty wine glass in her hand. "Oh, the Girl Scout again!" she exclaimed. It was the late afternoon, and this mom must have been drinking all day, yet she spoke as clear as a bell. The woman could hold her liquor. At this point in the day, my mom would be passed out or throwing things.

"Is Devin here?" I said. She let me in. Now I saw why she wasn't destroying the home in a drunken rage: it was the centerfold of *House Beautiful*, not a double-wide trailer full of replaceable trinkets. Everything in the place sparkled like it had just been cleaned. The stone sculpture in the living room, the glass tables and the long, sleek black leather sofa all seemed untouchable. Two silver and black chairs across from the sofa weren't made for sitting in. The white marble floor looked like a fresh fall of snow. The only touch of color in the room came from a giant painting hanging above the fire place. It was full of reds and oranges, swirled together and tangled up in a violent snarl of paint. She led me to the back of the house, which was one giant glass wall, letting sunlight ride

in like a tidal wave. The sliding glass doors led out onto a large wood deck perched above a pristine emerald lawn.

Devin was out in the yard swishing a ball back and forth in a little net attached to a stick. I'd never seen lacrosse in person before, but I recognized it from pictures of New England when Dad and I were surfing the net for houses to flip.

Devin turned around when we got out onto the deck. He was something to look at, all right. He had shaggy, white-blonde hair that surrounded his head like a halo, and dark blue eyes the color of a nautical stripe. His top lip rose in two pointed peaks and his bottom lip was full and sulky. His cheekbones were high and sharp enough to slit a wrist.

"Devin, you have a visitor," called his mother. She went back inside without a single wobble in her step.

Devin came closer to the deck, still swirling the ball in the net of his stick, flicking his wrists back and forth, making them dance.

"Hi," he said.

He wore cut-off khaki pants, the shredded threads dangling over his knees. His shirt was off and his chest was worth a stare. The arms were long and toned, the shoulders strong looking. He had healthy stomach muscles and a small belly button that looked downright delicate. I'd seen this type before in the pages of an Abercrombie & Fitch catalogue. He looked like he was advertising a lifestyle that was bright, easy and completely inaccessible to the rest of us. I thought about the possibility of hiding in the bushes, just so I could stare at him all day.

"Hi," I managed to eek out.

"What's up?"

Unfortunately, at that moment I accidentally glanced at my image reflected in the glass doors. Oh yeah, I thought, I'm a kid. The Girl Scout uniform made me look like somebody's little sister. I knew my face was red, and I didn't want Devin to see it, so I pretended to inspect my shoes.

"I'm selling cookies," I said.

"I figured," he said with a smile, displaying his bright white teeth. He looked about thirteen or fourteen, just a year or so older than me.

I took the order form out of my pocket and pretended to concentrate on it, not able to look him in the eye for fear I would turn into a puddle on his porch. "Do you want any?"

He came to the edge of the deck and looked at me for the first time. Tiny drops of sweat glistened at his temples, his cheeks, flushed from the activity, were a rosy pink. I noticed a white shark's tooth attached to a brown leather cord hanging around his neck.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Twelve. I just moved in down the street."

"Oh, yeah. I saw all those boxes in your driveway. Do you think I could borrow some? My friend and I are working on a project."

"Sure!" I replied, a little too eagerly. "But first I have to ask you a question."

He turned his back to me and hurled the ball into a goal at the other end of the yard. "Shoot," he said.

"I'm setting up a sort of beverage store, here on the sidewalk and--"

I was interrupted by the sliding door opening up. Another boy Devin's age came out carrying a lacrosse stick.

“Mikester!” Devin shouted. He ran toward the deck, scooped up another lacrosse ball, and launched it over my head toward his friend.

“Sick!” shouted Mikester, catching the ball in his net. He ran down the stairs to the lawn and began galloping beside Devin as they tossed the ball back and forth.

“I’ll come over and get those boxes later,” he shouted back to me. I guess that was my cue to leave.

Before I'd wanted him to join my lemon stand for the extra man-power, now I thought of it as a good excuse to get to look at him some more. I told myself I'd ask him about joining when he came over to get the boxes, but it didn’t work out that way. As soon as I got home, Dad sent me to the town center a few blocks away to buy more Teflon tape. When I returned, the supersized refrigerator box was missing from my driveway. Dad told me Devin had hauled it away.

I gathered up some other boxes—medium-sized ones left over from the tiles for the new bathrooms. Before I could bolt, Dad called me back. He was hammering a pine plank for a new kitchen island.

“Vic, I’m sorry to do this to you, but things are moving a little quicker than I thought.”

It was all the practice—too much practice—from renovating homes over and over again that kept making him faster. “There are certain decisions that need to be made. Have you had time to think about staying here?”

“We can’t,” I said. “The kids here are awful.”

“Well, I’m sure there will be some nice kids in the school. You can’t just base it on the first few you’ve met in the neighborhood.”

In truth, I really didn't mind the kids, and I'd sure been in far worse places. Besides Annie, this batch wasn't so bad. Carla had potential, and Devin was someone I wanted to see again. I also knew there would be a wide variety of friends to choose from once school started. I'd gotten pretty good at the meeting new kids thing.

"I'm not sure we fit in here, Dad."

"Does it matter? I don't know if we fit in anywhere, Vic. We've lived in so many places."

Right then it occurred to me these last years of moving weren't really to get away from Mom anymore. Dad and I—the both of us—were moving to avoid the memory of her. The memory of when she was good and when she was bad. Of when she loved us, and when she wanted to destroy us. Maybe these two Moms would always be there, no matter where we moved.

I dragged the boxes over to Carla's and knocked on her door. I told her I was in the process of getting her bracelet back, but that we needed to get moving on this lemonade stand. She agreed to help me. We got to work painting big yellow lemons on pieces of cardboard for the backdrop. We cut off smaller pieces and made signs to post throughout the neighborhood, then we made homemade lemonade in Carla's kitchen. We were actually having fun, laughing while we squeezed the lemons into pitchers, pretending the lemons were Annie's head. Carla told a funny story about how Mr. Whitman drove his car into the side of the house once.

We set up a card table and the Lemonade For Sale sign on the sidewalk next to my driveway. I put on the Girl Scout sash, just to add some legitimacy to the operation. It worked. By the end of the day we had sold cups of lemonade to everyone on the block.

Carla proved to be a competent partner. I manned the sales department, convincing customers to upgrade to a bigger cup (for only five cents more), while Carla poured. It was close to sunset. We'd seen the last of the commuters drive through and stop to buy a drink from us. I counted out a profit of twenty-two dollars, telling Carla I'd give her half as soon as I got the proper change. Before we could close up shop, my dad came to buy a cup.

"Thank you, ladies," he said, tipping a fake hat. He downed the cup in two gulps and bought another. "What do you ladies plan to do with the proceeds?"

As he gulped down the second cup I had a chance to look at him closely for the first time in a while. His hands were chafed. He had dark bags under his eyes and wrinkles starting to form on his forehead. All this moving, I could see, had taken a toll on him too. It just wouldn't be fair, I thought. It wouldn't be fair to bring all our troubles up here on a Greyhound bus. I couldn't do it to him. "Movies," I said. I counted out eleven dollars and handed it to Carla. "Possibly Twizzlers and a Coke too, depending."

"Let me know if you need a chauffeur," Dad said, walking back to the house.

Carla carefully counted her money and tucked it into her pocket. "Vic?" she said. "Do you think now that we're done, you could try to get my bracelet back?"

"You think I'd ever break a promise?"

I jumped on my bike and rode across the street to Annie's. I knocked on her door, but no one answered. From her porch I could see the refrigerator box in Devin's driveway. It moved a little, like there was someone inside of it, and I could hear hoots of laughter coming out of it. I figured since it was my refrigerator box, I had a right to know

what was going on, what this little “project” was that Devin had mentioned, so I hopped back on my bike and headed over to his place.

As I peddled closer I could hear the laughter of boys coming from inside the box. I got off the bike and walked around to the open end. Annie’s back was to me. She sat in the box wearing only her underpants and holding a fistful of change. Devin and his friend, Mikester, were laughing and shaking a jar of coins in front of her.

“What are you doing?” I couldn’t help myself from yelling it out.

Annie turned abruptly. She didn’t seem to care that she was almost naked. “I’m just stripping for them,” she said. “You’ve got your stupid lemonade stand. This is my way of making money.” She jangled the coins in her hand while Devin and his friend’s laughter echoed around her in the close quarters of the box.

“For what?” I grabbed her hand and opened it. “For nickels and dimes?”

“We pay her what she’s worth,” said Devin laughing louder. The shadows smudged and dulled their faces, turning their smiles to sneers. I yanked Annie out of the box.

“Where’s your shirt?” I asked. Devin emerged from the box, swinging her shirt in a lasso above his head. Mikester, a tall, gangly kid with zits, clenched her balled-up shorts in his fists and waved them at her face.

“Give it.” I demanded. Annie crossed her arms over her chest—the chest of a boy. Her body didn’t look that much different than Devin’s. Her face was red. For the first time she didn't look scary or crazy or silly. She just looked embarrassed.

I grabbed the shirt from Devin and gave it to Annie. She put it on. By now, Carla had appeared and was watching from the edge of the driveway.

“I hope you didn’t do anything with him,” I said to Annie.

“Are you kidding?” Devin said. “You think I’d fool around with that skank?” When he smirked the crest of his lips looked like fangs. "Let's see," he ticked off his fingers. "She's got a dead-beat dad who's always tanked, a sister who's slept with the whole town, and a mother who's missing, probably in a crack house or whore house, or something. She's trash. I'd rather stick my dick in a garbage can."

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” I said, pulling on Annie’s arm, but she yanked her hand free and planted herself perfectly still in front of Devin, staring at him. In a matter of seconds, her face went from a grim, defeated scowl to a fiendish sneer, and suddenly, she looked downright jubilant. I froze in terror, realizing what was about to come.

Her wail, her war cry, blasted through the streets, as she zoomed full force toward Devin, hurling herself into his unsuspecting body. He crashed to the ground and Annie rolled on top of him, straddling his stomach, her thighs squeezing his waist. Her fists furiously slammed at his chest.

“Get her, Devin, get her! Kick her ass!” Carla screamed, pumping a fist in the air.

Devin tried to grab Annie’s hands to push them away, but they were moving too fast. She was able to deflect his arms with one hand and punch him in the mouth with the other. She spit in his face. Instinctively, I ran up behind her and tried to drag her off, but couldn’t. Devin was able to get a hold of her wrist. He jerked it to his mouth, delivering a swift bite. Annie pulled her wrist away, screaming in pain. Still on top of him, she grabbed his shark tooth necklace and yanked it off his neck. Devin was finally able to roll

on his side and push her off. He stood up and backed away. “Crazy bitch!” he screamed. His perfect blonde mane was now matted and sweaty.

She ran for the jar of money, but Devin got it before her. “You’ll never get your money!” he cried out. “You’re not worth any of it!”

I held Annie’s arm, but I wasn’t strong enough for her. She was small like me, except there was something in her, some unrelenting fight that took over her limbs and made her stronger than any kid, or probably any adult for that matter. She escaped my grasp and lunged again at Devin, who was now in full defensive mode. His arms flew up to cover his face, but Annie surprised him with a swift kick to the groin.

“Kick him where it counts.” I remembered the popular girl refrain when it came to defending yourself against boys. But those had been just words from girls who thought they were tough. This was the real thing. Annie actually did kick him where it counts. He reeled back, grabbed his crotch in pain and let out the kind of squeal I’d only heard from the pig-pen at a farm.

I cringed, as if she had kicked me too in a sensitive place. Annie grabbed the jar of coins and poured it over Devin’s head, so nickels, dimes, pennies and quarters rained down on him. He sat slumped on the ground sobbing, his face red and swollen, surrounded by coins. I was still shaken up from watching the fight and filled with sympathy for Devin, but something else crept in: a small flicker of triumph. It didn’t seem like it had the right to be there at the moment, yet there it was.

While Carla ran over to tend to Devin, I kept my eyes on Annie as she backed away, hoping she wouldn’t strike again. I noticed blood coming from her wrist. She looked at me, now calm and composed, turned and strolled across the street. I followed.

“Where are you going?” Carla shouted after me. “Are you nuts?”

I followed Annie into her backyard. She leaned against an old shed and sucked the blood from her wrist.

“Are you okay,” I asked her, panting.

“What are you doing here? Go back to your stupid lemonade stand.”

She reached into a planter attached to the side of the shed, pulled out a pack of Camels and lit one up. Her wrist looked pretty bad, like she'd been bitten by a dog.

"Here," I said, taking her hand. I took off my Girl Scout sash and gently wrapped it around her wrist, tying it in a knot, so it made a bandage.

“Thanks,” Annie said. “But your uniform’s probably ruined now.”

Before I could respond, Carla ran up and started yelling in Annie’s face. “You maniac! He’s really hurt!”

Annie ignored her and gestured toward the planter. It was a rectangle of cement covered with chipping white paint. Instead of flowers, a rusty metal box was wedged inside. “This is where I keep everything important,” Annie said. She opened the metal box, pulled something out and threw it at Carla’s chest.

“I’ve been meaning to give this back to you, but I had to wait for something. There’s a reason I took it.”

Carla bent over to pick it up. Her charm bracelet, perfectly intact, shining in the sun.

“I knew it! I knew you had it!” shouted Carla.

“I wanted to add my own charm to it. But I didn’t know what to add.”

She took a drag from her cigarette. Between her two fingers she held the shark's tooth attached to the leather cord. The sharp white point of the tooth was covered with blood.

"Now I know," she said. "We just have to figure out how to put it on there."

Her intent seemed so genuine. I had a flash of an image of her smashing Carla's window with a smile on her face, smashing through it thinking she was helping Carla.

"You're a thief and a bully," said Carla, holding the bracelet tightly in her fist. "Why did you attack Devin like that?"

"He tried to take the money back. Told me I wasn't worth a nickel." She pulled up the sleeve of her t-shirt and inspected her upper arm. A big red mark looked like a future bruise. "Nobody tells me what I'm worth."

"You know what?" I said. "You're not worth anything. None of us are. We're just us."

"Amen, sister," she said. She passed over her lit cigarette. I took it between my fingers hesitantly. She could tell I'd never tried one before.

"Just breathe in, like you're sucking on a straw, then let it all out."

I inhaled too deeply, choking on the smoke. She took it from me, ashed it and handed it back. On the second try I took it in gently. I could feel the smoke searing my throat and filling up inside my chest, like a balloon, starting a little fire in there. It felt so damn good.

The Rhythm

My body's hormonal revolution first surfaced at my parents' thirty-fifth anniversary party. I was two-and-half months pregnant, and as I removed the foil from my famous clam casserole, I caught a whiff and felt the need to hurl.

"What's wrong, Jill?" my mother asked, stubbing out her cigarette.

"Nothing. Just excited for you guys. Go Mom and Dad," I said weakly, raising a pathetic fist in the air. I turned around and went outside. Paper lanterns lit up the yard. It was still warm out, but you could detect the bite of fall ready to strike at any moment. My sister Kathy and her gaggle of kids swarmed the lawn, polluting the place with their non-stop noise. It felt crowded and hot, like a packed bar. My dad grilled knockwurst while the adults swigged beer. That smell that I normally loved—fried sausage and beer—turned my stomach to mush.

"Crud, it's happening again," I said to my husband, Dan, steadying myself on his shoulder. I turned to him and grinned. "I'm frickin' sick."

"Why are you so happy about it, Jilly?" But he knew why.

Dan and I had been trying to have a baby for six years. At first I couldn't get pregnant, coming up with a series of blank checks, as I liked to call them. And when I was finally pregnant, I had three miscarriages in a row—bounced checks, I called those. Finally, this time around felt like a winner. My previous miscarriages had occurred at six weeks, yet I was well past that point, and I'd already heard a heartbeat on the sonogram—my first. Dr. Brody, my obstetrician, said if I could make it to three months I had a good chance of actually cashing this check.

I fled to my childhood bedroom to lie down and ride out the nausea. My mom had recently converted it to a jungle themed guest room, covering the bed with a leopard print comforter and zebra pillows, painting the walls beige and putting a fake banana tree in the corner. Within minutes, my mom came in smoking a cigarette. She didn't know I was pregnant. I wasn't telling a soul until I hit the safety zone of the three-month mark.

"You're missing the party," she said. My mom had a throaty voice. After years of smoking, she was beginning to sound like Burgess Meredith. "It's our anniversary for Christ's sake."

"I'm sick, Ma."

"Jeesh, I'm just kidding, what do you think?"

"Think? I'm sick, I can't really think." My mother always managed to get under my skin. It was primal.

"Is this 'cause Kathy's here with all the brats? What do you want me to do, kick 'em out of the house?" The last time we'd all been together, I sequestered myself in the downstairs bathroom to cry for an hour after my nieces and nephews kept asking me why I didn't have children. "Don't worry, you'll catch up," she said, jumping ahead several sentences to get to the bottom of the issue: I was behind in the baby-making game. My younger sister had it on me in spades. She was a fast food restaurant, but instead of fries, she cranked out babies. At thirty years old she already had four kids with a fifth on the way. Her husband, Patrick, had been a lapsed Catholic until he'd spotted the Virgin Mary in a pool of pepperoni oil, became a believer again and put a kibosh on the birth control. And apparently he was Mr. Stud, and she was as fertile as the Nile Valley. It just wasn't fair.

Meanwhile, I was taking my sweet time, traveling with Dan, focusing on my career as an English teacher at Watertown High. When I decided to have a baby after four years of marriage, I thought this business of getting knocked up would be a cake walk, but my reproductive organs staged an outright rebellion, and I didn't understand why. At thirty-four years old, mine was a healthy, pert, springy body. An athletic body full of fresh produce, live active cultures and maca-maca juice, yet apparently not a body that anybody wanted to live in. Not even for a few months.

"I'm already catching up," I said. My newfound nausea sealed the deal: this baby would be The One Who Makes It. Besides, I wasn't going to take an unfair sibling comparison lying down, so I came out with it. "There's one in the oven."

"I knew it," my mother said triumphantly, stubbing out her cigarette and frantically waving the smoke out of the room. "So why is Dan being such a pisser tonight? He's downstairs sulking like he needs his diapers changed."

I didn't want to tell her that my recent excitement about this baby had honed Dan's cynicism to a sharp point. This whole business of trying to have a baby had taken a toll on our marriage. After so many years of coming up short, we couldn't seem to shake the feeling of sadness and incompetency. Just loss, loss, loss. Loss of something that wasn't really there in the first place, and then trying to make sense of that loss, like trying to catch water.

"That's his problem," I said, feeling another wave of queasiness roll in. "My body's working right and I plan to enjoy it. Pass me the trashcan, I'm gonna barf."

The nausea continued through the next week. The hormones made my mind fizzy and popping, like a can of soda. All I could do was lie on the couch all day watching TV.

My mind couldn't grasp anything weightier than shows like "Leave it to Lamas," a reality series following Lorenzo Lamas and his dippy kids. Normally a voracious reader, I couldn't even crack open a book. All I could handle was the Shakespearian conflict between Lorenzo Lamas and his twenty-something son A.J., an unemployed slacker who wore witty t-shirts and a bowler hat. I found myself disapproving of A.J. along with Lorenzo, but also cheering him on. If this kid in my belly wants to shuffle around L.A. and lean up against decrepit buildings with a cigarette in his mouth all day long, let him. As long as he's alive and healthy. Bring it on.

I was grateful that this first trimester was during the summer, a hiatus from my teaching. The hormones made me too tired and sick to teach. They also made me irritable. A week before my three-month milestone, I was doing prenatal yoga at home because I heard it was good for the pregnancy. In my nauseated state, I was lying totally still on the floor staring up at the popcorn ceiling in the "corpse pose." Dan came into the room just as I was nodding off, hypnotized by the golden blades of the fan.

"What the hell?" he said. "What are you sleeping on the floor for?"

"It's yoga, Dan."

"What the hell are you doing yoga for? You're pregnant." He yanked off his tie and threw it across the bed. "It's gotta be bad for the baby, no?" He was looking in the mirror now, smoothing his blonde hair forward to conceal a retreating hairline. His cheeks had turned doughy, which now as a constantly hungry pregnant woman had me craving fresh baked bread.

"I'm not doing anything dangerous. This is yoga made especially for pregnant women."

"Why would they do that?"

"Why would who do what?"

"The whatchamacallits, monks or whatever. Make yoga for pregnant women." He did some shoulder rolls in the mirror.

"It's good for your body. You should know, you were a dancer."

"Was? Still am, Baby."

Dan was a former hip-hop dancer, plucked off the rough streets of Charlestown to join Step-It-Up, a boy's dance group that performed around Boston. I'd always hoped our child, when and if it would ever come, would inherit his electric blue eyes and dancing ability. But only those things. Dan had a keen physical intelligence, but not a whole lot going on up there in the head. For years I thought his idiotic comments and misinterpretations were ironic commentaries on the dumbing down of society. But the joke was on me because, it turns out, he actually was an idiot. Well, perhaps "idiot" is harsh. Let's just say, he's good with his feet. His dream to become a background dancer in music videos had withered down to selling apps, or blue teeth, or something related to cell phones, I wasn't sure what.

"Besides. Yoga is not dance," he said. "It's a form of aerobics and whatnot."

"Not aerobics, really. That's like Jane Fonda eighties stuff. Yoga's a form of exercise. Or meditation. It doesn't really matter. I'm just doing whatever I can to make sure this one sticks."

"Right. How's it any different than the others?" he said. He'd become even more cynical than me, after all these years.

"I'm nauseated and tired all the time. I didn't have morning sickness with the others. I'm taking progesterone and doing acupuncture. Besides, we're at twelve weeks. We're charting new territory here."

"I just hope 'Another One Bites the Dust' doesn't become my theme song."

"It's not funny, Dan. I know it's your baby too, but it's not your body going through all this."

"Exactly. My body seems to have been the only one working here."

I started to cry. Recently he had been taking out his frustration on me, peppering our conversations with hurtful comments.

"I'm sorry, Jill. It's just so . . ." He broke into an upbeat dance step to his own beat boxing. When he didn't have the right words, he'd dance it out. This ability to interpret words into physical gestures was once my favorite quality about Dan, but after seven years of marriage, it had become the thing I hated the most.

