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Annie Valente

Until Our Shadows Claim Us

The first night he took one of us, the Challenger disintegrated over the Atlantic Ocean. We'd watched that day from our second-grade classroom at Rosewood Elementary, from the huddled space of the magic carpet where Mrs. Levy read to us during story time, where she pulled the television close to the carpet's edge and dimmed the lights, like the movies, the launch as magic as the storybooks she read to us. We watched for all of them, especially for the teacher up there in space, and when the shuttle exploded only 73 seconds into flight, when Mrs. Levy held a hand to her mouth and shut off the television, we knew only that something had gone wrong, that the light bursting onscreen was not the same heart-fluttered spark of fireworks, the only other flare we knew.

At home, our parents watched the coverage. We watched with them, over TV dinners, over glasses of milk. We knew something terrible had happened, though we weren't sure what, and we felt sad and somehow empty until our parents tucked us into bed, into blankets soft and warm, and then we were safe again until we woke and heard the news while our parents poured our cereal and listened, a disaster of another kind, a tragedy far closer to home.

Craig Davenport, who'd sat next to us on the magic carpet, who'd played hopscotch and kickball on the playground with us, who at lunch had traded his juice box for our fruit snacks — gone, taken in the night from his own bedroom, the window still open when his parents came to wake him and found his empty bed.

There were speculations, notice of a vehicle, a number to call if any information was found. There were our parents, holding us close, dropping us off at the doors to school, watching us walk inside.

But we knew, as sure as we knew the shape of letters to spell our names, that at last he'd come for us. That what we'd done those few months before, the last innocent months of our lives, had brought all of this on.

We'd conjured him on the playground, bright blue October, our sweaters soft as fleece, a downy barrier between our skin and the
cold metal of rungs and bars. We crowded inside the rocket, a tall structure painted the colors of our American flag, its diameter large enough to encase all of us, all clustered around a discarded piece of mirror that Tom Davies found in the woodchips nestling the swing set. Tom looked at each of us, fear scratched into the soft creases of his face, and told us of the Rosewood Phantom, the first time we’d heard the name, the first time the words stained the ridges of our tongues.

Tom told us Rosewood had a killer, many years ago, a man who stole the town’s children one by one, any child who dared to step outside beyond nightfall and at times, even children tucked soundly in their beds. Tom told us the townspeople finally caught him, tortured him, wrapped him in a winding sheet, then they buried him alive beneath the hills of Stillwater Park, a death as terrible as the grief of all those parents.

Tom paused, shifted his gaze around the perimeter of the rocket, said the story never ended there. He told us the Rosewood Phantom would appear if we said his name three times into a mirror, even into a broken shard neglected among woodchips. He said the Phantom would emerge in rags, bloodied remnants of the winding sheet, to take the souls of more children, to exact revenge on our town. When Rachel Vasquez said That’s a lie, that sounds just like Bloody Mary, a game her sister played that never worked, Tom flashed a glare across all of us, told us he’d tried summoning the Rosewood Phantom once with his babysitter, in the bathroom of his basement. He said they’d never even made it to three, that upon the second summon the mirror began to shake, an eerie wobbling that forced the babysitter to turn on the lights, to make him promise he’d never tell his parents. Weeks later, when Tom lost a tooth and spat red into the bathroom sink, he left a dark stain across the porcelain, a stain that regardless of his mother’s scrubbing never lightened, its crimson a harrowing reminder of the Phantom’s blood-stained rags.

I don’t believe you, Nick Dorsey said. Nick, who never believed anything, who’d shouted that pigs and spiders couldn’t talk when Mrs. Levy tried to read us Charlotte’s Web, who’d told us all last year that Santa wasn’t real, though most of us still believed. Nick
reached into the huddle and grabbed the shard of mirror. Before Tom or any of us thought to stop him, he chanted the name of the Rosewood Phantom three times.

We waited, our breath all held as one. The wind picked up, blew yellowed leaves across the playground. We could have been angry with Nick, but none of us were, those few moments of waiting as delicious as sugar. And then nothing happened but the sound of a faint scream, carried across the blacktop on autumn wind, one lone call of triumph from the four-square grids.

Nick threw the mirror down, called Tom's bluff, told us ghost stories were for babies. Then we heard the whistle blown from the school doors, the end of recess, and we climbed down from the rocket, disbanded our summit, left the mirror shard abandoned inside the rocket’s cage. And then three months later Craig Davenport disappeared, and a real rocket broke apart.