"I'm frustrated too," I said. "But I have a good feeling about this one."

Dan shrugged and turned back to the mirror.

I went to the bathroom for a silent cry. The loneliness of hope was worse than that of despair. At least despair complemented loneliness—they were first cousins. Hope, on the other hand, needed a chorus. It was no fun being a hopeful loner. Or a lonesome hoper. Either way, it sucked.

As I surveyed my wet face in the mirror, I noticed how puffy it was, how thick my lips looked, like they'd been plumped with poison, how a light smattering of acne was working its way up one cheek like a line of ants. I looked pregnant. Really pregnant, at that gross and awkward stage. There was no denying it, and it made me feel good. I

wiped away the tears and smiled. “You’re not alone,” I said out loud, patting my belly. “And I’m not alone now.” This baby was the last shot for my marriage. Dan and I had become bad luck for one other. I wasn't worried though. This baby, this strange and welcome tenant inside me, was real and alive.

The day of the three-month ultrasound, Dan stood in front of our two-family townhouse in Watertown, work bag in hand, distant look in his eyes.

“I’m not attaching myself to anything,” he told me. “Whatever happens happens.”

Janie, our neighbor, came out on the porch of her side of the town house to water her geraniums. She and her four children shared the place with us, and when we first moved in I babysat for her all the time, loving her kids, letting her have a life. But when all my pregnancy trials and tribulations spilled out, I started resenting her ridiculous fertility—she’d had the babies back to back without even trying. I was surrounded by pregnant women and newborns, I just couldn’t escape them, but I couldn’t seem to get my own. I was already annoyed by my sister’s magical fertility, and being around Janie and her personal baby-factory compounded everything, so I eased off on the helping out. Now Janie just waved to me politely when she saw me, pissed off that she couldn’t count on me anymore to help with her horde of children. I’d caught her the other day trying to water my withered geraniums on my side of the porch and told her to stop. “Just let them die,” I’d told her.

Today, though I had an entirely different outlook. This time, something of mine was alive. I knew it, and I told Dan.

“Don’t get your hopes up, Jill,” he cautioned.

“It’s not hope,” I told him. “I just know.”

He spun around, ending with jazz hands shimmering beside his face. “Tadaaa,” he said.

“Exactly,” I said. His face sunk back into its permanent surrender, but I kept my smile alive. It had been an ironic “tadaa.”

“You’ll see,” I said.

I waited in the reception area at Dr. Brody’s office watching *Family Feud*. After the usual hour wait, I got called into the ultrasound room to change into a paper gown, and waited some more. I wasn’t even nervous, like all the other times. I welcomed the stupid paper gown that didn’t close all the way in the back and made me feel naked and fat. I was so exuberant, I almost wanted to flash Dr.Brody a shot of my butt crack, just to see his reaction. Confidently, I surfed the Internet on my phone, looking at the latest baby deals on Amazon.

Finally, the ultrasound technician came in. To my surprise, she was new. For all three of my past sonograms I’d had a technician named Lois, a stoic woman with perfect posture and the crispest scrubs I'd ever seen. She religiously followed the ultrasound technician’s code of not revealing anything about the image of the fetus. The technician was supposed to work the equipment, take measurements and pass it on to the doctor, who would then analyze the results and discuss it with the patient. Lois had taken this to an art form, remaining poker-faced behind her wire-rimmed spectacles, filling each sonogram with a measured silence. Even when there was no heartbeat, Lois didn’t say a thing. I’d tried to get her to talk, “There’s no heartbeat. That means it’s not alive, right?” But Lois would just shake her head and say in a monotone voice that I would have to talk to the doctor. It was like trying to get the Buckingham Palace guards to crack a smile.

Maybe I'd get more out of this newbie, but I also missed Lois. I'd been looking forward to celebrating this moment with her. Next to having a baby, the one thing I wanted most was to make Lois smile.

"Where's Lois?" I asked.

"Oh, she joined some other practice. But Amber's here now," she said, giving me a wink.

"Amber?"

"That's me, honey." She was petite with hair the color of a cashew nut. She began chatting me up, asking me how I was feeling, attempting little jokes about pregnancy hormones. Where Lois was Marcel Marceau, Amber here was Conan O'Brien. I played along, cheerful and relaxed, and it was pretty easy being genial for the first time in this room, knowing I'd soon be hearing the good news of my baby's heartbeat.

"One second, here, honey, I'm not used to this kind of machine," she said, flicking a bunch of switches. "There we go, right as rain."

Amber rubbed the cold gel on my stomach and placed the transducer on my belly. She moved it around like she was working a computer mouse.

I waited patiently for the heartbeat. A minute went by and there was nothing. I squeezed my eyes shut, thinking if I concentrated hard enough the sound would come. There was a white, blank silence that felt like the last word of a sentence, and then, as if the volume knob was being turned up ever so slowly, the distant sounds of a beating heart. The noise grew quicker and louder until it permeated the room, booming like a thumping bass drum at a heavy metal concert.

My face beamed at the thunderous sound of my baby's heartbeat. Beneath the sound, I heard the clucking of Amber's tongue.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It looks like you've had a miscarriage."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"There's no heartbeat, honey," Amber said. "She turned the monitor toward me and tapped her finger against it. Nail polish American flags adorned each of her long fingernails.

"This fetus is not viable," she said, clicking a patriotic nail against the screen.

What I saw was a little gray patch shaped like a shrimp in the far right side of the monitor. What I heard was a blaring, staccato rhythm.

"What's that sound then?" I asked.

"What sound, honey?"

"That heartbeat."

"There is no heartbeat. Maybe you're hearing your own, honey."

The sound just kept rolling in like Atlantic Ocean waves smashing into Cape Cod. *Whoosh-whoosh, whoosh-whoosh, whoosh-whoosh.* Was this woman deaf?

"Can you call Dr. Brody in?"

"That's not how it works, honey. You go back to the waiting room, then we send you in to his office."

She leaned over and patted my knee. I swatted her hand away.

"Screw that," I said. "I want to see him now. I'm not leaving this room until he comes in here and confirms what I'm hearing."

Amber rolled her eyes and sighed. Her cute, perky demeanor was turning to a bristled annoyance.

"Fine," she said, all snippety. "But you might have to wait awhile. He's seeing other patients, honey"

“Can you not call me *honey*?”

“Sorry, sweetheart.”

She left me in the cold, dark room. The only light came from the monitor, illuminating the wall of baby pictures across from me. During my last visit, I'd diverted my eyes from this wall, refusing to acknowledge the pitch-perfect happiness of these live, healthy babies in the face of my own loss. Now embraced by the sound of my baby's heartbeat, I gleefully scanned the photos, appreciating the unseen parental pride behind each picture. I envisioned the baby announcement I would send out, designing the graphics and message in my mind: “We welcome to the world . . . ” or “Introducing . . . ” or “Hear ye, hear ye . . . ” Something cute but not too precious, clever without being smart-ass. And the background music to my mental machinations? Keith Moon and Ringo Starr in a drumming duet that rocked my world. That's right, my baby's heartbeat wasn't only loud and clear, it had a kickass rhythm to it. As far as I was concerned, I could wait the whole day for Dr. Brody to come in here and validate what I was hearing. *Tha-thump, tha-thump, tha-thump*.

When he did finally come in, the rock n' roll beat of my baby’s heart had turned into a swinging jazz percussion that begged for a bebop accompaniment.

“I'm so happy you're here,” I cried. “This woman thinks I had a miscarriage, even though there's a heartbeat.”

Without looking at me, Brody scanned my chart. Amber resumed her position, and ran the machine over my stomach again. The cool gel had turned warm and sticky on my belly.

“See?” she said. She glanced sideways at me and looked at the doctor with raised eyebrows. It was a clearly a “this one belongs in the loony bin” look.

"This is your, what? Fourth miscarriage?” said Dr. Brody without looking up, his glasses perched at the tip of his nose as he looked at the monitor.

“How is this a miscarriage? ”

Dr. Brody looked up at me. “I’m sorry, but this pregnancy is no longer viable.”

“Viable? What the holy hell does that mean anyway?”

He pushed his glasses up his nose and seemed to look at me for the first time. Amber got up to wash her hands, and Dr. Brody sat down in her chair.

“It means possible. You’ve had another miscarriage is what it means. I’m sorry.”

“No need to be sorry. This baby’s alive.”

“When we don’t hear a heartbeat at six weeks, there’s always a chance the equipment didn’t pick it up. But at three months, well, it means there is no heartbeat. It means the pregnancy has terminated. I know this must be difficult for you.”

“What’s difficult?” I said with a smile, propping myself up on the table. “You and your little technician must be delusional. I’m pregnant. There is a heartbeat.”

“It’s understandable what’s happening,” Amber said, giving me a condescending smile. “You’re just so upset that you don’t want to accept the truth.”

“Here’s the truth, honey—you should have your license revoked.” Amber didn’t respond, but Dr. Brody nodded his head at her and she left the room.

He took a deep breath and put down my chart. “Jill, we have some very good counselors who work in conjunction with us. They can talk this over with you. I’ll have reception give you their number.”

“I don’t need a counselor. I need a doctor who’s not a frickin’ quack. That’s what I need.” I pulled my shirt over my tummy without wiping off the gel and got up. I patted my belly, a small, taut mound.

“I’m sorry you feel that way. They’ll just give you the same results. Please, Jill.”

I walked out of the room with Dr. Brody following me down the hall.

“At least take the counselor’s number,” he said. I ignored him and went for the door leading out to the waiting room, but it was locked.

“Can you buzz me through?” I said to the receptionist. She turned to Dr. Brody, waiting for his approval.

“Please, just take this number,” he said. “Cheryl, give her the number for Help I Need Somebody Associates.”

“Cheryl, just buzz me out.” I said it with such a steely voice that Cheryl wasn’t sure quite what to do. She didn’t buzz me though. She wrote down the number on the back of a card and handed it to me. I took it just to escape and stuffed the card in the waiting room trash can as I left, making sure Cheryl saw me.

These idiot people! I heard the heartbeat in stereo surround sound. And now as I crossed the parking lot, there it was again, the sound of my "viable" baby. Softly at first, like the tapping of rain on a roof, and then—bongos! Some sort of African drum talk trying to speak directly to me. It was so alive, I couldn’t bear it. A real, animate human residing in my body, linked with my blood and with my own beating heart. I thought of

turning around and marching back to show them how wrong they were, but the hell with them. I got in the car and screeched out of the parking lot, burning rubber all the way.

My satellite radio was tuned to the nineties station, and when "Ice, Ice Baby" started playing I turned it up so that my baby, brilliant musician that he was, could drum his heartbeat along to the rhythm. A real John Bonham I had in my stomach it seemed, and it wasn't so out of line either—Dan's hip-hop skills could be genetic, and I always had a good sense of rhythm myself. *Gung-ga, gung-ga, gung-ga.*

At home I spent the afternoon phoning Ob/Gyn offices to find a new one. Dr. Brody and his lame staff were out, that was for sure. There was no conceivable way that they were right. None. Not when I heard a consistent thumping, a rum-tum-tumping emanating from my belly, like a fleet of tap dancers doing the two-step across a dance floor.

"Danny!" I cried, running up to him as he came in the door from work. I pulled his slumped shoulders toward me and plugged my kisser into his cheek. "We're pregnant!"

"Really?" said Dan, his slack doll's face coming alive for the first time in months. "The baby's okay?"

I took his hand and placed it on my belly. "He's better than okay."

Dan threw his arms up in the air "Whooooh!" he shouted. "Wicked!" He clapped his hands and did a happy dance, a fist pumping, hip popping, gyrating spin. I listened for the beat with him, but the baby's heart wasn't beating along to Dan's rhythm or to anything else, and I realized I hadn't heard it since the moment Dan walked through the door.

"It's gone," I said. "I don't hear the heart."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll think I'm crazy, but I've been hearing the heartbeat ever since the ultrasound."

"Echoing in your ears and whatnot?"

"Something like that. But I don't hear it anymore."

"Well, as long as you hear it on the ultrasound. That's all that matters."

"Yeah, I guess."

The entire evening and into the night, though, I couldn't hear the heartbeat. I missed it. As soon as Dan was asleep, I slipped out of the house to our little patch of yard and stared up at the moon. As I looked up at that glowing night-light in the sky, a slight pitter-pattering sound came from a distance. Was it starting to rain? Was it my own heartbeat echoing in my head? No. The baby was back, dancing inside me. And it wasn't just my feeling something rhythmic from within, I was actually hearing this heartbeat in my ears. *Lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub*. The sound became louder and more frantic, like a squirrel's heart—a persistent, quick thump—the sound of an eager, excited will to live. I cupped my hands around my belly and then around my own heart, because our two hearts were beating to the same rhythm. I waved my arms in the air and bopped my head to the beat. I shimmied forward and back, popped a hip right to left, spun around and finished off with a not-too-shabby Baby Isaac. "This is how we do it," I sang, hearing that heartbeat grow louder and louder, as if the little b-boy inside of me knew exactly what I was up to. When I got winded I went upstairs, wiped the sweat off my body with a bath

towel, and climbed into bed beside Dan. The sound of my baby's heart went silent. It was then I realized I had a problem.

I decided not to contact another Ob/Gyn. They would probably just do the same as Brody and his staff—ignore a beating heart, dismiss a viable pregnancy. This baby would be born at home with a midwife. An art teacher at my school had given birth at home assisted by a Native American shaman she raved about. At the time, it had all sounded nutty, especially some of the midwife's radical practices, like burying the placenta in the yard under the full moon, but now I knew it was the right way to go. This was no ordinary pregnancy. I could hear my own baby's heartbeat for Christ's sake, and that surely had to count for something.

Marlene, the midwife, came to see me the next day. It turned out she was not a Native American—just a white woman from Taunton trained by a midwife in Leominster. She casually informed me she'd been kicked out of her former midwifery practice for philosophical differences. "The medical establishment," she told me, referring to her old colleagues of the alternative world, "is full of quacks." No more ultrasounds were needed. Instead, she would track the progress of the fetus through Reiki, by placing her hands on my belly and feeling the baby's energy. When Marlene was around, the rhythm came loud and clear, rolling rapidly in and out like the snare drum in a marching band.

"You're an uptight white woman," said Marlene, who was Caucasian herself. "You need to get in touch with your body more. The baby will thank you."

"I think being able to hear my baby's heartbeat makes me pretty in touch, no?"

"You can hear your baby's heartbeat? Cool." She had perched her thick squat body on a birthing stool covered with hieroglyphics, rubbing her hands across my belly to "read" the baby. She put her ear up to my bellybutton. "I can't hear anything, but I can confirm something."

"What?"

"You're having a boy. I can feel boy energy."

"I knew it," I said. "The rhythm is a boy rhythm. Quick, loud, rambunctious."

"The rhythm?" she said looking up at me with a smile.

"The sound of the heartbeat."

"Right."

Marlene told me that this early part of the pregnancy was the time to sit across from one another and tell folk tales so the baby would develop an appreciation for narrative. As an English teacher, I loved this concept. She said she was trying to get a group together because these things worked better with a tribe of women, but for now we would narrate as a duo. The story-telling process was meant to be intense, so she came back two days in a row, not wanting to miss a beat. This kind of frequency was unusual for a midwife. Normally, they were like doctors, visiting with the pregnant woman no more than once a month. But there was nothing normal about this pregnancy. Also, I got the feeling Marlene had nothing better to do. As far as I could tell, she had no other patients. I considered myself on the cutting edge.

On the third day, I noticed an especially rowdy beat coming from the baby as Marlene relayed a Yoruba folk tale. I rubbed my belly.

"Out of all the stories we've told—the Greek myths, the Chassidic tales, the Native American legends—I think he likes the African folklore the best."

"He's got good taste," she said. "Does he move around when he hears it?"

"No, his heartbeat gets louder and livelier."

"Ahhh, you can feel his heartbeat. You're more in touch than I thought."

"I can't feel it, I can hear it."

"Oh, that's right," Marlene said. "You mentioned that before." She wound a strip of measuring tape around my head. "This is for the ceremonial birthing head-dress we're going to make together for welcoming this baby into the universe."

The rhythm hammered wildly like a salsa. I smiled. "He likes that idea," I said. "His heartbeat's going ballistic."

"Jill, when you say you can hear the heartbeat, what exactly do you mean?" Her normally mellow demeanor seemed to prickle a little.

"I mean just that. I hear it."

"Literally?"

"Yes, just like you can hear the radio when you turn it on, or the sound of my voice right now. I hear the heartbeat."

"Are you hydrating yourself properly?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"You should avoid white sugar. And stay away from wheat."

"Wheat is bad?"

"Wheat isn't bad. It's evil."

"Really?"

“And I recommend a yogurt enema, twice a day.”

Before she left, she asked for Dan’s cell, saying she wanted to get in touch with his energy. Little did I know, she was planning to rat me out. Less than an hour later, Dan came home early from work. He walked in the door frantically running his hands through his hair, throwing his bag down, rushing to my side.

“Omigod!” he said his eyes bugged out. “I got a call from this midwife, Marlene? She said you were wigged out. Have you gone bananas, Jill?”

He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight. “She said maybe the hormones were making you whacko. Are you okay, Jilly?” he rocked me back and forth. My baby’s heartbeat had ceased the minute he walked in the door. “She also said you could be allergic to wheat. What the fuck is wheat?”

So Marlene—folk-tale-telling, ceremonial-headdress-making Marlene thought that I was crazy. For the first time, I wondered if she might be right. Hearing my unborn baby’s heartbeat was a completely outrageous notion, I admitted. But I thought of other “outrageous notions,” like the mother who was able to lift up a car to rescue her trapped baby, or the mother who wrestled a polar bear away from her toddler, or the mother who pried open the jaws of an alligator that had clamped down on her infant's ankle. I wasn’t crazy, I told myself, I was just a perceptive mother. Maybe one endowed with special powers. After all the crap I’d been through, maybe I was entitled to super-human abilities.

“Jilly, talk to me,” Dan shouted. “What’s going on? What happened to Brody?”

I pushed Dan away, hoping the rhythm would return, but nothing, just the purring of the AC and Dan's heavy breathing.

"Brody's a quack. I'm not the crazy one," I said in a measured voice. "This baby's for real and I'm having him at home. I was waiting to tell you until I found the right midwife. Fruit Loops Marlene is out."

"But she said you were hearing things. She said you hear the heartbeat all the time, and you did say something like that to me last week."

There was no way Dan could handle the truth so I lied. "I just meant I sensed the heartbeat. I heard it in a metaphorical sense, like any pregnant woman would."

"So by metaphorical you mean, supernatural? Like the baby's a demon or a ghost?"

"Metaphorical, moron. Like, I don't literally hear the heartbeat, but I feel the life inside of me."

"So why'd this lady call me up all concerned and whatnot?"

"Clearly, she misunderstood," I said. "I won't be using her anymore. By the way, it's a boy!"

Dan was satisfied, but I was not. It had been a week since the heartbeat first blurted out, but it stayed silent in Dan's presence. I thought maybe the silence was related to the time of day, that at five-thirty when Dan came home from work, my special maternal power went on hiatus. After all, it would fade in and out throughout the day. I'd be doing the laundry, putting clothes in the washer to the pounding drum machine of my baby's heart, like some sort of electronic music at a rave, and it would dwindle out for a moment as the phone rang and I started talking. If I wanted to hear the sound again, even

in mid-conversation, all I'd have to do is tune my ears and there it was. With Dan around though, there was no bringing in that signal. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't summon up that sound. And now I saw it had nothing to do with time of day. Marlene's phone call had brought Dan home early in the afternoon, a time when normally I'd be rocking out to that sweet rhythm, and my little buddy had just clammed right up.

I couldn't avoid the awful truth. I sat on that sofa in our living room, the afternoon light coming through the slats in the blinds and striping my belly in light. I worried for the first time about Dan and my baby. Dan's presence was either stopping or slowing the baby's heartbeat to a pace that made it inaudible. Either way, it couldn't be good for this child, and I decided I'd take no chances.

As soon as he left, I packed my bags and sped over to my parents' house. I told my mother Dan and I had had a fight, and I would be staying there for a few days. As soon as Dan got wind that I'd left, he drove over, but I told my mother not to let him in under any circumstances. She was torn. Both she and Dan hailed from Charlestown, and they shared a special bond from the moment they met. My mother begged me to let him in, to just have a conversation with him, but I refused. I told her I felt safe here, and that if she even considered letting him in, I'd seek refuge elsewhere.

"Did he hit you, Jill? 'Cause this sounds much worse than just an argument." I could see her hands trembling in desperation for a cigarette as she paced back and forth in my old bedroom. Meanwhile, Dan banged at the door downstairs. We could hear him through the closed window.

"Open the fuck up!"

"Oh, this will be a good story for the neighbors," I said.

"Fuck them," said my mom. "Answer the question. Did he hit you?"

It was so tempting to lie. A lie, I knew, would make my mother handle the problem and I'd be rid of Dan for good. But I couldn't condemn him like that. He was the father of my child, even if the child's heart stopped beating in his presence.

"He didn't lay a hand on me," I said. "We're just going through a rough patch."

This seemed to satisfy my mother. "Okay, I'll tell the pisser to leave," she said. I think she agreed just so she could go and grab a cigarette. I heard her yelling to Dan through the door, some more banging and shouting from him, and then finally quiet. I heard his car pull away, the flick of a lighter and a deep sigh from my mother below. And then I heard the beating of my baby's heart, faintly at first, and then booming, a delicious bass drum, pounding away, such a thumping backbeat I wanted to rap to it. What a vigorous life he was!

I luxuriated in the tropical jungle of my childhood room for the next few days. The morning sickness and fatigue had finally disappeared in my third month, and I relished the time to rest and listen without interruption to the sound of my baby's heart. The whirling and whooshing of surging blood pulsated through my ears. His rhythm was rousing, a mottled tempo that came sometimes fast, sometimes slow, sometimes loud, sometimes soft. The varied cadence of his sound made him so much more alive, like a real person with many moods and colors. He spoke to me through his thumps, tapping out a rhythm like he was knocking on the door to my heart. *Lub-dub. Gung-ga. Whomp-whomp.*

My mom kept bothering me about doctor's appointments, telling me she wanted to go with me. She wouldn't let me seek out another midwife, and I finally succumbed to

her decision, thinking any obstetrician besides Brody would be okay. And I knew just the OB I wanted: the one who employed Lois, my old stone-faced sonogram technician friend.

I called Dr. Brody's office and, disguising my voice, found out that Lois had gone to work for a Dr. Nadaje. I made an appointment, telling the office that my former doctor would be sending my medical records, though I'd started no such process—I wanted this one to start fresh. My mom took off work to come with me. Of course, the first thing Dr. Nadaje wanted was an ultrasound. Half naked and freezing in my paper gown, I sat on the white paper of the padded table patiently waiting like a piece of fish on ice. My mom sat in a chair across from me, opening and closing the pack of her Marlboro Reds. The door opened and there she was: Lois, looking lovelier than ever, her black hair pulled back in a bun, her delicate wire spectacles glimmering beneath the florescent lights. She made no sign of recognition, just offered a monotone "hello" and looked down at my chart. Then she looked up again, but her expression did not change.

"Lie down, please," said Lois like she was directing traffic. All business, this Lois. She rubbed the gel on my stomach and placed the transducer on top. Oddly enough the room had turned quiet. My body stopped for a moment to absorb the silence, and for a second, I doubted myself, doubted everything I had been through in the last few weeks, and everything I would ever go through. Then, Lois flicked a switch. BOOM-BOOM-BOOM-BOOM. Heavy footsteps clomping though mud. Irish step-dancers. A fleet of galloping horses. An ocean wave rolling into shore. A tiny forceful organ opening and closing like a lotus, pumping life through the body, bringing existence into being. Lois looked at me and smiled.

"I don't usually say this," she said, leaning forward. "But congratulations."

The Ghost of Diane

To: KaylieH@gmail.com

From: Greta316@netzero.net

Date: June 15, 2011

Subject: Directions and Plans for Weekend Reunion

After you go through Portland, about an hour later you'll see signs for Windham. Branch off onto route 302 and ten minutes from there take the Old Casco Road exit, NOT the Pleasant Lake exit. That exit is currently under construction. Take a left off the exit. You'll pass the Old Casco Hotel and then you'll begin to wind around the lake until you come to Cherrywood. It's more overgrown now, but you'll recognize it.

You will remember the low, white stone wall full of cracks and crevices, chipped rock, missing chunks, and sharp protrusions. That wall, like so much of Cherrywood, has a life of its own. Built by settlers in the early 1800's and restored a hundred years later when the place became an overnight camp for girls, it was fixed up again twenty years ago when the camp closed and was sold off for vacation homes. You will see the old "Cherrywood" sign, a fading dark green square hanging from the weathered post. The old gates are gone, and once you turn in, it's just the pebbled dirt road flanked by massive fir trees, now packed so tight that the path is dark at noon.

It takes a while to get down this dark road, but on your left you'll recognize the old gym, with its dilapidated white wood and sagging green roof, and on your right you will see the open meadow and beyond that, the forest. The lake appears once you get to the end of the road, and you'll realize that nothing has really changed since you left. The

camp's old director's cabin that my family owns is on the far right, then the big old dormitory of yours, and, finally Penelope's house to the left in the old dining hall. All of them lined up on the lake like ducks in a row. But these are things, Kaylie, that you already know. These are things I don't need to tell you, if you remember this part of your childhood. Do you?

I remember it vividly. The way you and I pushed off the dock, paddled the canoe out onto the lake. We'd pack a lunch for the day and explore. Discover little coves, those muddy inlets covered with rocks where we'd perch on a boulder to eat our sandwiches. Or we'd glide by people's homes, stealthily along the shore, try to peek in on their lives. We'd wonder if they were summer visitors like us, or if they lived here year round. Their homes, sitting on the edge of the shore, like they were balancing on the lake, peeking out from among the mass of trees.

Do you remember taking the canoe to Casco Beach where most of the locals would hang out? Teenage boys smoking cigarettes with white beer bellies and missing teeth. Girls with high ponytails and lots of makeup sitting on top of picnic tables. And then the hippie families, with their dogs and beards and vans. We the foreign, exotic summer visitors would lay out our towels on the pebbly sand, the tiny stretch of shore, watch the lake lap up at our feet and watch the locals wonder about us, where we came from, where we would be returning to. We'd wade into the water, feeling the tiny rocks between our toes, then the stones, then the sand, feeling that it was all ours.

Every year we would make our annual trek across the swamp in the middle of the woods. The swamp that led out into a ditch by the highway, the swamp across which you took us, bravely, strongly, surely. You, the unquestionable leader, Penelope, the clumsy

but beautiful ingénue, me the devoted protégé, trying my best to be as tough as you looked.

I say all this to spark your memory. Maybe if you recall the details, this reunion will be a little easier, a little smoother for everyone. I know you haven't been back for twelve years. I still don't understand. You left for college and never came back for the summer, never returned my letters or emails. So now you return to stage your wedding at the lake. What an inspired idea.

Did you get the email I sent last week, inviting you to our little rendezvous? I never heard back. I'm hoping you and I and Penelope will be able to reunite in between the wedding events. I've got all sorts of activities planned. I also sent an email to Penelope, though I don't know if she'll respond—I heard recently that she has a drug problem. Shame, don't you think? I also heard that you became a therapist. Good for you. Perhaps you can cure Penny while we're all here together. I know neither of you would come back just for me, but since you'll be here for your wedding (to which I'm not invited, I don't know why) you might as well say yes to the reunion. Please respond either way. I do hope you can make it.

Your Old Friend,

Greta

June 1992

The one-room guest cabin was tight and musty, still holding in the day's heat in the evening. It felt like an overgrown doll house. Greta took in the strong smell of wood when she first walked in. The floors, walls and ceiling of the cabin were all made of

balsam fir, and it was like being in a wooden box. She wanted to enjoy the concentrated smell of cinnamon emanating from the wood, but Kaylie opened one of the two small windows and the smell drifted out. At least now she could hear the comforting sound of the lapping lake, just steps from the cabin. Kaylie threw down her green sleeping bag and stack of Archie comics. Greta and Penelope did the same, but Penelope dropped the flashlight on her toe, and began whimpering in pain like an injured puppy.

"Shut up," Kaylie said. "You're such a baby."

"It hurts," squealed Penelope.

"It hurts!" Kaylie mimicked in an exaggerated wail.

Greta accepted that Kaylie was always bossy, but she was rarely mean, and Greta attributed Kaylie's foul mood to her parents' impending divorce. Greta's mom had just told her that Kaylie and her mom, Diane, would be alone at Cherrywood this summer. She wasn't supposed to say anything about it to anyone, and she wasn't even sure if Kaylie knew that she knew.

"No whining!" barked Kaylie. "No babies allowed!" They were all twelve years old, inhabiting the awkward space between not wanting to be a kid anymore and not ready to be a teenager. It was nowhere land, an empty zone of nothingness, or freedom, depending on how you saw it.

Penelope squeezed her pillow hard and bit down on her lower lip. Greta wondered if she also knew the news about Kaylie and was trying not to upset her. But then again, Penelope never talked back and had never stood up to Kaylie before; no one had.

It was dark in the cabin, and Greta was beginning to feel scared, but didn't dare say so. Kaylie reached up and pulled on the rusted chain of the overhead fan with its

tulip-shaped lights. It shook back and forth, sending the lights dancing across the ceiling, flashing in a way that rattled Greta for a moment. She'd been both thrilled and nervous about this sleepover. According to Kaylie, the guest cabin was once used as a place to punish the girls at the camp. It was, apparently, haunted by the spirit of one of the campers who was killed there in the 1930's after being repeatedly whipped as a punishment for stealing an apple from the dining hall. This true legend, according to Kaylie, was the reason they were spending the night there: to test their bravery.

"Where are the vanilla wafers?" Penelope asked, as usual wanting to get right down to the business of eating. She was voluptuous and clumsy, a fleshy ten year-old with big, soggy brown eyes, a mass of white blonde hair and an upper lip that rose to a sharp little peak.

"Only one each, for now," said Kaylie passing the cookies. "We have to ration them out." She sat down Indian style on her sleeping bag and started reading a comic. Her hooded eyes drooped downward making it look like she was sleeping. Her long, pointed nose cast a shadow across her thin lips. She was tall and thin with an athletic build from competitive swimming and basketball. Greta and Penelope each picked a comic as well, but Greta couldn't concentrate on the exhilarating love triangle between Archie, Veronica and Betty. She was distracted by the poster up on the wall. Under the title "The World's Most Dangerous Sharks," were water color paintings of thirty different sharks in grays and browns and blacks. There was something reassuring about the poster, something in the fact that these frightening creatures were there in image only, a reminder that she was safe; that they were safe.

“There’s something I want to tell you guys,” said Kaylie, putting down the comic book. She stood up to shut the windows and pull the shades down, and while her back was turned, Penelope snuck another cookie. Greta pretended not to see.

Kaylie reached up and pulled the chain again. The room went dark.

“Hey, what’s that for?” Greta said. She didn’t want to sound too upset about it, although she was. “Is it bedtime already?” she said with a weak laugh.

“No,” said Kaylie, flicking on the flashlight. “It’s story time.”

She positioned the flashlight under her chin, lighting up her face in an odd way that made her features look like they’d been removed and glued on again upside down. Now that the windows were closed, the smell of fir overtook the room, except this time it was mixed with an earthy, decaying odor too, like rotting wood.

“This is a true story,” she continued. Greta could see Penelope in her pink flowered pajamas sucking on the cookie, trying not to move her mouth so that Kaylie wouldn’t know about it. Greta pursed her lips. She would love a cookie right now just to distract her from her fear. She knew Kaylie was going to tell another story about the girl who was killed in the cabin. She told so many, she had even given the girl a name: Tessa. Greta took a deep breath and looked up at the shark poster, it’s yellowish background glowing in the dark. The sharks were real, somewhere at some time, but there was no way they could harm her now. Just like Tessa might be real, but there was no way she could harm her if she were dead, right?

“I know, I know. Tessa, the girl who died here,” Greta said, trying to preempt her fear of the upcoming story. “You told us how the counselor whipped her so badly that she was bleeding all over, how they left her in here for two nights with broken ribs.”

“No, it’s not about Tessa. It’s about me,” Kaylie said. The girls were quiet. With the windows closed they could only hear the creak of the wood floor and the wood walls.

“Last week,” Kaylie began, “I stayed in this cabin by myself overnight. It was before you guys got here for the summer. I wanted to test myself.”

Kaylie was always testing Greta and Penelope to prove their bravery, their toughness and their loyalty, but Greta was surprised to hear that Kaylie actually tested herself too. She’d always assumed that Kaylie did not need to be tested, that long ago, she had already passed a series of tests and proven herself.

“I was here alone. My mother came in to check on me before she went to bed, and I was reading Archies. She brought me over some cookies for a snack, but she forgot the milk. She said, ‘Don’t worry, Kaylie, I’ll go back and get it.’ As soon as she left, I started reading again. I finished a whole *Betty and Veronica Double Digest*, so I must have been reading for a while.”

“Weren’t you scared?” Penelope asked. “All alone in the cabin?” She held her pillow in her hands tightly, like a security blanket.

“I wasn’t scared. I told myself I was going to stay up all night to see if anything scary happened. I thought maybe the ghost of Tessa would come to me. Or, maybe the man with a hook for an arm would break out of the insane asylum and come here. And I wanted to be awake for that."

Kaylie’s tone was measured, like it always was, in control. She had a tinge of a Boston accent that came out more when she was tired.

“Anyway, I started to get tired. It must have been really late. I tried staying up for a little longer, but I couldn’t do it. I turned off my flashlight and lay down in my sleeping bag in the dark. That’s when I heard them.”

“Heard who?” said Greta.

“The loons. They were calling to each other on the lake. I thought it was strange because normally they make their noises at sunset and sun-up, not in the middle of the night. So I was sort of weirded out, you know? And then, I suddenly realized that my mother hadn’t come back with the milk. At first I thought, she must’ve forgotten, but that was so unlike her. I started to worry because she was all alone in the cabin.

“I decided to go check on her. I got out of my sleeping bag and made the short walk back to my cabin. The front door was wide open. I went into my mother’s bedroom and found the bed empty. The covers lay in a ball on the floor. I ran into the bathroom, the kitchen, the other bedrooms. She wasn’t there. I thought maybe I'd missed her on the walk over. It was so dark outside, the moon was just a sliver, barely giving off light. Maybe I'd missed her in the dark.

“So I ran back to the guest cabin. The loons were calling still, but louder now, sounding like an alarm. I ran really fast, forgetting my flashlight, running in the pitch dark. Just before I made it to the cabin, I thought I heard footsteps behind me. I turned around to make sure no one was following. I was so scared that someone or something would grab me that I walked backward the rest of the way to the cabin. I saw a square of light and knew I was at the cabin door. I slowly backed into the door and bumped up against something big and heavy. I turned around. It was a person taking up the whole doorway, but their feet weren't on the ground. I looked up to see a body hanging from a

rope, all loose like a rag doll. I couldn't see the person's face because their head was dropped forward, almost like it was gonna fall off the body, but I recognized the hair and the red slippers. It was my mother."

Greta's hand jumped to Penelope's arm, grasping it so tight that Penelope let out a scream. This made Greta shriek too. She could see the whole thing, Diane's wilted body, her long black hair hanging down in front of her face, the thick, braided rope extending up from her neck to the top of the door.

"What did you do?" cried Penelope.

"Penny, it's a story," shouted Greta, elbowing Penelope. "We just saw Kaylie's mom tonight. She's just trying to scare us." But still, Greta had to wrap her arms around herself so she wouldn't shake. It was strange that Kaylie had not burst into laughter, like she usually did when she tricked them with some great scare.

"Oh, yeah, Kaylie" Penelope said. "We did just see your mom. That's not funny."

Kaylie did not laugh. "It's not funny because it's true," she said. "The woman you saw tonight was not my mother. That was the ghost of my mother."

"That's stupid," said Greta, throwing a comic at her head. But Kaylie's face remained stoic.

"I'm serious, Greta. It is a ghost. And if you guys say anything to it for the entire summer, you're no longer my friends."

"What do you mean?" said Penelope, wrinkling up her forehead.

"I mean you can't talk to her. You can't even look at her. If you do, she will turn against us and haunt us. If you do, then I'm never talking to either of you again."

"That's crazy," said Greta, but she knew, they all knew, that no matter how crazy the idea, Kaylie's rules were to be followed.

Kaylie made them all put their hands on top of one another's and repeat after her.

"I will not," she said.

"I will not," Greta and Penelope said.

"Speak to Diane Hanley." She continued, with Greta and Penelope repeating after her.

"I will not look at Diane Hanley. I will not eat her food. If I do, Kaylie will no longer be my friend."

Greta thought it was weird, but she went with it because she felt bad for Kaylie, felt bad that her parents were getting a divorce, and besides, she figured Kaylie would forget about it the next morning.

"That is our pact," said Kaylie. "Forever and ever."

To: KaylieH@gmail.com

From: Greta316@netzero.net

Date: June 25, 2011

Subject: Haven't heard back from you

Dear Kaylie,

I'm a little chagrined that I haven't heard back from you. I sent you the invitation over a week ago. I checked carefully—I know this is the correct email address. I'm aware you're busy with wedding preparations, but please take a moment out of your packed

schedule and email me back. I hope you're not avoiding me because you think I'm crazy, though I know there's some piece of you that probably has always considered me nuts. Especially after the time we were sitting in the old gym and I started screaming and said that I'd seen the devil. Then later that day as we were on our way to Funtown U.S.A., I said I had to be back by five to meet the devil in the gym again. If you recall, we didn't get back until eight because you had to ride the flume for a tenth time and Penelope wanted to eat more fried dough, so I missed my meeting with the devil.

The truth is, Kaylie, I really didn't see the devil. I actually made all that up. Let me explain. That was the summer my friend Alison Keene from school was visiting. We were all sitting on the stage of the gym planning our annual talent show. You and I were trying to come up with song ideas for our gymnastics/dance routine. You were set on "Hangin' Tough," by New Kids on the Block while I wanted to use "She Drives Me Crazy" by the Fine Young Cannibals. Then Alison said that Doris, another girl from my school, also loved that song and that Doris was such a loser and also a very good friend of mine. I got really embarrassed. I guess, Kaylie, I looked up to you and didn't want you to think that I was friends with a loser. We only saw each other at Cherrywood over the summers, and I wanted you to think of the summer me as cool and tough. That way I could think of myself that way, and maybe bring a little piece of that back with me when I returned home in the fall. That's why I started screaming—to change the topic, not because I had seen the devil. So you see, I'm not crazy.

Yours truly,

Greta

June 1992

But Kaylie did not forget about the vow she'd made the girls take. After waking the next morning, Kaylie marched them down to the lake and out onto her dock. She took off her Claddagh ring and held it up to the sky. The ring had been a gift from her mother the previous summer, and both Penelope and Greta knew it well. The gold ring featured two hands clasping a heart surmounted by a crown. It was a symbol of love, friendship and loyalty, and Diane had one to match that she wore all the time. Kaylie cocked her arm back, and flung the ring as far as she could. It arced out over the smooth, shiny surface of the lake, and landed in the water with a "plink."

Greta was shocked. Penelope looked like she was going to cry. Kaylie just stared off into the distance, toward the violet mountains rising above the pine trees on the opposite shore.

"Come on," she said, in a low voice. "Let's get dressed and take the canoe out."

Penelope went back to the guest cabin to retrieve her clothes, while Kaylie and Greta climbed up the stairs leading to Kaylie's raised deck overlooking the lake. Diane had laid out a platter of homemade Belgian waffles with powdered sugar and fresh raspberries and a pitcher of warm maple syrup. Greta was about to sit down, when Kaylie yanked her back.

"You can't eat her food. If you eat her food you're admitting that she exists. And she doesn't. She's a ghost."

"But, Kaylie, I'm hungry. At least let me have breakfast."

"No," said Kaylie gritting her teeth.

Diane walked out with a carton of orange juice and some glasses.

“Good morning, girls,” she said, placing the drinks on the table. “How was your night in the guest cabin?”

Greta was about to open her mouth, when Kaylie gave her a look.

"Girls?" said Diane looking to both of them. She had the same hooded eyes as her daughter, but where Kaylie's face was long and narrow, Diane's was fuller and oval shaped. She usually wore her long black hair back in a single braid, and her cheeks were consistently rosy. Diane's trademark—a stack of beaded bracelets around both wrists—made Greta think of her as an artist. Even though Diane didn't paint or sculpt, she was extremely creative in the kitchen. Greta's own mother worked late all the time, lived in her tailored suits, and heated up frozen food for her kids or ordered takeout. Diane, on the other hand was a master in the art of nurturing.

"Hello? Earth to Kaylie and Greta." Diane snapped her fingers and laughed. "Did the bogey man steal my girls and replace them with zombies?"

Greta wanted so badly to laugh along with Diane. Diane laughed a lot. She laughed at Greta's bad jokes, she laughed at the tiniest hint of sarcasm, she laughed at herself often. Greta loved to ride that laugh, to jump in with her own laughter and join in Diane's easy joy.

This time, though, she stopped herself and looked at Kaylie, who set her mouth and raised her eyebrows. Greta looked down at the floor and blushed, avoiding Diane's reaction to her silent treatment.

Penelope ambled out onto the porch. “Oh, goody, waffles!” she said, rubbing her hands together.

“Stop!” shouted Kaylie, blocking her way. “Don’t even think about it.”

Penelope opened her mouth to speak and Kaylie delivered a sharp pinch to her side. “Owww!’

“Girls? Is everything okay?” Diane asked.

Kaylie took Greta’s and Penelope’s arm and tugged them inside.

“Come on,” she whispered. “I have a granola bar in my pocket. We can split it three ways.”

She put her arms around both girls and herded them outside. Greta turned to see Diane standing alone on the deck, still holding the orange juice and the cups looking confused. She remembered how last summer, when her parents were fighting a lot, she'd come over to Kaylie's for a sleep over and stay up late confiding in Diane. Diane would make her hot cocoa and speak to her like a friend. She’d ask things that nobody else would, like “How does it make you feel?” and “Are you scared that your parents will break up?” and “Are you lonely?” Greta was lonely, but she felt so much better when she was with Diane. And now, here she was, leaving her alone when Diane probably needed a friend more than ever.

"I can't do this," said Greta, as they reached the guest cabin. "I like your mom too much."

"Fine," said Kaylie. "Don't do it. But that's it for us then. If you talk to the ghost I'm not your friend anymore."

"Why are you doing this, Kaylie? Your mom's so nice. She's so cool. Is it because of, you know, your dad?"

Kaylie's eyes filled with tears. She took in a deep breath and closed her eyes. "No," she said, her voice slightly shaking. "I'm doing this because she is a ghost. The

story I told you is true. And, like I said, if you talk to the ghost, I will never talk to you again."

That was enough for Penelope. "Well I'm not talking to the ghost," she said.

"And what about you, Greta?" Kaylie said, attempting a smile. "Will you promise to follow the pact?" The tears spilled over and streaked down Kaylie's cheek. She put out her hand, now wet from crying. Penelope placed hers on top. They looked to Greta. Greta didn't want to hurt Diane, but she also didn't want to hurt Kaylie. The tough, durable Kaylie, was still such a child. At least Diane was an adult. She could handle it, right?

"Yeah, I'm in," she said quietly, placing her hand on top.

They sat on the floor and ate their pieces of granola bar. It would be a long summer without Diane's cooking. Greta usually spent evenings at Kaylie's house, where Diane would prepare spaghetti and meatballs from her family's old Italian recipe, or she'd whip up a big pot of clam chowder or meatloaf and mashed potatoes. She also liked to bake pies with fresh Maine blueberries, and cookies were her specialty. Greta felt as if Diane was her second mother, or, sometimes even the mother she preferred.