These were links, impossible to discard, as we'd so carelessly done with the mirror.

Spring arrived early, melted the icicles from the tree limbs beyond our windows, pushed a space between us and our nation's lost rocket, and even helped us forget the empty desk in Mrs. Levy's classroom, Craig's pencil box still inside, a sign of hope to all of us that he'd come back someday for its contents, that he'd sit beside us again. We moved through Valentine's Day, the first real reminder that Craig was gone, our shoeboxes papered and glittered as mailboxes for valentines, for the cards we brought each member of the class, even Craig, a puffy-painted box Misty Jones had made for him that sat atop his desk, its mail slot overflowing with notes. But then an early wave of warmth drove the snow to recede, drove the weight of Craig from our consciences, occupied instead by lighter coats, by splashed puddles and mud until the thaw brought forth police, as readily as it drew small crocuses and ants.

On our broadcasts, new searches—a new thirst for clues, hidden all those weeks beneath hard-packed snow, new locations to inspect, new community volunteers prepared to slug through sodden forests, to dig beneath softened ground. Our
parents asked us, at times, if we remembered anything particular about Craig, if we'd seen anything unusual that day. We shook our heads no, avoided our parents' eyes, and on the playground avoided the rocket, avoided each other altogether.

Mr. Tillman, one of Craig's neighbors, had reported seeing a strange vehicle on their street that day, 1979 Buick LeSabre Estate, a brown station wagon he'd never seen before, parked along the mailboxes that afternoon while he watched daytime game shows. The police followed that lead, though that was all we knew, though no other clues presented themselves under layers of snow, finally melted. While our town picked up searching we receded, kept our mouths shut, and at night locked our windows tight, crouched beneath covers, waited for the turn of doorknobs, the creak of panes slowly rising.

But nothing came, no telltale sounds, not even brief glimmers in mirrors though we held our breath every time we brushed our teeth. And then March melted to April, and no more clues were found or pursued, and early spring slid into full bloom, tulips and hyacinth lightening us, relaxing the tight cores of our chests, settling us into sleep as their growing bulbs guarded our yards.

And then in late April, the day after the Chernobyl disaster, after we learned that over 4,000 people had been killed, a radioactive bloom above two continents, we awoke to a world tilted even further off its axis, a world that allowed Rachel Vasquez to disappear.

As the police swarmed our school and streets in droves, as our parents spread their hearts between the Ukraine and Rosewood, disasters separated by seas, we knew for sure that there were no misgivings, no coincidences. We knew what we'd done, and we knew the scope now, unfathomable.

We'd brought these disasters upon us, and upon the world as well. By our own imprudence, born of curiosity and nothing else, we'd summoned a monster that took two of our peers from their parents, an insatiable fiend that stretched its claws across the Ukraine as well, that pulled a failed rocket from the sky. We knew the stakes had risen beyond the height charts lining our closet.
doors, with the deaths of more people than we knew to name. Our parents installed security systems, new technology, Rachel taken from her bedroom just like Craig. They bought us personal alarms, tucked mace inside our pockets, an arsenal of protections that we knew, even as we accepted them, could never save us, neither siren nor latch, not the tightest of bolts hugging our windows shut. We were not safe, none of us, and we curled into ourselves, grew quieter as the police descended upon our streets and tried relentlessly to determine what links connected Craig and Rachel, why Rosewood, why this class and these kids?

Tom Davies began collecting meteors, though we all recognized their shapes as shale. We watched him scour the playground, line space rock along his desk, where he’d watch them for hours, ignoring Mrs. Levy and imagining, we were sure, another world beyond this one, a planet of gentler tilt. Karen Kettleman stood at the edge of the swingset, during recess, stared at the sun long enough to brand an afterimage into her brain, some vision that flashed long after she closed her eyes, something bright and captured and burning. And Nick Dorsey pored over Two-Minute Mysteries, as if solving them might open a portal, some solution, as if knowing how Mr. Deeds died could dissolve the impossible specter of death.

When Trina Johnson’s personal alarm went off in her backpack, a blaring sound that interrupted Mrs. Levy’s story time and took over five minutes to find while the siren blasted louder, splitting our ears, Tom at last signaled to us, every one of us across the magic carpet, somehow less magical now, with a flicker of eyes we knew not to ignore. In the library, when we should have been finding books for our annual readathon, we met by the card catalogue instead, flipped through musty entries until we found the Rs, then Rosewood, then the Rosewood Phantom at last. We holed away in a deserted corner, behind young adult stacks where the windows leaked in faint light, and scanned our books, only two on all of Rosewood, until we found the paragraphs we needed, the Phantom himself.