The hardest part for Greta wasn't the absence of Diane's food though. The hardest part was squeezing out the interactions with Diane, and leaving a heavy void of silence. It wasn't an act of holding in, of restraint, like keeping a secret or trying not to giggle in class. It was hard, physical labor to discipline herself to turn away and ignore her when Diane begged with her eyes for an answer, any answer to any of her questions. At first Diane laughed it off, like it was a game (which it basically was, Greta felt, a cruel game), then after a few days, she became withdrawn and then angry. She'd stomp her feet and shout at the girls. "Talk to me! Say something, now!" But soon, she became resigned to

it. A hush fell over the room whenever she entered. Forgetting the whole thing, she would say something—"Are you going to the beach tomorrow?" or "Isn't it gorgeous out?"—and then suddenly remember that all she would get was silence. Her mouth would drop open and her eyes would dart from Kaylie to Penelope and land on Greta. Greta would quickly pick up a book or a deck of cards, anything to make herself busy.

The summer stretched on, and Diane's normally robust, cheerful presence, sank into a muted, frail specter. Her eyes drooped, her shoulders slumped, she shuffled around invisibly, and soon, after weeks of being shunned she really did seem like a ghost. Greta wanted to break the pact so badly, but she couldn't betray Kaylie. And besides, after a while it was too late. Instead of an absence of sound, the silence became its own physical being. A thing, a body, a ghost in the room that everyone could see, but not hear.

To: KaylieH@gmail.com

From: Greta316@netzero.net

Date: July 18, 2011

Subject: Cherrywood Reunion. Is it on? Yes it is!

Dear Kaylie,

Hello again, dear friend! How are the wedding preparations? Will it be a white wedding? Ha Ha! JK. LOL.

Well it's been over a month since I've extended my invitation. I'm reaching out once again to let you know that this reunion is happening. And you will be attending. I've given up on trying to track down Penny. She's probably holed up in some rehab center

dealing with her addiction. I don't want to bother her. We always knew she was the weakest of the three of us.

I want to jog your memory of a little something—well I plan to do a lot of memory jogging when you are here for the reunion—but let's call this a preemptive jog. A little jog in the park, or more apropos, the woods. Do you remember our catch phrase? "Kaylie, I can see you in the toaster." "Greta, I can see you in the toaster." That's the one. I assume you've answered the pop quiz correctly. How could you not? Remember how every summer at Cherrywood, you would come over to my cabin and we'd eat cinnamon toast together? If you remember, the toaster in the cabin was one of the old-fashioned kinds. It looked sort of like a silver submarine. You'd stick the bread in the two slots in the top and push a lever down so the toast disappears into the slots, then when it's ready it pops up out of the slots like a jack in the box, and the funny thing is, you'd never know when it was going to strike. Everything would be quiet and all of a sudden: POP! Up it flies with this loud sound from the metal spring coming undone. POP!

But before it would pop, do you remember what we used to do? While we were waiting, you and I would stand next to each other and look at our reflections in the shiny silver of the toaster. We used to giggle so much, because the reflections looked so peculiar. They were us but they weren't us. They were strange versions of us. The shiny silver and the curve of the toaster twisted the images so that our faces looked pulled down, like they were melting. And I'd point and say, "Kaylie, I can see you in the toaster." And then all of a sudden—POP! The toast would come flying out and we would just explode into laughter. The phrase became a little greeting of ours. "I can see you in the toaster!" we'd say to one another when we said hello or goodbye.

Anyway, I'm reminding you of this because just the other day, the strangest thing happened. I was standing by the toaster—yes, it's still there—and as usual, I saw my own reflection in it. All of a sudden an image of someone else appeared in the toaster beside me. And do you know who it was? No, it wasn't you, my friend, though I would've guessed the same. Not you, nor Penelope. The person who appeared beside me in the toaster was your mother. Well, I know it sounds odd, surely I'd think the same thing, but in some ways it makes perfect sense.

You see, she was wearing the Claddagh ring that was the mate of yours—the ring you never took off until the day of the pact. She held it up so I could see it, as if to tell me to forgive you. To forgive you for leaving this place and never coming back. Looking at your mother's melted face in the toaster, it seemed that she herself had forgiven you. Did she? No need to answer now. Wait until the reunion (I'm counting the days!) We'll surely get some answers then.

Yours always,

Greta

December 1996

Greta held tight to the iron railing so as not to slip on the icy steps. She knew this was the right side of the two-family house in West Roxbury because it had one of Diane's homemade signature wreaths, a holiday version, made of candy canes, golden pine cones and beanie babies interwoven to form a circle. She opened the screen and knocked on the door, swallowing first, steeling herself for this unlikely meeting with her summer friend.

After ten years of spending their summers together, they were meeting for the first time outside of Cherrywood.

"Greta! Come in." Kaylie's face was pale compared to her usual summer tan. She was decked out in gold hoop earrings, and a blue and white silk-trimmed baby-doll dress. A fine stripe of black eyeliner rimmed her eyes, and red lipstick colored her thin lips. Greta was used to seeing her in t-shirt and shorts or a bathing suit. It was a shock to see such a tomboy like Kaylie wearing makeup, almost like seeing a boy dressed in drag. She had not expected Kaylie's sixteenth birthday party to warrant formal wear.

"Happy birthday," Greta said coming into the house. It smelled of gravy. The space was small but cozy, full of ruffled pillows, one of Diane's hand-knit afghans draped across the sofa and a fake Christmas tree in the corner, every inch of it covered with plastic ornaments and a rainbow of lights. Eight of Kaylie's school friends stood in a circle of conversation, all wearing similar baby-doll dresses and big, sparkling jewelry, their hair blown out and puffed up. Greta awkwardly shoved her present into Kaylie's hands. She wore an old mauve Gap sweater with a white turtleneck and baggy jeans.

"Let me introduce you," Kaylie said. Already her grin had turned to more of a smirk. Her expectations were probably crushed, Greta thought, by the disappointing non-summer Greta that was here. She searched the room for Penelope, hoping for an ally amongst this alien crowd.

"Penny's not here," said Kaylie, as if reading her mind. "She went to Aspen with her family." She took Greta by the shoulders and pointed her in the direction of the other girls.

"Everybody, this is Greta," said Kaylie in a deflated voice.

"Hi," said Greta meekly, raising a hand in a sort of a half-wave, half-salute. She might as well just put her fingers to her forehead in the shape of an "L," she thought.

Beyond the gaggle of ornately-dressed friends was the dining room table set with delicate white china, gleaming silver cutlery and crystal wine glasses. Diane was fussing about the table, wearing a long white dress. She'd lost a lot of weight, and her face, without its usual fullness, now looked drawn and angular. Greta wanted to say hello, but Diane seemed totally focused on folding white napkins into the shape of swans. The light gushing through the window behind Diane bleached her out, making her almost invisible. The only image that stood out to Greta was Diane's black hair, floating in the stark whiteness of the room.

Kaylie turned her back on Greta as soon as the doorbell rang, and then Greta didn't see her until they sat down to eat, so absorbed was Kaylie in the arrival of friends whom she saw every day at school. The whole thing felt strange, as if a figment of Greta's imagination had come to life: Kaylie really did exist outside of Cherrywood. But there was something off about this version of Kaylie, something Greta couldn't quite put her finger on.

The lunch was just as fancy as the guests' clothing and the table decorations. Diane had prepared shrimp cocktail served out of martini glasses, an arugula salad, and for the main course, a rich beef bourguignon. Hovering behind them silently, she floated from chair to chair, filling the girls' glasses with sparkling cider spiked with white wine. She served all the dishes, gliding in and out of the kitchen without anyone noticing her at all. As Diane set a piece of chocolate torte at Greta's place, Greta could see a web of blue veins showing through the pale skin of her thin wrists. She also saw the gold Claddagh

ring glinting off Diane's finger. Diane still wore it after all these years, even though Kaylie had never replaced hers. The ring was loose on her middle finger, sliding up and down as she placed food on the table. Greta wanted to ask Diane why she had become so thin and so quiet, but couldn't form the words.

Although Kaylie had lifted the pact the summer after she first enforced it, something irreversible had been done, and Greta's brief exchanges with Diane during subsequent summers were awkward and sad. It was almost as if they continued to shun her. Something had been broken and could not be repaired. They never resumed their meals together and they didn't hang out at Kaylie's cabin anymore. Each summer, Greta noticed that Diane laughed less and less, that her old humor drifted away, and there were no more confiding chats. When Greta offered details about her brother's new girlfriend whom her parents despised, or her anxiety about the upcoming school year, Diane would nod and smile, and give one word answers with no follow-up. It was as if she had been so hurt she couldn't bring herself to talk again. Greta tried to ignore the change, but she couldn't avoid the palpable silence when Diane entered a room. The silence had a presence of its own, refusing to leave even after the pact had been lifted and the girls had grown up.

Now away from Cherrywood where the silence seemed to reside, Greta urged herself to speak up, to say something to Diane—anything would do. The chatter of the other girls blocked out any opportunity to speak, though, and she folded herself up into her own silence. She couldn't keep up with the rapid, dizzying conversation with its exclusive air of intimacy anyway. She was relieved when lunch ended and all the girls returned to the living room. Greta hung back in the dining room, gathering up empty

plates, pretending to help, but really trying to avoid the rest of the party. Bumping her hip to open the swinging kitchen door while balancing a pile of plates in her hand, she nearly crashed into Diane coming through in the other direction. Diane gasped and her face turned a stark white.

"Sorry," said Greta, rushing into the kitchen and depositing the plates on the counter. "Sorry. Are you okay?"

Diane looked shaken, stunned.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she said steadying herself on the counter, breathing heavily. "You don't have to help. Go back to the party."

"Diane, are you okay? You seem . . . "

"I'm fine," Diane interrupted, waving her away.

"Diane, I just want to tell you I'm sorry. Sorry for treating you in such a bad way when you were probably going through such a tough time." It just flooded out of Greta, and it felt so good, like a hammer shattering glass. Here, on the other side of summer, outside of Cherrywood, she could repair things. "All those summers ago when we didn't talk to you. We were just stupid little kids."

"Oh, that's so nice of you," said Diane, tears rolling out of her eyes. "So nice to hear from you Greta. You know, I really missed talking to you. It was like losing someone. I always felt like you were another daughter to me. And then to not be able to talk to you. I felt like I lost two daughters that summer."

Greta leaned over and hugged Diane. Her body felt so frail, but warm. She'd missed this. She took in Diane's scent of baby powder and flour, and noticed something else there too that she couldn't quite place.

“Can we go back?” said Greta. “To how it used to be? Forget about it all, like it never happened. I missed you too.”

Diane wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hands, reminding Greta of a baby raccoon cleaning itself. “Oh, we can never go back, I’m afraid,” she said, her voice no longer shaking. “Too much has changed.”

“No, nothing has changed,” Greta said. “Not if we don’t want it to.”

“No, I mean physically, dear.” Her voice was resolute now, her face dry.

“What do you mean, physically?”

“Kaylie wants to keep it a secret, but you should know. I’m not well. I have cancer.”

Greta burst into tears.

“No, no, don’t cry,” Diane said, rubbing Greta’s back just like she used to. “It will be okay. Come on, stop crying. You have to go out and celebrate with Kaylie.”

In the living room, Kaylie sat at the head of a circle opening presents. Greta stumbled in and stood behind the sofa, all the seats taken. No one offered her a space. She dug her nails into her palms, forcing herself to hold in the tears. Diane had asked Greta not to tell anyone the awful news: Diane had pancreatic cancer. The doctors said she would die within the year. She couldn’t even let Kaylie know she knew.

A blonde in a lime green dress and chunky patent leather shoes was handing the presents to Kaylie, standing over her as she opened each one. Every present was some type of personal adornment—fake fingernails, a set of headbands, an ankle bracelet, chunky gold hoops. Except for Greta’s which was a handmade photo collage on a framed foam board of all their summers at Cherrywood from age six to sixteen. It was a beautiful

patchwork collection of photos that Greta had spent hours digging up and putting together. When Kaylie opened it up, the oohs and ahhs of previous presents were absent and silence overtook the room. “Thanks,” said Kaylie, blushing and flashing the collage to the crowd for less than a second before depositing it face down on the floor.

“And for our last present,” said the blonde girl whose hair was swept up high above her forehead, forming a thick bouffant that resembled a crown. “From all of us.” She handed a present to Kaylie as giggles arose amongst the group.

It was a framed picture of a freckled, long-necked boy in a suit, hazy brush strokes of pale blue behind him. Kaylie didn’t just blush, she turned a full shade of scarlet. The giggles erupted into outright laughter.

“We know how much you like him,” said blondie, a playful elbow poking into Kaylie’s side. “So, we thought you could put this on your bedside table.”

Greta surmised two things: One, that the boy in the picture was either an embarrassing crush or a potential boyfriend. And, two, that Kaylie was not the unquestioned alpha amongst her school friends like she was with her summer ones, that she was indeed, at this moment, the butt of a joke.

Before Greta left, she snuck into the kitchen and hugged Diane one more time. As she took in the sweet scent of baby powder and the musty smell of flour, she recognized the unknown element that had eluded her before: it was the smell of rotting wood.

To: KaylieH@gmail.com

From: Greta316@netzero.net

Date: August 1, 2011

Subject: Who won?

Dear Kaylie,

This is becoming increasingly alarming that you are not responding to my emails. I know this is the right address. Don't ask me how I know, I just do. Now, let's talk turkey about my plans for the reunion. I know you'll be here. So you don't have much of a choice in terms of attendance, do you?

I'd like to know something. Remember the time at your sixteenth birthday party? I felt like such an idiot, trying to live up to the me you knew from the summer. I felt better, though, when I caught the "other" you, outside of the "summer" you and I saw the cracks in your armor. It was like there were two Kaylies, and of course, you must know as a therapist, that there can only be one. So, what I want to know is: which one ended up winning? Which one are you, the summer you or the other you? Funny, you could ask the same of me, and I could answer by way of telling you this: I live here now. I live permanently in our old summer home. I moved into the cabin a year ago, and I work at the Otisfield Lobster House as a waitress. I'm sure you think it's a waste of my education and upbringing—my parents certainly do. You may have heard about my "breakdown" at college, how I had to take a year off, but eventually I got my degree, and now everyone thinks I should be working in an office, not in a restaurant. I actually enjoy the freedom of the job. You see, when I come home after a hard day's work (and believe me, it's hard), I can relax and know that the Otisfield Lobster House will remain the Otisfield

Lobster House with or without me. I'm not tied to the Otisfield Lobster House nor is it to me, and that affords me a liberty that other professions don't allow, like for example, a therapist, who is responsible for the well-being and, in many cases, the very life or death of her patients.

I know because I've dealt with my fair share of therapists. Ever since my little "break" a decade ago, they've had me on various medications. Well good for them. They got me under control. Only problem was, something was missing. I didn't feel quite like myself, like something, or someone was holding me back, and I ended up going off the pills. I knew it was the right decision when I reached a point of clarity one night a few months ago. I was sitting in our cabin's big living room. You remember, with the stone fireplace and the creaky wood floor and the big moose head in the center of everything staring right down at you with its yellow eyes. I sat in that living room alone and the only thing I could talk to was the moose. I looked up at him—I called him Morris—and I started to tell him what fun we used to have here as children. How when you and me and Penelope roamed these grounds and rode the lake and stormed the fields, how we did it all with endless possibility. How we took on every day knowing it would be an adventure, knowing anything could happen. And how now it all feels so closed off. It's all little boxes. Going from one box to another, sideways, backwards or whatever direction you choose to travel, you end up in another box. And Morris looked at me with his dead eyes, and he sort of gave me a wink, and he said, "Well, welcome to adulthood, Greta."

I walked out to the dock and watched the moon light up the lake. I turned toward your cabin. I could see your dock just a little ways down. The lights were off. No one had come that summer. I sat there for a long time, and I realized, no one had come the

summer before, or the summer before that. No one except your dad and his new wife a few times and then the people you rented it to. You had not come since the day you left for college. And I have returned every single summer.

So tell me, why does this place mean so much to me and so little to you?

I asked your mother the same question the other night, when I was toasting up a nice piece of cinnamon toast, and she appeared in the toaster while I was waiting. She said the problem is that you never really cared about Cherrywood in the first place. How could that be? I asked her. How could anyone not care about this place? She said that not everyone could appreciate the beauty of Cherrywood like we do (me and your mom, that is). And then, she reached out of the toaster and gave me a present. It was her Claddagh ring! She said she wanted me to have it now. I couldn't believe it. I was so happy, I put it right on my finger, where its been ever since.

Forever and Ever,

Greta

October 1998

Greta's dorm room at Harvard on the third floor of Hollis Hall had such high ceilings, cathedral-like, she thought, as she lay on her bed staring up at the white expanse. The windows looking out onto the green span of Harvard Yard were also tall, so elongated they looked elastic. Next door, one of her dorm mates played some type of Middle Eastern music. Its notes, deviating from any normal melody, jarred Greta's ears, its vexing combinations of highs and lows sending little pangs throughout her body, each note pressing on her chest, into her sides, bearing down on her forehead so that she

wanted to scream for them to stop, but she was paralyzed in the bed. She couldn't move, couldn't talk. She had promised herself ten minutes of meditation and had to follow through.

Finally, an interruption came by way of the door opening a crack, a burst of light coming through on this otherwise gray, dank day. It must be her roommate, Greta thought, returning after three nights of sleeping over at her boyfriend's. Her roommate was so often not there that Greta had begun to feel uncomfortable when she actually was there. It was like living with a stranger, and indeed Greta barely knew the girl. She had already decided to request a single for her sophomore year, knowing there was nothing to do but try to grin and bear it for the remainder of this one.

The door closed again, and Greta saw that it wasn't her roommate, only the wind, or perhaps nothing at all. She got up to look out the window, an occupation she'd taken to with increasing frequency now that she was so often alone in this room. Her classes were beginning to feel unnecessary. Comparative Religion, Applied Mathematics, Expository Writing, and the freshman seminar: Humans, Animals and Cyborgs. All for what? So she could go out into the world and say she knew things? She looked down at the broad expanse of lawn forming the square between the brick buildings. The maple trees were alive with color, while the oaks had already given up half their foliage to the fall. Students lugging backpacks and professors toting briefcases scattered the dead leaves as they hurried along. And then on the path running alongside her dormitory, an oddly familiar looking woman with long black hair walking a Pomeranian.

The woman crossed in front of the dorm's entrance and took a right into Harvard Yard where Greta got a better look at her. She recognized the woman's stretched out

face, now so thin it was almost bony. It was Diane, wearing a beige flowing dress, holding tight to the dog's leash, walking slowly in an airy way. She knew Diane worked in Cambridge at an insurance firm, but had heard that she'd been too weak to work and was now bedridden at home. She'd made it a year longer than the doctors' predicted. How wonderful it was, then, to see Diane up and about. Yes, pale and drawn, but otherwise looking physically fit. Greta had no clue where this dog had come from, but she loved the sight of the two of them floating along the walkway, their heads held high. Greta bounded up from the chair and ran downstairs to say hello. As soon as she made it out onto the green, Diane was gone. She ran across the lawn, turning onto various paths, glancing around half-naked trees, and circling back to Hollis Hall, but no trace of Diane. She returned to her room and called her mother to find out what Diane was doing at Harvard.

Her mother greeted Greta's question with a long silence.

"It's not Diane," she told Greta. "It couldn't be. Greta, I was going to call you."

"What?" said Greta grasping the phone, pushing it against her ear and shutting her eyes. She knew what her mother was going to say.

"Diane passed away last night. Her sister called to tell us this morning."

Suddenly it was as if all the sound in the world had ceased, as if someone had turned the volume down to zero. The room took on a great expanding whiteness, and Greta felt like she was falling. She steadied herself against the wall, and took a deep breath. The air was redolent with the early compost smell of fallen, decaying leaves. She shut her eyes and let her head spin. She knew she had seen Diane, but she didn't tell her mother.

To: KaylieH@gmail.com

From: Greta316@netzero.net

Date: August 18, 2011

Subject: You can run, but you can't ...

Ahhh, Kaylie. Avoiding me, eh? It's okay. I get it. You certainly are the expert at giving the silent treatment. This must be how your mother felt all those years ago. I understand why she finally gave up.

I will not give up, though. I will not become resigned. No matter how much you'd like to avoid it, this reunion is happening. I'm sure you will understand on some level how your refusal to talk to me leaves me no choice but to speak out so there is no confusion between the two of us.

I suppose, realistically, the only place I can have a conversation with you is in the toaster. I finally saw you there last night. Well, it wasn't really you, of course. It was the distorted version of you, the version that makes your face look liquid, like it's dripping down the toaster, all wobbly and melting. Ahhh, I said. She's finally returned. Because when I first found you on the internet, and saw the wedding invitation on your friend's blog, I let out a long laugh that echoed over the lake. The invitation was such a lie. It allowed you to lay claim to a place that you gave up a long time ago.

You have been trying to escape Cherrywood for years, and failing that you now return to overwrite the truth of what happened here with a fairy tale wedding. You think you can make everything right, and then be able to leave. It just won't work, Kaylie. Like it or not, you are tied to me and to this place forever. You are tied to me and to Cherrywood because you know the truth of this place, and you know that I know that

truth. How your mother did not die of cancer. How all those years ago, such a long time ago, you told a story that came true. It's amazing that a child can make something so devastating happen, just by telling a story. Amazing, isn't it Kaylie? But you did it.

Don't worry. My lips are sealed.

Greta

August 2011

Greta went to the end of the dock and dangled her bare feet in the cool lake, feeling the last glimmer of sun on her cheeks. The late August air—crisp, yet still warm—indicated that summer was dying. She loved the feeling of it, loved that transition, when one season possessed the traits of the next. And she knew that fall would drift into winter and everything around her would die. She held her hand up to her face, examined the exquisite delicacy of the gold Claddagh ring on her middle finger. Two hands holding a crowned heart. A bond forever.

She could see the wedding party assembling just south down the shoreline. At the end of Kaylie's dock stood a bald man in a dark suit, probably the minister, and facing him a tall, broad-shouldered man in a light beige suit, no tie, no shoes. Two little blonde children, no doubt Kaylie's father's new kids, scampered down the dock scattering rose petals. And then came Kaylie, barefoot in a long white strapless dress, a ring of daisies in her hair, walking slowly toward the end of the dock, her arm linked in her father's. How charming and carefree!

Partially hidden by the trees, closer to the shore, were a cluster of people who, Greta imagined, were friends and relatives, Penelope among them, perhaps. She heard

violin music echoing across the lake, competing with the sound of the loons who were calling to one another.