What we found sank our hearts, so little information for so much hurt. His name, unknown. Lost over time, like every name in the Ukraine that we didn’t know and never would. All those par-
ents, also lost, not even brief mention of a winding sheet, not the rags Tom promised would appear. The only fact we could find was of a killer, that he'd existed, that he'd been buried in Stillwater Park like Tom said. But the legend – just a story, a tale to keep children from wandering off after dark, with no warning or word of perfect sunshine, of the shade we'd brought in light.

Tom sat back on his heels, rested his palms against his jeans. I told you there'd be nothing, said Nick, not believing, even still, though his voice cracked against its syllables, opened a wavering gap of doubt. He waited, hovering with the rest of us, over books that told us nothing though we lingered, as if the black text below us might rearrange itself into solution, into an absolution we craved.

The police trekked through our neighborhoods, made maps and diagrams. They graphed every similarity they knew between Craig and Rachel, a series of questions for their parents that we imagined offered hope, small ember, but also some heaving and winded burden, a stretched-open book of not knowing, of perhaps never knowing, of ceaseless, crushing wait.

They tracked every Buick LeSabre Estate, every color, year, every driver. They scanned yards and forests, swollen by rain and spring, scoured sodden landscapes for footprints, for hairs and blanket fibers and clothes. In early May, our local broadcasts erupted for several days when the media leaked too early that Officer Franks found a bloodied rag in Craig's yard, discarded beneath Mrs. Davenport's rosebushes. We lay hiding in our beds, not sleeping, strange roil of shame and hope and fear, that the rags were what we'd waited for, that this proof meant the Phantom had been stopped, but also that one of us would have to confess, that we'd known all along how he'd reappeared.

We hoped for an end as much as we feared it. That blood meant our classmates were not simply elsewhere, but gone. We imagined limbs, broken or worse. We imagined teeth, sharp nails, rags to cloak and suffocate. We imagined the crushing sensation of hands, clamped down on our chests while we slept, to grip and pull us away, beyond windows, beyond the walls of our rooms, and
though some of us had never known religion we prayed, beside our beds at night after we heard our parents settle into sleep, that the Phantom was found, that he'd never find us.

But then, we awoke to the morning news. Only animal blood, a clue that might have still signaled a lead if not connected immediately to Jericho, Mrs. Feinberg's cat, a neighboring, pregnant feline who'd birthed her kittens beneath the Davenports' porch. The police had found one dead kitten near Mrs. Feinberg's sycamore tree, wrapped loosely in the rest of the bloodied rag, an attempt at burial by claw and teeth and Jericho still hiding beneath the porch, refusing to come out.

We imagined Craig's parents, in their home above this feline mother, equally sequestered, equally heartbroken. We felt the compression against our own ribcages, as those astronauts must have felt before they ever reached orbit, mistook for gravity, and as every heart in the Ukraine must have felt as the blast erupted, a weight as unimaginable as a phantom's pale hands, gripping the cylinders of our necks.

And then, a lull. Though the police maintained their presence, though our alarms stayed in our backpacks. The trees thickened above us, leaves shot from their branches, a canopy of green light that grew steadily darker through May. We walked to school in pairs, or threes, or our families drove us, or we took the bus door to door, drivers paid by our parents to wait, to watch us dash inside. We warmed gradually again to our classroom, a space that felt safe despite holes, despite the gaping absence of two desks, Rachel's pencil box keeping vigil alongside Craig's. Mandy Newman braided friendship bracelets for Rachel, one for every week she'd been gone. Misty Jones kept watch over Craig's Valentine box, still atop his desk, a scattering of new notes left for his birthday, announced on the intercom as Rosewood's birthdays were but without the fanfare of cupcakes, of a trip to the principal's office for celebratory pencils and erasers.

Our classroom, a small cocoon, and even daylight itself, some solace. But at dusk, when our neighborhood lights flooded...
on, we whipped home on our bikes, spokes whirring with wind, or we stayed home altogether, watched from our windows as the streetlamps flickered on and pooled light. We could see them, from our beds, illumined circles that at any moment we expected to break with the flash of a shadow, a flutter of torn rags.

Yet even still, the pulse of summer approaching soothed us, the days growing warmer, then warmer still until our final days of class had come and gone, celebrated with kickball and popsicles, with an outdoor field day and with lingering last looks at our classroom, as we waved Mrs. Levy goodbye. Then we were on our own, no classmates and no carpet, and no pencil boxes to remind us of what we'd lost, of what we'd cast away with a chant, a summoning.

We spent our days splashing at the pool, guarding lemonade stands, thumbing through our summer reading lists, full sun beating above us, a light bright enough to erase the shade we'd shared. We felt our parents relax, calmed by sun, by warmth and no news on our television screens, and we stayed up late, had sleepovers, watched Cujo and Carrie, films we were still too young to see, films we couldn't help but watch. The thrill felt illicit, a transgression all the same but one that felt honest, and our guilt slid away, our worry, on the unending calm of each day. We had picnics with our families, chased ice cream trucks, helped our parents make sun tea, left on the back porch to steep in sunshine. We even marveled at fireworks on July Fourth, letting ourselves fall silent and hushed beneath the glare of their splendor, and for only a moment thought of the space shuttle's sparks, an unbearable trail of light now faded.

We knew the police still searched. We watched their cars patrol past the pool, saw them stationed on our streets. But the long days, that lack of dark, let us forget the things we'd done, let us off the hook by keeping us from one another, no collective conscience, no reminders in the glances we shared, in looks we now avoided.

And then in August, when our class lists posted, we walked with our parents to the school doors and felt our dread return. We saw our names listed together, heard our parents exclaim joy, tell us we'd move through third grade with our friends, Mr. Jeffries's class, no longer Mrs. Levy's magic carpet but together all the same. The sun felt strange above us as we walked home, and as we lay awake at
night and felt summer receding, even in restless heat, in the stretch of weeks we still had until Labor Day.

Then in late August, full sun overhead, we awoke to an explosion of carbon dioxide in Cameroon, the unimaginable deaths of thousands of people, so many livestock, and to the disappearance of Nick Dorsey, gone before school ever began.

We sat before televisions, forgot our bicycles, our books and swimsuits. The Rosewood pool closed, off limits for safety until further notice. Police crowded our streets, flash of blue and red lights artificial beneath sun, a heat that bore down heavily and simmered against blacktop. We watched FBI agents fan through our community and saw reporters question our neighbors, interviews we watched on local broadcast and beyond, disappearances swelled to national news now as well.

We watched our televisions for Nick Dorsey, and for Rachel and Craig, but also for Cameroon, all those people, all those animals, a cloud of asphyxiation over Lake Nyos that we felt enclose our own throats as well, a constriction of lung and air sac and cell that made some of us wake in the night screaming, the flooded relief of gasped oxygen at once a reprieve, a requiem. That we could breathe, that we were alive. But that we awoke at all, to this world, a world no longer ours. We imagined suffocation, what that lack of breath might mean. We feared the shape of our own organs, that our lungs could fail us, that our hearts could ever sputter and cease, and that we held things beating inside of us, things we'd never fully understand or see, things we couldn't trust.

Our parents held us, close. They made our beds, washed our dishes, sang us lullabies and read us bedtime stories, though we knew as well as them that we were too old now, too matured. We felt them watching us, at times, while we pretended to sleep, never knowing if they watched us breathe out of love, or if they watched the windows beyond our beds, standing guard for the threats pressed like palmprints against our panes.

Craig's parents began to see Rachel's, beyond pleasantries they'd once exchanged at parent-teacher nights, a communal,
shared grief that lessened their own. And Nick’s mother appeared on television, his father long gone from divorce, made pleas for her son to return home, to stop these jokes and this sneaking out, her skepticism the same as Nick’s, that his open window meant he left on his own. But then five days passed, and her pleas turned to prayers, soft supplication feathering her voice though a hard anger broadened beneath it, her eyes leveled at the camera, telling whoever took her son to just bring him home, now.

These entreaties broke us, split deep cracks through a summer ending, a stretch of months we knew was never carefree, never everlasting, only brief amnesty from the weight of ourselves. We considered the gravity of an exploding lake, its lack of coincidence, how danger lurked beneath the surface of all things and how the earth held so many secrets, in Cameroon, in Stillwater Park. We felt the rupture beneath us, nearby park, an unknown cemetery disturbed and heaving its shadow across our town, across the Atlantic as well, an ocean that separated us from radiation, from poisonous bloom, that swallowed shards of rocket as they disintegrated.