The music stopped and Kaylie was now at the very edge of the dock standing beside her beau. Greta had never received a response to her email, nor an invitation to the wedding. It didn't matter, though. She now had a special, irreplaceable bond with Diane. And she knew, now, that Kaylie had finally returned to Cherrywood.

She took in the lovely image of the couple standing side by side on the dock, their figures reflected in the water, rippled and curled. Greta caught the scent of burning wood rising up in the air. Fall is coming, she thought, and she would carry this image into fall, winter and beyond. It was almost an image of perfection, but not yet complete. Greta, inched closer and craned her neck to see.

And there she was, moving gracefully down the dock to stand beside her daughter: Diane in a pale blue dress, a white flower tucked behind her ear, slender and fair, more beautiful than she had ever looked before. Greta waved to her, hoping she would see her, hoping she would look over, along the shoreline, down the lake, look over and notice the watcher from the dock.

Teeth

Miami: December 2010

Lucy thinks it would be fun combining a business trip with a vacation in Miami, but oh what a mess it's turned out to be. The minute the plane touches down, she gets a call from her son's rehab center in California informing her he's escaped again. *Great*.

Then she has to tell her ex-husband that she's selling the apartment he's renting from her, and that he has to move out. Of course, he refuses to leave, and now she's looking at the painful process of eviction. *Great and great*.

Then the meeting with the Mercy Hospital people goes terribly wrong when right before her presentation she realizes the lining of her skirt has ripped and is trailing behind her like a silk tail. She tries discreetly to stuff it back up into her skirt in the boardroom, but this only makes it look like she's itching her lady parts. *Great, great and great*.

Now, her third day here, she lies on the couch in her son Skylar's living room. His wife gave up offering Lucy a proper bed years ago because Lucy ignores such pleasantries, just flopping herself down on the nearest horizontal surface whenever sleep beckons—on a couch, a roomy chair, or even on the floor with a blanket. No problem. She's perfectly fine, thank you very much. Lucy can cram eight hours of sleep into just four, so she's not one for staying in bed, and is usually up and prowling well before dawn. But today, feeling the spirit of a vacation, she sleeps in, opening her eyes briefly at five a.m., then six, and restraining her impulse to jump up and out, succumbing to a voice telling her to stay, to rest, you need your rest, Lucy.

It doesn't matter anyway. At six-fifteen her three-year-old grandson comes into the room. Lucy hears his mother pick him up, coo to him, pour him a glass of milk and

bring him to the adjacent playroom. Lucy is soothed by their sounds. She curls up tighter on the couch, pulling the blanket over her body. She fell asleep in her clothes the night before—a white blouse with a scalloped collar and a knee length pleated skirt covered with butterflies. She hears the boy approaching.

"Gramma Lucy," he says. "Gramma Lucy." His voice rises in a teasing lilt. He is a mischievous one, this grandson Max, more wily than the others.

Still lying on the couch, Lucy shifts her body around to see him standing there with her front teeth in his hands. It is a partial plate—six porcelain front teeth attached to a pink acrylic molding that fits snugly to the roof of her mouth.

"Gimme dat." The words sound funny without her front teeth, but Max knows exactly what she's saying. He holds them in front of her, then snatches them away giggling, just as she reaches for them. Thinking it a game now, the boy runs around the coffee table while Lucy jumps up and lunges for him, missing as he cuts back and forth. At sixty-six years-old, she realizes she doesn't move as quickly as she used to. She'll have to outwit the little shit.

"Max, can Grammy hab it? You want a toy? I'll gib you a toy. Gib it to Grammy. Come on."

She bobs back and forth on her toes, faking a left, then grabbing to the right. *Come on, Lucy, you can do it!* The kid is too quick. He darts out of the way, leaps up onto an armchair and holds the teeth above his head, springing up and down on the cushion.

"Hee hee!," he squeals. "Grammy's teef!"

Lucy dashes to the chair. Just before she can grasp the teeth, Max cocks back his arm and hurls them across the room. The plate chatters across the tile floor like a

prankster's pair of wind-up false teeth, smashes into the edge of the bookcase and breaks in two.

"No!" she cries, rushing to the teeth. "No, no, no!" She picks up the pieces and sees that the pink plate has a clean break down the middle. "My teef," she says crumpling to the floor. She puts her face in her hand and quietly moans. Max backs away slowly and runs to his room.

"What's wrong?" says her daughter-in-law, Naomi, coming into the living room. "Did Max do this?"

Lucy is unable to speak. She nods silently.

"Max! Come here right now!"

"Iss all right," Lucy says, crying. "He's juss a child."

She clasps the two halves, one in each hand. She begins pacing the room, restoring the teeth to their half-moon shape by holding them together, then pulling them apart again in disbelief.

"It's okay," says Naomi. "Those are fixable. I think they have some of that dental glue at CVS."

"No, no, no. Dat stuff doesn't work. I can't pix dem." Lucy breathes rapidly. In, out, in, out, she reminds herself, because if she didn't she would stop breathing, and if she stops breathing, she will spontaneously combust.

"So, we'll get new ones. They aren't that expensive, are they?"

"You don't understand," Lucy says slowly, deliberately. "It's not da money. Dese teef were my little friends."

"Your friends?"

Lucy nods. “Dey’ve been wit me por twenty years. Made juss por my mout. Dey’ve been trough everyting wid me.”

“Well, okay.” Naomi trails behind Lucy’s frantic pacing across the length of the living room. “Then you’ll get a new set of friends. New teeth for a new beginning.”

“You don’t get it. Dese teef are da only tings I can rely on,” Lucy says, cupping the teeth in a single fist.

“Then maybe it’s time for you to find some real friends,” Naomi says, talking to her as if she were a child. “Some human friends.”

“I hab dose. Dey don’t compare to my teef.”

“I know, Lucy,” says Naomi. “I know. This is all about Harold, isn’t it?”

Lucy had lost six of her top front teeth by the time she was forty because her ex-husband Harold had told her not to brush them. Brushing was just a scam perpetuated by those greedy toothpaste companies, when all that was really needed was healthy eating—all natural, organic foods, no processed sugars; just nuts and berries, fruits and vegetables. Nature’s pure way. And he should know. Harold was a dentist and twenty years her senior. Who was she to question him?

Lucy had just turned eighteen when she met Harold at a resort in the Catskills, and their one-night stand resulted in Eli, her eldest son. It took another seventeen years, two more sons, and the destruction of more than her six teeth for her to finally leave him. By the time she’d fled to Ohio to attend college, the top row of front teeth were so degenerated that Dr. Bogle, a dentist in Colombus, had to pull them all and mold a fake set for her mouth.

“These teeth symbolize everything Harold did to you,” Naomi says, her voice rising with every syllable. “They are not your friends. Those teeth are your enemies. It’s time for a new beginning.”

Lucy’s eyes glaze over. She’s had so many new beginnings she can’t count anymore. She’s tired of new beginnings. Her whole life is just one new beginning after another, and every new beginning has somehow gone wrong. Can’t things just stay the same for once?

Getting a hold of herself, she slumps down into the couch. Her face is drenched with tears. On the floor in front of her, a handful of crumpled clothes spill out of a large tear in the trash bag she brought down from New York. Her suitcase snapped apart in the middle of the airport, so she swiped a plastic bag from a janitor’s cart, stuffed her belongings in, and slung it over her shoulder. First her trusty blue suitcase, now her teeth. But she will do what she always does—show a good face. No one can understand anyways, so she will act as if everything is okay.

She smiles at Naomi, then realizing her smile is toothless, shuts her mouth quickly and bursts into tears. When she was young, people compared her to Ava Gardiner, but her enormous, pine needle green eyes have been eclipsed by purple bags underneath. At forty, when her hair started graying, she colored it a deep auburn. Now, after so many cheap dye jobs, her black waves of silk have turned to rust, frizzing out in a trapezoid. Her petite body has grown voluptuous, according to the men who want to sleep with her (at least there are some), but she knows she’s just getting fat. Her smile, though—at least she has her smile. She's always been able to rely on her smile to get what she wants. And now, that too has deserted her. *Great, great, great, great.*

Greenwich: December 1982

Cockroaches perform their cockroach dance (*La Cucaracha*) across the dirty dishes in the sink. Lucy sees them whenever she flicks on the lights, so she keeps the kitchen dark. The kitchen is the size of a small closet, but since Lucy doesn't cook anyway, it doesn't really matter. The dirty dishes have accumulated over days, possibly weeks, from a little something here, a little something there—maybe a can of soup she heated up or a microwave dinner zapped by her son. She tries to discourage his microwave use, the nuclear rays being potentially harmful and all, but the kid's gotta eat. One of these days, she will get an energy spurt and actually wash those dishes, but not today.

If she has to eat a meal, she'll go to one of the places on Greenwich Avenue on which she lives. Mainly, she doesn't eat meals, she just nibbles. She'll gnaw on a carrot or take a bite out of a stick of butter, filch an apple from the fruit stand, or grab some dry cereal perhaps. Occasionally, she'll make eggs for her son if they can't afford the deli around the corner. He's a regular at Burger King, which is farther from their apartment, sure, but not too far for him to walk.

Lucy's second floor apartment overlooks the shops and restaurants on the swanky street below. Having moved in on the eve of her thirty-eighth birthday a year ago, she's ever since been trying to rehabilitate her eighteen year-old son Eli from the residue of a mental breakdown for which he's spent a month in an expensive institution.

It's Christmas eve tonight and the sky is purple, the air thick, warning of snow. As usual, Eli is parked in front of the television. Lucy hears a noise and opens the door to her

apartment looking for her sons, Skylar, fifteen, and Badge, thirteen, who are visiting for the weekend. The downstairs door opens and a flurry of fresh air rushes up the stairs, followed by her two red-cheeked boys, both panting heavily, bundled in old coats and scarves.

Lucy jumps up and down clapping her hands. “You’re here! You’re here!”

They rumble up the dark stairwell to Lucy’s apartment. She holds the door open proudly. Her kids have seen the place before, but she’s always excited to show it to them, always excited to play the hostess in her very own apartment on Greenwich Avenue. With two big rooms—a wide living room and a long, narrow bedroom—hardwood floors, high ceilings, crown molding and colossal windows, it has an old-world elegance. The landlord doesn’t keep it so well, nor does Lucy, but chipping paint and scratched floors are not details that matter to teenage boys, or to her.

She pulls the accordion door across the kitchen, hiding its disarray. Eli sits hunched over on the sofa facing the door in sweat pants and a wife-beater tank top, his eyes glassed over from his daily dose of Thorazine. Skylar stops short at the sight of his oldest brother, while Badge rushes through, his oversized linebacker body pushing Skylar aside, his brown curls flapping upwards. He throws off his 1970's caramel colored, thin leather jacket. “I’m hungry,” he shouts, ripping off his red scarf, tearing off his mittens.

Skylar finally enters and takes a bottle of Bacardi Silver rum down from the top of the television set.

“Whose is this?” he asks his mother.

“That’s Eli’s,” she says, giving Eli a wink. “He likes to relax with a nice cocktail every once in a while.”

Eli does not respond. It doesn't belong to him. He does not drink at all. The bottle belongs to Lucy's boyfriend, Ron, who owns an auto body shop. She doesn't want her younger sons to know about Ron because she knows they will judge her. Eli knows everything, but since he doesn't speak, her secret is safe. Besides, Ron really isn't officially her boyfriend anyway. He's married. He's more like her lover, though it's more than just physical—he's also been her sole source of comfort for the last year. She tolerates his constant near absence in order to periodically enjoy his strength and assurance.

"Can I have some?" asks Skylar, looking at his brother.

"Sure, honey," answers his mother. "If you really want." Two weeks earlier Skylar got drunk on potato vodka with his friend Coker Lintz and vomited in the kiddie pool at the Scarsdale Country Club. To make matters worse, she had to listen to Harold telling her it was all her fault, that every weekend the boys spent with her corrupted them. According to Harold, she kept taking them to "places of ill repute" and introducing them to "unscrupulous people."

"I don't really want," says Skylar, handing the bottle to Eli while glaring at his mother. He removes his worn, jean jacket to reveal a black Ozzy Osbourne t-shirt. Lucy used to love to stare into his bright blue eyes, to smooth his blonde hair and kiss his cherubic face. Now he bristles at her touch. He is going through an awkward stage, his nose growing quicker than the rest of his face, pimples cropping up. His successful career as a child actor is on hiatus because of this pubescent onslaught. Twenty-year-olds play teenagers, and teenagers, beyond or before the awkward stage, play children. She knows that the minute the phase is over, Harold will put him right back into show business. For

now Badge is Harold's cash cow, having just finished a lucrative national tour in a revival of Pippin.

"Mom, I'm still hungry," says Badge. "Can we go out?"

"Oh, poor baby. Want a candy cane from my tree?" She points to the miniature Christmas tree on a table in the corner of the apartment. No matter that they're Jewish and don't celebrate the holiday; Lucy loves the spirit of the season and tries to get into it as much as possible. The faux pine tree, really more of a bush, has been decorated with piles of silver tinsel, mini candy canes and plastic hearts painted gold—all of which she found at Walgreens during a festive shopping rampage.

"Real food, Mom," says Badge, unwrapping a candy-cane and stuffing it in his mouth.

"Did he give you money?" she says, looking to both boys.

"Who?" asks Skylar.

"Your father, of course. Who else?" The bastard who made his sons shower at the YMCA because he didn't want to waste water. The jerk who forced his kids into show business, stole their money and gambled it away in risky stocks. That's who.

"Nahh," says Skylar reaching into his pocket and pulling out a wrinkled bill. "All I have is this twenty from Coker. He wants you to get him a case of beer like you did last time."

Lucy quickly takes the money. As a freelance videographer, she lives job to job, and recently there haven't been any. Ron promised to give her $100 so she could take the boys out to eat and buy them gifts, but he seems to have conveniently disappeared the day before Christmas. Her calls have gone unanswered, and when she stopped by his auto

body shop, Ron's Nuts and Bolts, it was closed for the holiday. She mentally calculates the price of subs and sodas from the deli downstairs and figures she'll tell the boys she forgot her purse and will have to use the $20. Coker can have the Bacardi for now and a rain check for the beer. She glances at her purse tucked away in the corner of an armchair.

"Look, it's snowing," she says, gesturing toward the window to divert their attention. She slowly backs up and gently places a pillow over the purse, like she's smothering it out of kindness.

And, indeed, it is snowing. Out the lofty arched windows they can see it fall, the flakes blending and disappearing into the faded yellow brick of the building across the alleyway.

"What a beautiful Christmas moment!" She says grabbing the hands of Skylar and Badge. She really does feel a warm and cozy sensation, holding her sons' hands, looking out at the snow, really does feel that these boys belong to her and she to them, that everything will be just fine, more than fine, that the Christmas spirit—no matter that it's not her holiday—is entering them in this time and place.

She looks over at Eli. He is still holding the rum bottle, still staring down at the floor. He saw her hide the purse, but he's not registering much nowadays. She has rescued him. Maybe if she hadn't left Harold and the boys two years ago, sneaking out in the middle of the night, striking out on her own, maybe Eli wouldn't have had his nervous breakdown. But she would have had one, and she would not now be in the position to help them. Better to stay strong to help her sons, she tells herself. It's like the airline stewardess says: When the plane is going down, parents should put on their oxygen masks first so they can help their children, and that's what she'll do.

“Let’s go!” she shouts, coiling Badge’s scarf around his neck. “Let’s go get some yummy food!”

Badge springs into action, shoving his hands into his mittens, grabbing his jacket, opening the door and charging into the hallway. Skylar rolls his eyes and yanks on his jacket. "Whatever," he says, and shuffles out the door.

Lucy throws on an old red peacoat she found at a consignment shop. “Come on, honey,” she says to Eli, who hasn’t moved. “Don’t you want to eat?”

He stands up silently and puts on his parka. “That’s it, honey. We’ll get a sub for now and one to bring back for your lunch tomorrow,” she says, winking at him, herding him out the door.

It is a fine, biting and invigorating Christmas Eve night, and Lucy is taking her boys out to dinner!

But the deli is closed. Lucy peers down the avenue. The only place open is the fancy cheese shop wedged between Laura Ashley and the antique furniture store. Through the large glass windows Lucy sees people standing around the shop drinking wine from plastic cups. Maybe the boys will be happy with a big wheel of brie, she thinks.

“Here we go boys, right here.” She leads them to the shop but the door is locked. She catches a reflection of herself in the window and notices that the flyaway strands of gray, which have recently staged a hostile takeover of her black hair are out in full force tonight. She smoothes down her hair, flattening the renegade wisps into the rest of her curls. Despite the gray, she looks younger than thirty-seven. She could easily be mistaken for thirty. Her high, sharp cheekbones and hunter green eyes are striking. Her greatest

weapon, though, is her smile, and now, with her brand new set of bright white teeth, she feels unstoppable.

She knocks on the glass. A man unlocks the door and sticks his head out.

"Hi, sweetheart, can we get in there?" She flashes him her smile.

“Private party,” he says. “Sorry.”

“Oh, that’s okay, honey, we just want to buy some cheese.”

The man releases a snort of laughter, shuts the door and locks it again.

“Well sorry, Mr. Snobby Snootyton,” says Lucy. She's probably not dressed right, she thinks. She probably looks disheveled in the old coat. It doesn't matter now anyway. She just needs to figure out the eating situation. Her mind jumps to Plan C. They could drive to the supermarket and buy eggs.

“Mom! Mom! Look!” Badge is tugging at her sleeve. He points toward a bright façade on the other side of the street about two blocks away. Leave it to Badge to spot the one open eatery. She can tell from here that it’s that upscale Italian restaurant, the one Ron has been promising to take her to.

She pulls the boys into a huddle on Greenwich Avenue, which is largely deserted. Just the falling snow, colonial street lamps glowing and a periodic car or two whirring slowly through the slushy street. “Wouldn’t it be fun,” she says. “To go on a trip to Stop-N-Shop and pick whatever you want for dinner?”

Badge’s insistent tugging is moving them steadily closer to the restaurant. They can see it now on the corner, the small burgundy sign “La Campagna,” in gold letters, the windows generating an amber glow.

"Let's go here," shouts Badge, pulling them further down the block. "Come on. Come on."

"Anything you want from Stop-N-Shop!" Lucy shouts toward him. "Any kind of omelet you want! Plus dessert! How 'bout that?"

But he's crossed the empty street by now. She looks to Skylar, whose arms are folded across his chest. "You don't cook anyway, Mom. Since when do you cook?" He follows Badge across the street. Eli remains still, staring at the ground.

"Come on," she says, dragging him across the street like a limp doll.

Badge is already inside the restaurant as Lucy reluctantly opens the door and steps into the warmth. The restaurant does look tempting. It is dark, softly lit by smoldering candles. Women with glossy hair lean across the table toward men with impeccable jaw lines. She had once asked Ron to take her here after looking at the menu posted in the window. She remembers the prices weren't so unreasonable, but he told her it was too public a place to be seen together.

She performs some quick math in her head. Three into twenty is roughly seven dollars. The boys can each have an appetizer but no drinks. She will have nothing. Her mouth is watering just thinking of the appetizers she will not get to eat. Her boys should enjoy this, though. They deserve it.

At the maître d' stand, a tall painfully thin woman in a tight ponytail eyes them warily.

"Oh, hi, honey," Lucy chirps. "Our reservations for Christmas Eve dinner got mixed up, so I'm wondering if we can get a table at this nice little place. You look tan, honey, did you go on vacation?" The boys huddle behind her, an expectant entourage.

The woman looks slightly flustered, but can't help from smiling.

"I just got back from Aruba."

"Oh, amazing, honey," says Lucy trying her best to mimic the Greenwich accent. Clenching her teeth together and jutting out her chin, Lucy squashes her Long Island accent the best she can, "It's gorgeous this time of year. Did your sweetie take you there?"

"Actually, I went with my parents."

"Oh, even better, honey. Men are rotten rats." Lucy winks at the hostess, getting her to crack another smile as she gathers up the menus. She seats them at a table at the back of the restaurant beside a thin corridor leading to the kitchen and the rear exit.

The restaurant is pretty well populated on Christmas Eve. The smell of roasted meats, the fireplace in the corner and the light murmur of voices lend it a warm, cozy quality. It's a nice neighborhood bistro, thinks Lucy, not a fancy-schmancy place—quaint and affordable. She opens the menu to discover that either they've hiked their prices or they're price gouging for the holiday. The cheapest appetizer, bruschetta, is eight dollars. All the main courses go for at least fifteen bucks a pop. But, she thinks, two appetizers and the free bread basket . . .

"Short ribs!" Badge calls out. "That's what I really want."

The short ribs are twenty-five dollars alone. But she loves to see Badge eat, loves his endless appetite. More than anything she wants to feed her sons. She wants to fill their bellies and share a special night with them at the restaurant. She wants them to remember this night and remember how well she treated them. None of that will be possible with Sky's measly twenty.

"I have to go to the bathroom," she says. "Don't order until I get back."

She finds a pay phone in the hallway and dials Ron, hoping his wife will not answer.

"Hey, Ron here," he answers in his gruff voice. It's this old-school toughness that makes her feel protected. Sometimes in the middle of the night after she'd gotten Eli back to sleep following one of his night terror incidents, Ron would show up and lie down in bed with her, his beefy arms wrapping her like a coat of armor. Sometimes it was the only thing that made her feel sane. He never criticized her either. One night she was about to go out with the back of her dress unzipped. Ron took her in his arms, and instead of calling her an idiot for forgetting to zip her dress, kissed her on the cheek and zipped it up for her.

"Listen, Ronny, sweetie," she says into the phone in one long breath, "I need you to come down to La Camp—whatever it is—you know, it's the restaurant, the nice one, in my neighborhood; I'm here with my boys and I just need a little loan right now, honey, well, it's not really a loan, 'cause you promised it to me, but that's fine, honey, that you didn't give it me before when you told me you would, I just need it now, that's all. I really need you to come down here, it's only ten minutes, just say you've got some last minute Christmas shopping, I never ask you for anything, you know me. I don't need much, but this. I need this right now. So, can you do it, honey? Ron? Ron are you there?"

The dial tone reverberates in her ears. She's been through this before with him. Usually if he hangs up on her, it means his wife was in earshot, and Lucy understands and is not normally upset by it, but tonight she really needs him. She knows she can't call again. She can only hope he heard what she had to say, and that he will show up soon.

A kitchen worker enters from a door leading outside at the end of the hallway, sending in a cold blast of air. Suddenly freezing, Lucy retreats to her seat where a waitress stands over their table.

"Here she is," says Badge. "I'll have the short ribs and—what's the soup of the day?"

"Italian wedding soup"

"I'll have that, too."

The waitress looks at Lucy. All three boys are devouring the breadbasket, stuffing the warm baguette slices into their mouths.

"I'm not hungry. I'll have water."

"Seltzer or Perrier?"

"Tap is fine, honey."

Lucy casually hands the menu to the waitress who looks annoyed that she's not eating. Sky orders veal cutlets and Eli gets the pasta putanesca. They all order Tab to drink. It must be over sixty dollars, even before the tip or tax. The waitress walks briskly away.

"Boys. I'm really glad that you ordered all this food," Lucy says, "but this place isn't really very good, so I think it would be better and healthier, if we just cancel our orders and go home. I'll make you whatever you want." She tries to sell it, but her enthusiasm just isn't there. She'll have to force the issue. "Really, boys. We have to go now."

"What?" shouts Skylar, his voice dominating above the crowd's monotone buzz.

Badge's face, lit by the flickering candle, drops, and then, quickly steels itself. Lucy watches his face transform from somber to hardened, and it's the fact that he's trying to endure the disappointment that breaks her heart. No, she thinks. They deserve this meal. She deserves to let them have it. She will not let them down again.

"Kidding!" she shouts, throwing her hands up in the air. She watches as Badge lets out a burst of suppressed air. His cheeks rise to meet his eyes again, and he rubs those little paws together in anticipation of the feast. Even Eli, comatose Eli, seems momentarily awakened from his medicated stupor. *Worth it. Worth it to see that smile.*

"Ha!" shouts Sky, slapping the table. "Funny, Mom. I thought you were going to pull a Mom on us!"

"Pull a Mom?"

"Yeah, you know," he pauses. "Never mind."

The waitress brings Badge's soup, the sodas for the boys and Lucy's water.

"Can we get some more bread?" says Lucy holding up the empty breadbasket. Now the entire operation is depending on Ron, her knight in shining armor, her savior, that short, stocky bear of a man. Surely, he will not let her down. Although he's not available often, he always comes through when Lucy really needs him.

Lucy chugs the entire glass of water while Badge slurps down his soup. "Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm," he sighs. In the commercial he did for Dunkin Hines Brownies when he was eight, his only lines were "hmmm." At first he said it genuinely as he tasted the brownie, Lucy remembers, but after twenty-three takes, he felt sick and had to fake the "hmmm." This is the real thing, though, and Lucy reaps such pleasure from the sound.

Badge passes the soup around for the table to taste and soft moaning is heard as background to the lip-smacking sounds emanating from her boys. Lucy takes a small taste. It is a meaty soup, full of prosciutto and meatballs, a hearty, satisfying soup. She manipulates her tongue to adjust the plate of teeth in her mouth and let the flavor wash over her palette. Her stomach aches for more as she returns the soup to Badge, and he promptly resumes his slurping, stopping only to lovingly dip in a piece of bread.

The main course arrives and her three boys descend on the dishes like lions attacking their prey. When Lucy was at home she'd throw several packs of chicken legs into the oven, then pile them onto a platter when done, place them in the center of the table and watch six hands (eight if you included Harold's) grab for the spoils. Everyone always got at least two pieces, but for seconds, you had to be fast. It always gave her pleasure to see the heartiness of her boys' appetites. Their vigor made manners impossible, but it didn't matter to her. Let them eat and enjoy.

Each boy gives Lucy a taste of their dish, and those single bites are all she needs. The ribs, slow roasted in rosemary and wine, taste earthy and rich. The veal, coated in breadcrumbs and fried in oil with lemon, is light and textured, and Eli's pasta putanesca zings her mouth with its salty capers, anchovies and red pepper flakes. For dessert they order a tiramisu to share. It is gone in mere seconds, but its silky chocolate leaves a sweet halo on Lucy's tongue, while eliciting more sighs and moans from Badge.

When they finish, the waitress brings the bill: eighty-five dollars.

"I'll be right back, boys," says Lucy, slipping away.

She digs her wallet from the dredges of her pocketbook and pours out the remaining change, all crudded with lint. As the coins fall into her open palm, she thinks

of her lost teeth. Upon extracting them, Dr. Bogle held them up and let them rain down into her hand, six yellow and splintered nuggets. “This is what you were living with,” he told her.

She sticks the money in the slot and dials. Ron answers in a hushed voice.

“What do you want? It’s Christmas eve, for Chrissake.”

“I want the hundred you promised me, Ron.” She hears Christmas music and a gaggle of voices in the background over the phone.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get it to you yesterday. After Christmas, I promise.”

“Ron, I need it now. I’m stuck at a restaurant with my kids, and I can’t pay the bill.”

“Well what do you want me to do? Beth’s parents are here. I can’t get away now.”

“You motherfucker!” she yells into the phone. “You told me yesterday--"

“Calm down.” He’s chuckling now. “After the holiday we’ll go to Mystic for the weekend.”

“Well what the fuck am I supposed to do now?”

“Put up a tab. I do it all the time.” Lucy hears the sound of a door opening and a blast of “Winter Wonderland” through the phone.

“This place doesn’t take a tab, you fat fuck. It’s a nice restaurant, not a bar.”

“Merry Christmas, Bob,” he says to her. “I’ll take a look at it after the holiday.”

He hangs up. Lucy slams the phone down. She wants to dial him back again and again until that cold, bony wife of his grows suspicious. Why had Lucy let herself believe Ron would come through? There’d been other times he failed to show up as planned, or cancelled a rendezvous at the last minute. She’d just selectively chosen to forget them,

seeing him through a golden haze as some sort of superhero who helped her navigate one of the toughest years of her life. But now she's reminded that he was barely there, that she's the one who got herself through it all, that his presence was more romantic notion than reality. It feels good and scary at the same time, this realization that she does not need Ron, or anyone. She has always lived by her own wily resources, and she will continue to do so. *Think, Lucy! Think on your feet!*

She goes to the bathroom to splash water on her face, to counter the swollen redness from crying on the phone. She flashes a smile at herself, lets her false white teeth gleam in the mirror, then marches back to the table with a grin.

"Eli, before we leave, you might want to go to the bathroom," she says in her pluckiest voice.

"I don't have to."

"Eli, we're not going right home. I'm taking you boys somewhere special. So go now."

Eli gets up and walks like a zombie toward the hallway to the bathroom. Lucy counts to sixty.

"Boys, I want to show you something special. Follow me."

"What, Mom?" says Skylar, not budging from his seat.

"Just trust me," she says with an urgency that gets their attention. Skylar rolls his eyes. Both boys follow her down the hallway. Just then Eli emerges from the bathroom, and Lucy takes his hand.

"Just through here," she says as she leads them forward. She opens the back door exit and walks out into the cold alley.

“Now, if you don’t want to miss it, we have to run,” she says. One arm linked in Eli’s, she links the other in Badge's and they take off, Skylar following closely behind.

“Mom! Don’t you have to pay for dinner?” he asks.

”Don’t worry, honey, I have a tab there. They know me.”

Sky seems to accept this explanation.

They run through the alley, turn left twice and slow to a brisk walk when they reach Cobble Hill. Lucy giggles in between panting. The snow falls in big, fat flakes, dotting their heads and shoulders.

“Isn’t this fun?” she says to the boys. “Isn’t this an adventure?”

The boys look tired and cold.

“Come on, perk up! It’s right up here.”

They walk up an icy path to the top of the hill and look down at Greenwich through the curtain of snow. The mansions are decked out in glittering Christmas lights, snaked along the edges of rooftops, lining the windowpanes, wrapped around pillars. Flashes of white, red, green, blue and yellow—thousands of them—winking up at Lucy and her boys.

“Isn’t it beautiful? Doesn’t this put you right in the Christmas spirit?” she says, shivering.

“Mom,” says Skylar. “We don’t even celebrate Christmas.”

“That’s okay, honey. Christmas celebrates us.”

She can see her boys’ breath puffing out in visible clouds, like ghosts rising in the night, as they shiver in their thin jackets.

“Come here. Let’s get warm.” She pulls all three boys close to her, and they stand in a huddle overlooking the light show in silence. Their brief reverie is suddenly interrupted by the jangle of clinking metal on metal, and Lucy looks down the hill to see a small terrier racing toward them, its leash trailing in the snow behind.

“Dog!” cries Badge, grasping onto her arm breathing heavily. He is famously terrified of dogs of any size or shape. Skylar snorts and rolls his eyes, as Eli stares off toward the distant lights.

“Don’t worry, honey,” says Lucy, putting her arm snugly around Badge, pulling Eli and Sky closer to form a unified clump.

“I’m your mother, and I will always protect you,” she says, half-believing it herself. *Always.*

White Plains: June 1981

Lucy drives into town the first day of summer, the symbolism of which is not lost on her. Somewhere in the back of her mind she hopes her children will think she is responsible for the change of seasons, and somewhere else back there, she really does believe she's bringing summer into town.

Pulling up to the house, she flips down the rearview mirror to check herself out and smiles at the sight of her new teeth, the ones Dr. Bogle constructed for her in Ohio to replace the six rotting front teeth. For years her smile had been suppressed, muffled by a reflex action of pursing her lips to shelter her mouth from view, but now she can’t wait for her sons to see her smile and flaunt the handsome set of symmetrical, straight white teeth.

After driving for ten hours straight from Columbus to White Plains, it feels good to get out into the humid air and stretch her legs. The grass in the front lawn reaches her knees. The charcoal gray paint, faded and chipping when she left almost a year ago, is now bleached in patches and darker in other parts, as if pummeled in turn by an overabundance of sun and rain. One shutter tilts precariously on the bottom left window, while the top right shutter, the one at the window of the bedroom where she used to sleep, is covered in bird droppings. The other once navy blue shutters are intact, but splintered and spotted with a brownish film. The large Victorian house was neat and trim when they bought it fifteen years ago, and although she made no effort to keep it up when she lived there, she must have done some things because it looks like it has aged ten years in her relatively short absence.

Or maybe she is seeing it from a new perspective. Perhaps, when she lived here she blocked out these details--the cracked walkway with cement breaking off at the sides, the dead '63 Caddy deserted in the side yard, the broken window above the garage, the flock of wildflowers and weeds growing up alongside the house. She used to think the dandelions and long wisps of grass made the property look like *Little House on the Prairie*, but now she sees they only make the house look abandoned.

She's a little afraid to look inside and discover what's happened to the house and the boys during her absence. She knocks on the door, which feels odd, knocking on the door of the house in which she raised her children. No one answers.

She tries the door, but it is locked. Just when she's about to go around back, her seventeen year-old, Eli, opens the door.

"Mom?"

"Oh, hi, honey."

"What . . . are you doing here?"

"I wanted to surprise you."

She hugs him dismissively, as if she's only been gone for a mere afternoon. And that's how it feels. To her the year went by so quickly. She missed her sons, but she was busy studying and finally earning her college degree in communications at Ohio State. Randomly, she'd call and speak to one or another of them, trying to explain why she'd left, trying to convey the new excitement of her life, trying to convince them she'd be home soon. Her bond with her three sons was so tight, she had thought, nothing could undo it. And yet here she is standing in front of Eli like a stranger.

Eli moves out of the way as she walks through the door and looks around. She takes in the shag rug covered in stains, the battered sofas, one of them missing a cushion, the piles of newspapers in the corner, the long lightning bolt of a crack in the wall, which Harold had refused to fix, which he had, in fact, proudly displayed as a revolt against the wealthy, materialistic inhabitants of this upper class New York suburb. Even more proudly displayed, though, is the painting of a woman breast-feeding a baby.

Hanging on the wall directly opposite the front door, the painting assaults Lucy as she enters the room. It is, first of all, humongous—about ten feet by five feet. The painter's style is primitive, full of bold color, almost cartoonish. The woman in the picture is lying down, her upper body completely naked, holding a baby to one breast while the other, huge and pointed, sticks straight up like its coming out of the baby's head. A man's face hovers over her shoulder, his gaze directed at the feeding baby.

Lucy remembers liking this painting when Harold first brought it home in the late sixties. He told her the artist was an emerging anti-establishment painter who emphasized themes of women and children in his work. She thought there was something feminist about it; that it made a revolutionary statement about a woman's right to breast-feed. But now she realizes these were more Harold's thoughts than her own.

She is actually mortified by the painting; angry that this woman's privacy is being violated, her body on display like this, her nakedness morphed, blown up and thrust into the viewer's face. And angrier still that the supine woman can't even enjoy a private moment with her baby, that her husband has to be there, peering over her shoulder as if he is conducting the whole operation. It's Harold, she thinks. The painting is of her and Harold, the controlling, manipulative husband she left behind.

Lucy hears footsteps banging down the stairs and looks up to see her youngest son twelve year-old, Badge. He bursts into tears the minute he sees her.

"Mommy!" he cries, running into her arms, his chin-length curls bouncing, his pudgy body, huffing and puffing. Lucy wonders if the kid is still in show business. He's a male Shirley Temple, able to sing, tap and produce two cratered dimples on cue. Now he's just a big ball of tears, grabbing onto Lucy with a white-knuckled grip, making her dissolve into tears too. There was no other way, she tells herself, stroking his curls. She had to leave them behind. She had to.

"Why did you go, Mommy?"

"I had to go. I had to go, so I could take better care of you, sweetie."

She had to go because she would have killed herself otherwise, she thinks. She had to go so she could survive for her children.

Badge looks up at her, his huge, wet, brown eyes bringing Lucy back to when he was a baby. He is still such a baby.

“Are you staying?” he asks.

“Yes, Mommy isn’t going anywhere. I promise, my sweetie.”

Her fourteen-year-old son, Skylar, appears in the threshold of the door without saying a thing. Lucy looks up from Badge’s embrace.

“Oh, hi, honey. I missed you too.”

Skylar doesn’t respond. He raises one shoulder up in a half shrug, nods his head at her, and walks out of the room.

“Sky!” Lucy follows him up the stairs. He goes into his room and slams the door. She does not try to enter, knowing she deserves this treatment, but the sound of the slamming door rumbles through her body like a train, jarring her. She tries again to reassure herself**.**

Downstairs Badge clutches onto her again. Eli is pacing the room and pulling at his hair. He looks so much like Lucy with his black curls and his dark, darting eyes. When she left last year, he was a reserved, oversensitive teenager. There's something wild about him now, though that worries Lucy. An anxiety that reminds her of herself at her worst.

“Dad will be home soon, Mom,” says Eli. “He’s not going to want you here. He’ll be home soon.”

She smiles widely, hoping Eli will recognize her pearly new teeth.

“So, let’s go, sweetie. You can all come apartment hunting with me.”

“No, we can’t. Sky has an audition. I have to drive him.” Between Sky and Badge, Harold must have brought in at least a hundred thousand dollars in the past few years. She’d seen Skylar in a cereal commercial while she was in Ohio, and thought how strange it was that she had more contact with him on television than she did in reality. He was probably bringing in a pretty penny at this point. The question is, where is all the money?

“I’ll drive him. We’ll all go together.”

“He wouldn’t want that, Mom. He wouldn’t want that,” Eli says tearing at his hair as if spiders were crawling on his skull.

“Stop pulling your hair, honey. You’ll go bald.”

She's been pulling her own hair out lately, plucking out a single gray strand that keeps reappearing every few weeks. Eli shifts his weight, rocking back and forth in front of the sofa, looking down at the floor. He has yet to look Lucy in the eye.

“Sweetie, that’s fine then. I’ll take Badge with me and meet you afterwards.”

“Mom, you can’t take Badge. That would be kidnapping. Kidnapping.”

“Kidnapping my own child?”

“Dad will do something. I don’t know what . . . Something.”

“I’m not afraid of that fucker,” Lucy says, a little louder than intended. “Come on, Badge. Let’s go. We'll get ice cream.”

Badge bounds up from the couch. "Ice cream!" he shouts.

"Don't go with her," says Eli. "Dad won't like it."

"Oh, please, he'll be fine," says Lucy, holding her hand out to Badge. "Come on, honey, I'll get you a triple scoop."

Badge looks from Eli to his mother.

"Let's go, sweetie. Let's go get ice cream." She's holding out her hand still, the unbreakable bond of mother and child swimming in the space between their fingers. Badge remains motionless. Eli's pacing grows increasingly manic, faster and more confined.

"Don't you want to come with Mommy, sweetie-pie?" And then, whatever it is swimming in the air turns sour, she can feel it, like the freckles of mold creeping along the baseboard at her feet. Out of the corner of her eye, Lucy sees the old rosewood piano in the sunroom and remembers sitting on the bench with all three boys, making up songs together.

Why is she calling them *sweetie*? This is the word she uses to ingratiate herself to strangers. These are her boys.

"Badge," she says stroking his hair. "Don't be afraid of the big, mean monster you call your Daddy." She gives him a wink. "Come with Mommy. Please"

Badge just shakes his head without looking up at her.

Lucy raises her eyebrows dramatically. No one has said anything about her new teeth.

"Fine," she says softly. She thinks of herself as defeated. She thinks this hurts more than any sore gums ever did.

"Just remember," she says, walking out the door. "I will always be your mommy."

Eli's pacing stops for once. He is strangely still. "You're not our mommy. You're our mother."

Children are like teeth, she thinks. If you don't take care of them, they rot.

When she leaves the house, she promises herself she will find an apartment nearby. She will take them away from Harold. She will make him pay. She tells herself she had to leave. That if she didn't leave, she would be dead. And then who would care for these children? Who would be their mother? Who would be their mommy?

White Plains; Manhattan; West Amityville: August 1980

Lucy quietly opens the door to Badge and Eli's room, quickly so the hinges don't squeak. She tiptoes over to the bottom bunk and looks down on her youngest son. Harold has declared this the last baby tooth that eleven year-old Badge will lose, and so she has written an elaborate letter from the Tooth Fairy detailing the various ways the fairy has used his teeth over the last five years: one served as home plate in a Tooth Fairy baseball game, another was used as a life raft to save a fairy drowning in a puddle, and another two acted as columns for the Tooth Fairy's palace. Badge doesn't budge, as she gently lifts a corner of his pillow and slips in the note and a quarter, careful not to touch his spill of curls. His breathing is heavy and measured, content from eating a whole roast chicken for dinner.

Sneaking back downstairs, she collapses on the sofa where she has recently taken to sleeping to avoid Harold's bed, but as usual, she wakes before five, restless and ready to go. Where, she does not know. She goes for a walk around the tree-lined neighborhood, taking in the warm air, going over the planned escape in her head. She's secretly applied and been accepted to the Ohio State, where she can transfer her old credits from NYU and finish within a year. The money she's managed to surreptitiously swipe from Harold and borrow from her friend Nancy is still not enough to cover the bus

tickets for her and the boys to Ohio and the down payment for housing once they arrive. The semester starts in only a few weeks, and she is growing frantic. *Come on, Lucy. Work your magic.*

When she returns over an hour later, the sun is casting a purplish hue across the neighborhood, turning the pavement a deep indigo, bathing the rows of elms in a violet light. Lucy goes into the kitchen and cooks up a large pot of oatmeal, rubbing her sore teeth and her pink-rimmed eyes. It's a cramped, depressing space, never updated from its 1960's hues of puke green and urine yellow, the floor peeling in pieces so big they had to fasten it down with duct tape so nobody would trip.

Harold shuffles in. "Tea," he says. He's wearing his oversized black robe that puffs out around his neck like a stole. Lucy thinks the robe makes him look like a creep, but he's been wearing it all the time since Eli said it made him look like Darth Vader.

She puts the pot on, as Badge runs into the kitchen beaming. A burst of sunshine, thinks Lucy.

"Mom, look the tooth fairy left me a quarter!" He rushes to hug her.

"What a nice Tooth Fairy."

"Mom, tell me the truth, are you the Tooth Fairy?"

"Oh no, honey, the Tooth Fairy is real. How else could she fit under your pillow to give you a quarter?"

"Well, Mom, you could put your hand under there."

"I could, but I didn't," Lucy says with a wink. "Get your brothers up."

"Sky! Eli!" Badge calls up the stairs.

Harold grabs him by the collar, jerking him backward. “What are you doing? You have an audition today! You’ll lose your voice!”

“But I was supposed to go to David’s house.”

“No. Your mother is picking you up after school and taking you downtown. Aren’t you, Lucy?”

“Oh, Harold, we planned David’s a long time ago. Does he have to go to the audition?”

The tea kettle whistles and Eli and Skylar come downstairs. They are dressed for school, all wearing hand-me-downs from the neighbors. Lucy notices a hole in Skylar’s pants. She clears away Harold's pile of newspaper clippings, stock market charts, bottles of vitamins and royal jelly from the table, gathering it all up into her arms and shoving it into the one empty space on the kitchen counter. She brings the pot of oatmeal and three bowls to the table, and the boys sit down and dig in. She stands over them spooning more oatmeal into their bowls as they finish.

“Lucy, may I speak with you privately?” says Harold, finishing his tea.

She follows him into the dining room where Harold begins pacing back and forth.

“I’m a little concerned, Lucy, that you are not understanding what we are doing here. For you to ask me if he has to go to the audition makes me think that you fail to understand the import of it. Do you understand the import of it, Lucy? Do you realize how vital it is that Badge attends every audition he is asked to? Do you know how many boys his age would kill to be in his position?” He bangs a fist on the old, beaten up dining room table. Behind him a lopsided curtain hangs from a broken rod.

"Why aren't you taking him, if it's so important? You always take him to his auditions."

"I'm at the Bronx clinic today. Being the only dentist around willing to work on AIDS patients means back-to-back appointments. I won't have a moment. You have to take him. This is a lucrative granola bar commercial."

“What good is it, Harold? He made ten thousand dollars in commercials last year and he wears pants with holes.”

“Do not question me. Do not question the purpose of this, especially in front of the boys!”

“So where’s the money?”

“You know I invested it. It’s there for when he needs it.”

"Yeah, but what if it gets lost? Those penny stocks you invest in are the same as gambling."

"You know absolutely nothing about the market. I will not have a ninny tell me about the market. The residuals for this commercial could pay more than fifteen thousand dollars, Lucy."

“Well, don't count on him getting it. He’s not half as talented as Sky. The roles are going to fade out any day now. He won’t make it to thirteen like Sky did.”

“I am working very closely with him to make sure that he does make it to thirteen and then some.”

“You’re wasting your time. He doesn’t want to do it anymore, anyway.”

“He doesn’t know what’s good for him. I do, and someday he, and even you, will thank me.”

Later in the car, when driving Badge downtown, she wonders what Harold will do when it's all gone. When they are all gone. While Badge studies his audition lines, she smiles to herself thinking how Harold has no idea of her plan, but she worries that she will not get the money in time for the start of school. As they ride the elevator up to the casting agency on the top floor, Lucy thinks of all the people she knows who could possibly help.

The doors open at the ninth floor and her sister Susan steps in. Susan is preoccupied and doesn't even notice her, pivoting to face the front, pushing a floor button and staring straight ahead. Lucy is too shocked to say anything. Susan is looking so much better than the last time Lucy had seen her over a decade ago. She is well turned out in a violet business suit, her glossy hair brushing the tops of her puffy shoulder pads, but Lucy thinks her only sibling, a couple of years her junior, can't be more than a secretary despite her fancy power suit. Lucy holds her breath, waiting for Susan to get off. Badge cracks his neck and begins vocal exercises. Susan turns at the sounds and meets Lucy's eyes. She gasps.

"Lucy?"

Lucy smiles at her, as the doors to Susan's floor open.

"Oh, hi, Susan. How are you?"

Susan looks her up and down, holding the door open with one hand. Lucy is dressed in a long, crumpled flower skirt and the neighbor's oversized blouse. At thirty-six, her skin is still soft and smooth unlike Susan's face, which looks hardened and set.

"I'm fine. You?"

"Fine. It's your floor." She nods at the door.

Susan steps out of the elevator. “Mom’s dying,” she says, as the doors start to close. “You might want to call her.”

It takes Lucy a few days to track down her mother who is out of the hospital now and living at home, waiting to die. “She has lung cancer and could go any day,” her father tells her over the phone. “Come over and visit; she will be happy to see you.”

Happy to see me? thinks Lucy. Just like that? As if in the past seventeen years, she could have popped in at any time, could have stopped by to say "hello," and her mother would have been *happy to see her*? Lucy takes a deep breath and calms herself, remembering that her mother is dying. She will be gone from this world soon, and Lucy and her children will barely know the difference.

Her parents have moved out of their two-story brick home in Massapequa to a small condominium in a brick building with a white roof in West Amityville. Much of the furniture from her childhood—the overstuffed flowered chairs, the pink silk sofa, the elegant mahogany tables, so delicate they look like doll house furniture, are crowded into the tiny, two-bedroom space. Lucy wouldn’t mind taking some of this furniture off their hands for her future home near Ohio State, but then she remembers what her divorced friend Nancy used to say: the only way out is to travel with as little baggage as possible.

Sharon, Lucy’s sixty-year-old mother, is perched in a hot pink and turquoise flowered armchair, her gold-rimmed spectacles glinting in the overhead light, her once red hair now a soft rosy color, thin and wispy, as if it has fallen out and grown back in, which it has, her father later tells her, as a result of the chemo. A slender ring of smoke rises to the ceiling. She is sucking on a cigarette. Diagnosed with lung cancer and still puffing away.

"Oh, hi, Ma," Lucy says, surprising herself that the angry, resentful words aren't coming out, but instead the words of her childhood. She immediately falls back into the role of the daughter, despite the fact that she has not been a daughter for seventeen years. Funny how life works.

"Hello, Lucy," says her mother in her deep throaty voice, which is now deeper and throatier than ever. "Are you here alone?"

"Well, yeah, Ma. I didn't think you'd want to see anyone else," she says slipping into the wise-ass daughter.

"Nonsense!" Sharon says. "I've never met your children. Why not see what they look like before I go?"

Lucy's father falls into a coughing fit. At least he never smoked a day in his life, so he's not at risk for lung cancer, she thinks.

"Sit down," he says, gesturing toward a matching chair, as if Lucy is a neighbor stopping by for tea. *Sit down*, *have a seat, we won't bite*.

"You look well, Ma," Lucy says. And she does look remarkably well for a woman about to die. Her pallor is yellowish but otherwise her skin is smooth. Only two deep, c-shaped lines around her mouth, like parentheses, reveal her age. She's lost weight, giving her a look of frailty, but her eyes glitter with a force Lucy has never seen in her before, as if her looming death invigorates her. She sits in the chair, head held high, inhaling the smoke from her long, white Virginia Slims menthol cigarette. Her gold chunky jewelry and regal demeanor make her look like the matriarch of a large and grand family, even though she's barely got anyone—just her husband, Susan, and Susan's son.

The place smells of Lucy's childhood. They've brought the smell with them. And then Lucy realizes that the salient smell of her childhood was minty smoke from the menthol cigarettes, and this is suddenly depressing. That and the fact that her mother's upright carriage and elevated chin is clearly an attempt to distance herself from the daughter she has refused to speak to in two decades, that she has now agreed to see only because she is on her way out. Well, maybe a deathbed reprieve is better than nothing.

"They've sucked me dry," her mother says. "They took everything from my body, they took all my money. I hardly look *well*."

Her mother would never allow any compliments when Lucy was a child, and she's not about to start now. Lucy remembers stumbling all over herself trying to please her mother, only to have her bat her comments back in her face, taking anything she said and turning it into a throwaway trinket.

"Who's they?"

"They. The doctors. The hospital. Trying to keep me alive. And failing. What a waste." She waves dismissively at the air with her cigarette.

"Did you try any alternative treatments? Harold knows some amazing healers, Ma. It's never too late."

Sharon is silent. Lucy bites her lip. She didn't mean to use the H word, a word she's sure Sharon did not want to hear. Force of habit still has her gushing about his connections, even though she no longer believes in him. She looks up at the gold-painted, lopsided chandelier hanging from the popcorn ceiling. Such a strange sight paired with her mother's good china and silver shining out from behind the glass doors of the antique curio.

"It is too late, my darling," Sharon says. Lucy tears up. Her mother has never called her darling before. Sharon reaches forward and puts a veined hand on Lucy's. "I'm happy you're here. There's something I want you to have."

Her mother struggles to her feet, opens the curio and starts gathering up whatever she can put her hands on. She piles the goods onto a tablecloth in the center of the dining room table—silver cutlery, serving platters, bowls, a Kiddush cup, a samovar, a tea pot, ornate candlesticks—scoops up the four corners of the table cloth and hands the bundle to Lucy like a newborn baby. The woman who gave her nothing during her lifetime except the ability to discern different brands of cigarettes, the woman who passed on no domestic skills (taught her neither how to cook nor sew), no womanly skills (didn't show her how to dress, put on makeup or pick out jewelry), and not a single helpful life philosophy (no mantra or a single, itty-bitty coping tool, not one), now at this moment, before her death, wants to bestow her collection of antique silver to Lucy? Well, it's better than nothing, Lucy thinks.

Then her mother reaches to the top of the curio and pulls down three miniature pillows featuring her own needlepoint work–-one for each of the children, she says. One pictures a red barn, another a Prince Charles Spaniel, and the third is a picture of a tooth, with a little pocket at the top for the Tooth Fairy's coin.

"I made this for your kids, when I thought there was a chance I might see them," she says, patting the tooth pillow. "I guess someone can use it now, though."

Lucy does not have the heart to tell her that the tooth pillow is no longer needed.

"Please bring them to see me, Lucy."

"Oh, I will, Ma. Don't you worry," she says with a wink.

And then Sharon lowers her lashes and looks at Lucy with her face pointed toward the floor, up through the lashes, making it seem as if Lucy is standing over her, Sharon peering up from below. But Lucy is smaller than her mother. It is only a trick of the eye, a trick Sharon used often when Lucy was a child. The mommy monster, Lucy and her sister called it. The mommy monster look. It was always followed by an admonishment of guilt, and today was no different.

“Why haven't you brought them to see me before, Lucy? The children.”

Her voice is lowered, gruff almost.

“Well, Ma. You weren't talking to me, remember? You and Dad didn't talk to me for seventeen years.” Lucy straightens her back, lifts her carriage and raises her chin. “Why was that, Ma? Why didn't you speak to me?”

She had not meant to bring this up, not wanting to upset her mother in her delicate condition, but it appears she has no choice.

Sharon takes a step back and settles into an ornate dining room chair.

“You went and got pregnant before getting married,” Sharon says. “Then you did one worse, and married an old man.”

“Still, Ma. You could have talked to me. You missed out on your grandchildren.”

“You've always been impulsive, Lucy. Ever since you were a little girl and grabbed for the cookies on the counter, before I could even put them on a plate. Sit quietly. Wait patiently, I always told you. But you never could.”

“So what.” says Lucy, her blood quickening. Impulsive? I'll show you impulsive, she thinks, resisting the urge to run outside, to get away from her mommy monster. “You should've at least called.”

“I did, and he wouldn't let you talk to me.”

“If you really wanted to talk to me, you could've.” Her voice is getting louder now, she doesn't mean it to.

“Well, you could have called me, Lucy. When I never heard from you, I took it as a sign that you didn't want to see me.”

“You're supposed to be the one to contact me, Ma. You're the parent. You're the mother.”

“And you are no longer a child. You're an adult. Though you may not realize it.”

Her father runs into the room. “What's going on here?”

"Nothing," says Sharon, flashing him a smile. "No damn thing at all." She flutters up a spotted hand to smooth her hair. Lucy leaves with the bundle of silver and a feeling that instead of closure, she scratched the stitches off and made everyone bleed again.

It’s late in the day on a Sunday when Lucy’s father calls to say that her mother has died. She’d only just seen her a week ago, and the kids never had a chance to meet her. Lucy tries to feel something, but besides a raw numbness, there is only astonishment over the chance encounter with Susan that allowed Lucy to see her mother one last time .

All Lucy has left of her is the bundle of silver. She opens the cavity of the broken washing machine where she stored it and runs her hand over a cold, smooth silver platter made in the 1800s and passed down from an ancestor in Warsaw. She wonders how she will take it with her when Nancy stressed the importance of leaving with as little as possible, envisioning herself like a hobo, her little bag of possessions tied up in a handkerchief and slung over her shoulder. She takes out an ornate candelabra, its stems

gracefully curved like a delicate silver tree. Her mother never gave her anything of value, and finally, when she hands over the mother lode to her daughter, it is a burden. And then, as Lucy removes a two-hundred-year-old samovar, an intricate pattern of leaves running across its surface, she realizes how wrong she is. Her mother actually gave her the most valuable gift possible: the means to escape.

It is not hard to find an antiques dealer in the quaint, tony towns of Westchester County that will pay well for heirloom silver from Poland passed down from mother to daughter for the past two hundred years. It is funny, thinks Lucy, having successfully named her price at an expensive shop in Scarsdale and fingering the wad of cash now in her hand—my great, great, great, great grandmother thought she was just passing down silver. She couldn't know that she was really passing down freedom.

The money is enough for a bus ticket to Columbus, Ohio, and a down payment on a cheap rental near the school. The semester starts in a week, and Lucy knows, she has always known somewhere in the back of her mind, that she cannot take them with her.

Her bus leaves at midnight. She quietly opens the door to Skylar's room, where he's snuggled under his sheets in a deep sleep. She remembers the day he was born, how she ate lamb chops right before going into labor, how Sky was quiet at first when he came out, his big blue eyes exploring the room. In Eli and Badge's room, Lucy hears Eli mumbling in his sleep from the top bunk. She bends down to put her face beside Badge, to touch his cheek. His nostrils flare as great bursts of breath come out of him. He's so vigorous, this one! He will be just fine, she thinks. As she closes the door to their room, she burns the images of them sleeping into her mind. *They will all be just fine*.

She tiptoes down the stairs. *Take as little as possible*, Nancy said. Lucy has only her trusty blue suitcase, three outfits and a bag of walnuts for the trip. Just a little more than a hobo. She slips out the door and steps onto the wet grass, wondering if this raw, rattling fear is what it feels like to be free.

White Plains; Massapequa: October 1967

Lucy lies on a mattress up in the attic. The sunlight spills through the triangular shaped dormer windows, washing the room in a bright, warm light. Recently she has started spending a lot more time here. She can lock the door and get away from Harold and his bullying. She can relax in the warmth of the private space, just her and her new baby Skylar, whom she loves more than anything.

As Sky nurses, Lucy stares at a picture in the newspaper of an anti-war demonstrator holding a flower up to the sharp point of a national guardsman's bayonet outside the Pentagon. The demonstrator is a young woman, who looks similar to Lucy. She looks about Lucy's age, twenty-three, with salient cheekbones and cavernous eyes. But her hair is boy short, unlike Lucy's long black curls that reach below her shoulder blades. The woman in the picture has a pleading expression and her shoulders are hunched slightly forward as if she is begging the soldier. Lucy hates the war, would like to join the protestors, loves their message, but she can’t stand the pleading expression of this girl with the flower. She wants to yank it from her hand and shove it down her throat. She pushes the paper aside and disengages the Three-month old Skylar from her breast. She has been nursing for nearly half an hour, and although he could continue the rest of

the day or until he dozes off, Lucy decides he's finished based on the soreness of her nipples and his weakening suck. He has drained her of milk this session and is simply suckling for comfort at this point. Not that she wants to deny him comfort. She often sits there for hours letting the baby cat-nap on her breast, hazily transitioning from sleeping to nursing throughout the day. But today, Sunday, Harold is home, and she wants to make a dent in the dishes piling up in the sink to avoid comments about her slovenliness.

She props Skylar on her shoulder and goes into the kitchen, rubbing her sore gums with her fingers. What did Harold say again? That her diet was the problem? The pain has been nagging her for weeks now, coming and going in waves. She rinses with salt water like he told her to do, hoping it will eradicate the pain. He is a dentist, after all. He must know what he is talking about.

The almond-toned wood paneling on the cabinets, the harvest gold laminate counter tops, the avocado green stove and the linoleum floors in the pattern of faux bricks, remind her that this home of theirs is still somewhat new. Although they moved in three years ago and the shag carpets were already stained in several places, the home still retained its modernity from the previous owners' complete gutting and rehab of the eighty-year-old house. For Lucy, there is solace in the home's renovated novelty, as if she too were entitled to a fresh start, as if she too could be an early twentieth century Victorian remodeled and then sold to new owners.

The dirty dishes, ignored for two days, rise imperiously from the sink. Some serious scrubbing has to be done. Before she can even turn on the sink, Harold storms in and thrusts his face in hers.

“There’s something you haven’t told me, Lucy,” he says, his voice building, getting ready for the trump card he is about to play. She curses herself for not getting to the dishes before his return. She tries to avoid these senseless confrontations that used to scare her, but after almost four years, she knows the game. She gently pats Skylar's back, eliciting a loud burp.

“What, that you snore in your sleep?”

When he is angry or frustrated, Harold’s face—leonine, with the flat nose, the blue eyes set far apart, the eastern European high, rosy cheeks and the red, pulpy lips—barely departs from his usual grim expression. Only his eyebrows arch, a trick he learned from watching vaudeville as a kid, and the corners of his mouth rise slightly in a smile. The only time she sees him smile is when he’s angry.

“You failed to mention,” he says. “That your strumpet friend has come down with a case of gonorrhea.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She does know, of course, exactly what he is talking about.

“Nancy O’Connor--that divorced harlot.” He punctuates the final word by poking her in the collarbone. Harold never hits or kicks or slaps her. But he pokes her all the time. He pokes her awake in the morning, he pokes her in the back when she is cooking to tell her to add or subtract an ingredient (“More parsley!” Poke. “Less salt!” Poke), he pokes her any time he wants to make a point, as if his thundering voice weren’t enough.

“Where did you hear that?”

“It doesn't matter how I know. I always know.”

Somehow, Harold has figured out that Lucy's only friend, Nancy, caught gonorrhea from a new boyfriend. White Plains is a small town, and Nancy's recent divorce and her subsequent contraction of gonorrhea is currently a hot topic. It was only a matter of a time before Harold found out, despite his lack of interaction with the locals. He could have overheard talk at the drug store, supermarket, or gas station. Harold always manages to figure things out. It seems to Lucy that privacy and secrets are immune to his omniscient abilities. It's hard to keep up with him, let alone get ahead.

"Who cares? She's still my friend."

"No, she's not. You are not going to bring that diseased woman into my house to spread her disgusting germs to my children." He has always hated her spending time with a divorced woman in the first place, but now the gonorrhea seals his distaste of the friendship. "I forbid you to see her again." Poke. He must sense Lucy's jealousy of Nancy's new freedom, must know somehow that Lucy thinks often about divorcing him, that she is just waiting for the right time and circumstances to leave. Knowing this, like he seems to know everything.

"This is ridiculous!" she yells. "You don't give someone a disease like that just by being in the same room. You have to actually have sex with them. Something you would know nothing about!"

Harold delivers a sharp poke to her rib cage. "That's because you're frigid!"

"I'm not frigid! The problem is you're gay!" She shifts Skylar to her left arm to ward off more pokes. Skylar lets out a wail, as if he senses the tension emanating from his parents. This time, Harold pushes her with his finger up against the refrigerator, boring it deeply into her sternum.

“Don’t you ever say that, Lucy!” he shouts. “I am more of a man than you will ever know. You are just a frigid little girl without a mommy or a daddy. I am all you have.”

Lucy brings up a puddle of saliva in her mouth, puckers her lips and spits at Harold's face. He sees it coming and blocks it with his hand. There is a protracted moment of silence, as Harold inspects the spit running down his palm. Realizing what she’s done, Lucy moves slowly away, sidling toward the kitchen door, keeping her eyes on Harold with a defiant glare.

She sees him set his mouth. She hears his breath quicken. He lunges forward, yanks her arm back, gets behind her and clamps his other hand over her mouth. She tightens her one-armed clutch on Skylar, sets her feet apart to steady herself. She is preparing herself to bite his hand. She will jerk her chin up and clamp down on his stubby, poke-happy fingers, then dart out the back door and go—just go. Who knows where? It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that she fight back in this moment, because if she doesn’t she knows they will replay this scene again and again. If she doesn’t fight back he will know it’s okay to treat her like this.

“You've been spending too much time with that grotesque Nancy. I knew she was a bad influence.” He speaks softly, gently now, the brass in his voice giving way to a purr. He tightens his hand across her mouth. “If you ever talk to me like that again,” he continues, “I will kill you.”

Something inside of her comes loose, and she loses her nerve. Instead of biting Harold, she digs her nail into Skylar’s thigh to make him cry so Harold will release her. Skylar lets out a squeal that turns into a sob.

Harold takes his hand off her mouth, grabs her by the hair and softly smoothes the swath that he holds.

“The baby's hungry. Feed him.”

Later when she lies on her mattress on the floor nursing Skylar and reading more articles about the war protestors, she decides that now is the time. If she doesn’t leave Harold now, she will die. The thought comes to her just like that. She’s always felt she could tolerate anything for the sake of her kids, that her kids need a father and a roof to live under, and if she has to subjugate herself for that purpose, then that is the way it has to be. But she can’t be of any help to her kids if she is dead. Now, for the first time, she feels she must take her two boys and go. The only problem is, she has nowhere to go and no way to support herself, let alone the kids.

She waits until the next morning after Harold leaves for work and walks to the town center where Nancy works at Hank's Hardware World. She wheels Sky’s stroller through the narrow aisles to the back where Nancy sits at the register reading a paperback romance novel. On the cover, a shirtless man with flowing blonde hair holds the heroine against his muscled chest at the edge of a cliff.

“Luce!” Nancy puts the book down, revealing her freckled nose.

“Hi, sweetie,” says Lucy limply.

“Where’s my peppy Luce? Are you okay?”

“Remember when you said I could stay in your guest house if I ever really needed to? If things got really bad?” Lucy attempts to smile as she speaks. *Always ask with a smile.*

“Oh, Luce—”

"Things are bad. I know it's only one room, but I don't care. The kids and I can share the pullout couch. It will be heaven compared to what I'm used to."

"Luce, the thing is . . . "

"I've got to get out, Nancy. You know my parents and sister won't talk to me. They've never forgiven me for marrying that man. You're all I have."

"Lucy," says Nancy, putting both her hands over Lucy's. "The house is gone. Mike took it all. He's trying to take the kids too."

"What?"

"It just happened last week. I've been staying at Sandra's until I find my own place."

Lucy's knees wobble. She bows her head and takes a deep breath, trying to steady herself. It feels as if she'd reached for something solid, and it turned out to be make-believe. Perhaps it's all imaginary, she thinks—everything made of air.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie," says Lucy. "Are you okay?"

"Not really. Just trying to hold it together. What about you?"

"Same."

Lucy knows they only have words to help one another. They will each need something more stable to rely on. Nancy has a vast supply of cousins, lovers, a brother she's close with in New Jersey, and a mother in Florida. Lucy takes stock. She has Nancy, a sister who hates her, and parents who haven't spoken to her in four years.

So even though she hasn't talked to her sister for a year, she feels certain that Susan will help her if she really needs it. And she really needs it. At least Susan, unlike her parents who disowned her when she became pregnant, has stayed in contact. They'd

maintained their relationship, until . . . Lucy couldn't even remember what had driven them apart, but it was something other than Harold and the ignominy of marrying such an older and odious man. Why did she and Susan drift apart?

When she gets home, she calls Susan who hangs up on her immediately once Lucy announces herself. She dials again and there is no answer. She still has Susan's address. It would be an hour down to Massapequa and an hour back, enough time to see Susan and be home in time to pick up Eli at the pre-school around the corner. She'll have to take the train because Harold never leaves her with a car. He doesn't like her to be free to go anywhere. Lucy changes into her best outfit—a velvet, ginger colored skirt she found at a local thrift store and a bright purple peasant blouse. Her figure returned quickly after Sky was born, her waist almost back to itty-bitty and her hips and chest plumped out just enough to avoid being mistaken for a teenager. She tucks in the blouse, wanting to look nice for Susan. If she looks nice, she has a better chance of making her case. She puts Sky in his best outfit too—a blue knit number with a matching hat and blanket, an expensive baby gift from Nancy when she still had access to her husband's bank account.

Lucy spends the train ride to Long Island trying to remember why she and Susan stopped talking. They'd been fairly close as little girls, distant but friendly in their teenage years, and polite to each other as adults, exchanging calls on birthdays, getting together for lunch every once in a while if they happened to be in each other's part of town. As things grew tense with Lucy and her parents, Susan acted as the go-between, carrying the message that their mother and father wanted to contact her but that Harold was keeping them away. They'd almost disowned her when she got knocked up, but

marrying Harold so quickly seemed to make things even worse once they met him. They admittedly hated him, but still, they wanted to see her. Lucy didn't buy it for a second. If they wanted a relationship, they knew where to find her. To her credit, Susan never took sides and their break last year didn't have anything to do with their parents. She remembers Susan repeatedly hanging up on her, until she finally just stopped calling. If Susan wanted to reach out, Lucy would be there, but she'd stopped trying.

The ramshackle look of Susan's small one-story house in Massapequa, seems worsened by the stark contrast posed by its newly tarred roof. Their father, a roofer, has been haphazardly supporting Susan and her son, Derek, ever since her husband left a few years ago. Lucy wonders how she and her sister had each gone so wrong. They'd grown up in a nice, three-bedroom brick house in a stable household in Massapequa, and yet the two of them had consistently failed—both getting pregnant before marriage, both becoming involved with assholes, both trapped in miserable domestic situations. When they were girls they made plans to live luxurious lives. Susan would marry the prince of a small country and live on a yacht. Lucy would marry an oil tycoon and live in a Tahitian palace. Instead they'd both gotten themselves into trouble and just attracted more of it. They'd expected so much, thinks Lucy. Maybe that was the problem—shooting too high.

Holding Sky tight in her arms, Lucy knocks on the door. It opens, and there she is, Susan standing in a terry cloth robe, smoking a cigarette, her rust colored hair in a loose ponytail. One eye looks more closed than the other as she squints through the sunlight at Lucy. It takes her a second, and then she figures out who is standing before her.

"Ahh shit. Lucy?"

"Ta-da!" Lucy says, stretching out an arm and swiveling her hips. She is actually thrilled to see her sister, comforted in a weird sort of way. Relieved that there is at least someone else in her life. Susan does not move to let her in.

"What are you doing here?" Her voice is monotone, listless.

"You hung up on me, silly. This is the only way to talk to you. It's almost like you're avoiding me," she says with a wink.

"I am."

"Sue," she says reaching forward and hugging her. "I missed you."

Skylar lifts his face to look at Susan. His bright blue eyes are irresistible. Susan smiles and looks down at him.

"Who's this?" she says to Skylar.

"If you let me in, I'll tell you."

The home is badly lit. The bright morning sunlight that drilled into Lucy's eyes on the ride down makes no appearance in this dark room, its curtains pulled tight over two tiny windows. A naked bulb illuminates the ceiling in a stark white glow that fails to spread to the rest of the room. In a corner, a sandy-haired little boy bangs a wooden spoon across a line of pots.

"Is that Derek?" shouts Lucy, rushing over to him. Derek stops drumming. "Last time I saw you, you were a baby like this," she says showing him Skylar. She kneels down and gives him a hug. He pushes her away.

"Sue, he's so big!" Lucy plops down on the couch and starts nursing Skylar.

"He's average size for a two-year-old," says Susan, still standing by the door.

"No, I mean, it's been so long."

"What do you want?" says Susan grinding out her cigarette in the ashtray. "I know it's something, so just tell me right now."

Derek resumes his percussion on the pots.

"I wanted to see you, Susan."

"All of a sudden?"

"Is that so strange? You're my sister." She's not quite sure how she's going to work in the fact that she does want something. She really has wanted to see Susan for a long time, and at least figure out why Susan has come to detest her so.

"Yeah, it's strange coming from you, because you always want something. What are you after now?" Derek adds singing to the drumming. "Rooo toooday! Roo today!" he shouts.

"I never knew why you stopped talking to me."

Susan lets out a snort. A sardonic smile spreads across her face.

"Let's just say I was always right about you. Not to trust you."

"What does that mean, Sue?" She pops the baby off her breast. He is asleep again. He lies peacefully cradled in her arms.

"Roo tudy, roo tudy," Derek sings.

"It means you were a shitty big sister. And I thought, like an idiot, that you had matured. And maybe you did. But . . . " Susan trails off, distracted by a pause in Derek's song. She lights another cigarette. "You're getting me worked up, Lucy. I don't want to get angry, I really don't. I'm just too damned tired to tell the truth."

"So tell me. Tell me what I did that was so awful. Was it forgetting your birthday last year? I'm sorry I had a lot going on."

"No. I don't give a shit about my birthday."

"Something about Mom and Dad? Did they turn you against me? What did they say? You can't believe them, Susan, you know that. They lie, Sue. Or was it forgetting Derek's birthday? Was that it?"

"No, no, no!" Susan throws her hands up in the air. "You know. It was Robert. Rob MCulwen, okay? It was the fact that you screwed him. I just found that out last year. He finally told me before he left for Vietnam again. You screwed him the night of the spring dance while I lay in bed sick, you screwed the love of my life in the back seat of his car."

Lucy's mind races back to the spring dance, flooding her with images of gardenias in bloom, anointing girls' dresses and perfuming the air. She only remembers that honeyed smell all around and the deer dying in the road from the impact of Rob's car.

"Wait a second," says Lucy, standing up. "I didn't do it with him." Skylar jerks awake, crying. Lucy props him over her shoulder, pats his back as she paces the room. "I went for a ride in his car, sure, but we didn't do anything. What'd he say?"

Susan takes a long drag from her cigarette. Derek starts whining. She throws him a magazine and he dutifully begins tearing it up.

"Ya know, it just doesn't matter anymore, Lucy, but if there's one thing I've learned, it's that you, in every situation, are always the liar."

"I'm not lying! Not this time."

"Why'd you leave the dance early with him anyway? I know I said you could go with him, but you didn't have to go all the way!"

Lucy remembers. Susan had caught the flu and cancelled with Rob. She asked Lucy, who was a senior and not planning to go the junior dance anyway, if she would take her place so that Rob didn't have to go alone.

"I didn't know any of this," Susan says, "until last year when Rob came back from Vietnam. We were going to get married, you know. He was going to adopt Derek. But it ruined everything after he told me this. We got in a huge fight, and that was that."

"Sue, I had no idea—"

"You knew I loved him. You knew, Lucy. You just didn't care. That's how you are. You do what you want, you step on who you have to, you lie if you have to."

"But he's lying. I didn't know you cared that much, but I didn't do it with him anyway. Okay, I'm sorry I left the dance early with him, but that was it. We got in a car accident, we hit a deer and that was the end of the night."

"The deer story, yeah. I believed that one. I was so stupid."

"Susan, go ahead and marry the jerk, it's okay. We didn't do anything, I swear. Get him in the same room with me, and you'll see. I have no feelings for him, and he ended up hating me by the end of the night! So, you see, you can marry him. Go ahead and marry the liar."

Susan stubs out her cigarette, this time right on the windowsill. Lucy sees it is covered in a gray film.

"It doesn't matter anyway. He lost his legs a few months ago. He's in some hospital in California. He'll never be the same."

Lucy sits down. She remembers Rob's legs—long and agile. She imagines him whole-bodied, playing basketball, dancing with her, vaulting over the door of his convertible.

"That's terrible. How did it happen?"

"He stepped on a mine. Three other guys died." Susan slumps deeper into the couch and sobs. Derek stops drumming, hears her from his corner, and starts to cry, too.

"Oh, Sue. I'm so sorry."

On the train ride home, Lucy thinks that at least Susan has Derek. He must be some solace for her, the fact that they belong to one another. And at least she, Lucy, has her own sons. She is taking a train back to hell, mission unaccomplished, but her sons are alive and healthy. And Rob, who does he have? If Lucy had let him fall in love with her that spring night, would he have gone off to war? Would he have found a way to dodge the draft so he could be with her? And what would have become of her life? She would have avoided Harold, sure, but she wouldn't have these children, and she can't imagine that.

The train comes to a stop without any station in sight. The loudspeaker announces that there is a slight delay, but that they should be moving again soon. Lucy starts to panic. Skylar lies in her lap, serenely sleeping, but she feels jitters move up and down her body, vibrations rattling her with fear: if she is late to meet Eli at pre-school, the teacher will call her home and then, when she is not there to answer, they will call Harold's office, and he will know that she has left the house.

She is about to get up and ask someone what the delay is when the train lurches forward, slowly gaining speed. Lucy sits back, closes her eyes and sighs. She sees the

reason for the hold up at the next stop. A group of anti-war protestors have taken over the station, waving signs in the air and chanting. They have blocked off potential passengers from boarding the train by creating a chain, arms entwined, that stretches in front of the tracks. Lucy's train keeps moving, skipping the station, gaining speed as the loudspeaker says they will be moving on to the next stop.

She wants to leap off the train and join the protestors, but she has to be home for her children. She is a mother, after all. And what of Rob's mother? What of the mothers of the boys who died fighting alongside Rob? There are probably mothers in that chain she just passed, holding hands and waving their signs and shouting. She is not exempt from making change because she is a mother, Lucy tells herself. She is responsible for making change. Skylar wakes, looking to be fed. She eases him under her shirt so he can suckle, and as she relaxes, the glimmer of the thought sits there shimmering in its own glow, remaining just that—a thought. And she is aware of this and completely ignorant of it at the same time. Her teeth start to hurt again, a gnawing, tenacious ache that snaps her back to the reality of now. These aching teeth are beginning to feel like an unwelcome old friend.

She hurries home from the train station, fearful she will be too late and that Harold will explode again, when all she wants to do is get away without anymore hassles. Somehow, she will find the money and she will find the moment to leave. She will bundle up her boys and whisk them away. She doesn't need an oil tycoon. Just some pudgy, balding, decent guy will do. Anybody but Harold.

There on the doorstep, she finds a vase of red roses waiting. The card says, "I love you- Harold." Lucy sinks down and sits awkwardly on the worn stoop of the house,

staring at the card. Skylar sleeps peacefully on his back, nestled in her left arm. She lifts the flowers and settles them into the cradle formed between her right hand and elbow. The roses are fresh and beautiful in their perfect stage of blossom. This unexpected gesture, so typical of Harold's flare for the dramatic, upends all the emotions she was carrying back from the visit with her sister. Maybe she's not so all alone after all, and maybe he's not all that bad. He never punches or beats her. He never abandoned her. And she knows she hasn't always been the model wife. She wonders if Harold, so sure in all his beliefs, ever questioned his decision to marry her. She had kids too young, and he, perhaps, had kids against his will, or at least against his intentions. In his own way, he has tried to be a good father to her sons. Perhaps she's been wrong about fighting back. Fighting back has only led to more fights. Perhaps if she doesn't fight, he won't either. Isn't that what they always said to do with bullies? Ignore them and they will leave you alone. Perhaps she's just been trying in all the wrong ways.

The roses are the same color as the carpet at Grossman's—the resort in the Catskills where they'd first met so long ago, where Harold abruptly stopped as she walked past him, turned his head in her direction, and their eyes met. His were the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. Later that night, they seemed to call for her from across the room, and by the time he'd sought her out and pulled her onto the dance floor, she had almost fully succumbed. He was so mature, so suave in his white dinner jacket, so commanding. Without so much as a word, he took her in his arms and navigated through and around the other dancers. Before the song had finished, she was already married to him in her mind, living in a nice house, in a nice suburb with nice kids. Perhaps she was right all along. Perhaps there's still time for her vision to come through. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.

The Bronx: September 1963:

Lucy carries a light blue suitcase full of her best clothes and shoes. She has brought it all the way from Long Island, on a train then a bus, then on foot, to this neighborhood in the Bronx. As soon as the suitcase grows unbearable in one hand, she switches it to the other, back and forth like this until she reaches the dentist's office. She checks the address on the card and looks up at the white facade, patches of its paint chipping to reveal a dull cinder block lurking beneath. Men with caramel skin holding tiny cups of espresso lean against the wall, smoking cigarettes. Several of them dart their eyes up and down her body, and one makes a sound like he's calling a cat. She ignores them, holding her head higher as she passes them by, trying to avoid eye contact and trying to keep from smiling. She enters a dark narrow hall, works her way up a steep staircase, down another shabby corridor and into the clinic where a small woman with a pockmarked face sits at a folding table.

"Yes." says the woman softly. "May I help you?"

Lucy clears her throat. She is tired from the journey, but finally here.

"I'd like to see Dr. Finklestein."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, sweetie. I'm a friend."

The woman is disarmed by the "sweetie." She smiles and raises her eyebrows. Lucy's dark olive eyes lend her an exotic look at nineteen years-old, but her petite frame and delicate hands make her look in her early teens.

“Let me get him. Your name?” asks the woman.

“Just tell him, Lucy.”

The receptionist gets up from her chair and walks down a long hallway. Lucy follows quietly behind her, but near the end of the hallway she cuts in front of the woman and parks herself in the doorway, steadying herself on the threshold.

Harold looks up from his desk, which is covered with stacks of papers, except for one corner that holds a giant plastic tooth the size of a human head. She has only seen him that one time before in the Catskills, and she is taken aback by his appearance—his black horn-rimmed glasses obscuring the blue of his eyes, and his white lab coat replacing his white dinner jacket.

Before he or the woman in the hall can say anything, Lucy plops down her suitcase with a thump.

“I’m pregnant,” she says.

Massapequa: May 1961

Oh God, she’s tasted the lips of that sweet, pale-skinned Rob at the high school dance, their very first date. While “Stay” plays, he sweeps his hand up the chiffon of Lucy’s sleeve, into the dip of her shoulder and behind her neck, moves his fingers up to touch the hollow space beneath her pinned up hair, gently presses and pulls her into him. She was waiting for this from the minute he picked her up in his gold Plymouth

convertible, anticipating how and when it would happen, she so wanted to kiss the tall and beautiful Rob, and now that she has, she feels, not the sense of accomplishment she expected, but instead a sense of ownership—that they are one another's possessions.

Rob, who is supposed to be dancing with Lucy's sister, pulls Lucy closer, running one hand down her back. The other couples spin around them like white and black and pink pinwheels, while Lucy and Rob rock back and forth against one another. Rob tastes of salt—his lips do—his tongue, when he slips the tip of it briefly into her mouth, tastes of lemon.

A chaperone in a white tuxedo comes over to them in the middle of the dance floor and whispers politely that they need to stand further apart or leave the gym. They decide to leave.

Instead of heading to Seaman's Neck Park, the spot where she heard couples went to park, Rob steers toward the lake. He tells her he knows a more private place at the edge of the lake, near the Preserve, that no one ever goes to. It's like the Garden of Eden, he tells her. Casually, he places his right palm just above her left knee. The weight of his hand through the three layers of dress feels like it will leave a permanent imprint, and waves of heat rush up and down her thigh.

Lucy is not supposed to be here with him, but when he asked her to the dance, how could she not go? Her sister Susan said it was okay, not wanting to leave Rob without a date when she got sick. Lucy let herself get carried away and leave the dance with him, but it seems so meant to be.

Rob says the night is warm enough. He pulls over to the A&P parking lot, gets out of the car and pulls the top down in one lithesome move, then propels himself back into

the car by jumping over the closed door. He is tall and straight with close-cropped dark hair, a smile that bends sideways up into a smirk, eyes the color of root beer.

Both thrilled and nervous, Lucy stifles a rush of the giggles. His hand returns to her thigh. It sits there without moving, heavy with the weight of promise. He lifts his hand up to touch her cheek lightly. It is warm and intimate, and Lucy thinks she might cry, it is so personal, the touch. She experiences again the feeling of being possessed and of possessing, and is comforted and excited all at once.

"You look lovely tonight," he says. "You are always so lovely." The lights of the A&P sign reflect off the side view mirror and onto Rob's face, illuminating it in yellow and red stripes. He turns on the radio and fools with the knob, stopping at "Are You Lonesome Tonight?"

He puts his hand back on her thigh, and with the other hand steers the car out of the parking lot back onto the road. The shops and homes fade, the trees grow thicker as they drive on, until there are no signs of human life, just the long, thick trunks of the white pines, the wispy green fringe, falling in soft feathered swoops.

He moves his hand beneath her dress and inches it ever so slightly higher. It is a thrilling gesture, and she can barely contain the urge to laugh or cry, or . . . she doesn't quite know what she wants to do, but she will nearly die for the want of doing.

"You're like a doll," he tells her, turning to face her.

There are no lights on the side of the road, but she can make out his face in the dark. It smiles wide in spontaneous amusement, his teeth glinting against the black sky. She has made boys smile like this before, but never while a hand rested above her knee. A

shiver of delight flutters up her spine. Susan is better off without such a bad boy, Lucy thinks. She is saving Susan from his touch.

He looks at her again and turns to bring his hand again to caress her face. She closes her eyes in total surrender. Then in a sudden instant, her neck is jerked forward, her tiny body ferociously slammed into the dashboard, and her head rammed against the windshield, twisting her face to the left. Both bodies jerk backwards and are pressed into their seats with a thump as the car pitches to a brutal halt. They sit in their seats, stunned, staring forward at the spider web of cracks on the windshield. The horn blares in a constant wave of sound that drowns out the music. Lucy turns to see Rob angled in her direction, his right arm extended in front of her, his left elbow up against the steering wheel. He turns to look at Lucy, then yelps in pain as he slowly twists his body back to release his elbow from the steering wheel. The horn stops and strains of "Let's Twist Again" emerge from the radio, as if to taunt them in their immobility.

Lucy does not feel any pain, but she is shocked and shaken and confused. Her ears are ringing a high, steady whine. What happened? She hit the windshield, but Rob's arm had reached out in front of her like an improvised seatbelt that cushioned her from the full force of the blow. Luckily, he was driving slowly down winding Lake Shore Drive.

They have hit something, or something has hit them, but they are okay.

Rob switches off the ignition, keeping the headlights on.

"You okay?" he asks, his voice trembling.

"I think so. You?"

They both get out of the car and move to its front. On the ground before them lies the body of a big brown animal, dappled with snow white spots on its side. One of the animal's legs is bent at an awful angle and twitches spasmodically. Its neck is twisted back awkwardly, its face struggling to turn towards them, and its one upturned eye wide open, unblinking and black. Lucy can see the gash across its front flank, see the dark blood pooling on the street beneath its stomach. Lucy recognizes this is a deer, as she feels the sticky substance of its life source spilling beneath her shoes. The creature's stomach swells up and down, clouds of steamy breath plume from its flaring nostrils as staccato snorts jerk from its mouth. Strangely impassively, the deer stares into her eyes without any hint of blame or wonder.

Lucy's head starts to hurt, and she bursts into sobs, not from any pain, but from the horror of the scene.

Rob kneels down beside the deer. "It's a female," he says flatly. "I wish I had my gun so I could put her out of her misery."

She bends down to touch its fur, knowing it will soon die. "Shhh," Lucy says, running her hand along the deer's back. She wants to calm it in its last moments, but she doesn't know how.

Rob stands up with a groan. "We should go to a hospital. See about our wounds."

"No," she says. Now her teeth are starting to hurt from the impact with the windshield, and she moves her jaw from side to side. "Let's move her off the road."

Rob lets out a quick shot of a laugh. "It would take at least three men."

He walks toward her with a slight limp and holds out his hand. "Get in the car."

“I don’t want to leave her,” Lucy says. “Go get help. I’ll wait here.” The deer’s breathing has steadied and Lucy feels that her gentle stroking is helping it.

“You’re bleeding. Get in the car. You’re bleeding from your mouth.”

She puts her hand to her gums and rubs a finger across her teeth. On the left side in the back she can feel a molar coming loose. She takes her finger out and sees the blood, now tasting and feeling its sweet stickiness.

“I’m fine,” she says. She can feel her breathing accelerate. Her head and body are muffled with pain, but it seems important to stay with the deer. “Just go.”

“I am not leaving you here in the middle of the road in the dark with a dead deer.” He speaks urgently, his voice rising in pitch.

“She’s not dead!” Lucy shouts.

“Well, she’s on her way out.” His voice is edged with a nasty tinge Lucy has not heard before.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Rob comes up close in front of her and yells: “Get in the car, now!”

The pain in her head mushrooms and travels through to her ears, but she feels this deep obligation to stay.

“I told you, I’m not going.”

Rob leans over and straddles her, cups his forearms under her armpits, and starts to lift her up. Lucy is an accomplished ice skater and a dedicated dancer. Her delicate body is no match for Rob’s muscular physique, but her strength pairs with a primitive scrappiness. She pulls loose and shoots her foot forward, slamming it into Rob’s crotch.

He falls backwards, wailing in pain and drops to the ground, landing ass down next to the dying animal. He rolls himself into a fetal position, clutching his privates.

"You bitch," he groans. "Bitch." His eyes glare at her in anger.

Lucy gets to her feet and stands frozen by the car. For a moment she thinks she'll jump in and drive away, but she does not want to leave the deer to die alone.

"You're crazy," Rob says, pushing himself up off the ground and into a standing position. "I didn't know you were so crazy."

Lucy backs up away from him, circles behind the car without letting him out of her sight, and comes back around on the other side of the deer. She does not know what he is now capable of.

"Stay here with your damn deer. I don't give a shit." He spits on the ground. The glare of the headlights illuminates the flecks of blood in his saliva. He gets into the car and puts it in reverse. She hears the song "Stay," playing on the radio, the same song they had danced to less than an hour ago.

"We'll see if anyone comes to get you," shouts Rob, putting the car in reverse.

As soon as the car drives away, pitch darkness envelops Lucy and the deer. The music and the engine and Rob's voice fade, and the silence of the road and the woods give back its own blank sound. She is frightened, until her eyes adjust and she can make out the lines of the trees and the curve of the road. The trees, pointing up like arrows at the stars, flank her. The sky, a roof, blankets her, and the street holds her weight and the weight of the deer like two hands. She feels contained in this place and time, as if she were a figure in a snow globe. Though the circumstances are sad for the deer and for her shattered image of Rob and romance, she does not want to leave this place ever.

The deer's breath is slowing. Still fixed on Lucy, the creature's black eye is still wide open, unblinking. Waiting.

It's okay if nobody ever comes. She will stay and soothe the deer. It is only fair. After all, the deer will die soon, but Lucy has her whole life stretching wondrously before her.