The school year came, without our wanting, beyond sobered Labor Day celebrations, no barbecues or last swims. The pool remained closed, water draining slowly, a murky pond of stilled glass that caught leaves shaken from trees. Our neighborhoods and parks kept curfew past dusk, no cookouts or bike rides, the streets deserted and silent. The FBI remained in Rosewood, stood guard outside our school, alongside police and parents and community volunteers, a wall of protection to keep us safe. But our classroom no longer was, not cocoon nor nest, not a place that felt sound with so many gone, so many missing. Mr. Jeffries welcomed us, had us glitter new nametags, arranged us in desk pods that were full, no missing desks, no vigiled pencil boxes. But we knew, as well as he knew, a misgiving we heard beneath his voice, bright but clear as he began his first lesson on life sciences that we were those kids, from Mrs. Levy’s class, those kids who were connected by inexplicable lines, by irrevocable bounds.

Misty Jones was the first to act out. During story time, no magic carpet but a nook of the room, she stayed at her desk as we all moved to the corner, her face crumpled and red before she smashed
her pencil box against her desk, its contents splintered and rattling. Mr. Jeffries looked up, rose from his rocking chair in the nook, but Misty was already gone, ran from the room, and hid in the last bathroom stall until her father picked her up early. Then there was Karen Kettleman, who never came inside from recess, who already had police tracking the perimeters of school for her before they found her, curled up inside the rocket, awake but unmoving, and shivering though September sun still bore down bright above.

We all felt unhinged, though Mr. Jeffries tried his hardest to calm us, an effort that broke our hearts as much as our parents’ concern for us did, their worried glances we saw and ignored. We got into first fistfights, slammed each other against corridor walls, a solidity that felt satisfying. We remembered the sensation of fist against skin as we tried to fall asleep, held the feeling close against our fingertips, a memory of tangibility to beat back, to drown out the windowpanes beyond the foot of our beds.

We struggled together inside the confines of a classroom, that first week a preliminary taste, some terrible foreshadowing of what the year would bring, what we would force ourselves to endure. We longed for Nick’s distrust, a trait we’d once hated but ached for in earnest, some checked rationality, a voice to tell us this wasn’t ours, this wasn’t what we’d done. We ran our hands over cavernous absence, indelible as ink in the wooden swirls of our desks, lines we traced during lessons that never led back to Rachel, to Craig, though we peeked sometimes into Mrs. Levy’s classroom, at their once-full desks, at the magic carpet of what we’d been.

And yet we still held hope, sputtering flame, a tiny spark held captive inside hollowed marrow to protect from wind, extinguishing gusts, that there was more for us than this. At night, we watched the glowing stars glued against our ceilings and imagined life beyond this, somewhere older, a place where this would end, where we would unfurl like crocuses and begin anew.

But at the end of that first week, just four days into the school year, we learned that terrorists grounded a plane in Pakistan, hijacked with 360 people on board, that twenty of those people had been killed. We also learned that Trina Johnson had disappeared overnight, and our sputtering flame blew out.
We watched an anger erupt in Rosewood, a rage kept bottled for months. We watched Trina's father collapse on his porch, during a press conference not unlike the ones Nick's mother had endured, watched the contours of his face bend with fury and with sorrow. We watched community volunteers become vigilantes and grab their guns dusted off from cellar gun cases, meant for hunting and shooting cans, pulled forth from storage to kill. We felt any flame we'd sheltered burn slowly down to cinder, an ash carried off on drafts. What horrors blew through town seeped inside us, no airtight seals, our membranes as permeable as our windows.

Beyond culpability, beyond hope, we felt something change, something imminent and menacing. A space shuttle, radioactive cloud, an explosion of lake and gas – these were things no one had rendered, disasters without intent, all terrible, terrible accidents. But this, a violent siege, a disaster more deliberate, more calculated, and so much closer in proximity, only two weeks between Nick and Trina's disappearances. We felt a heaviness span the Atlantic, blanket our chests, the fear of all those families, so much brutality, a mirror held against our own. We felt the gravity of our own violence, of a chain set in motion and now of inertia, a gravity as crushing as a phantom's hovering presence, his shadow cast long across our homes, our bedrooms, as the September sun sank under its own heavy weight.

We couldn't avoid each other, not anymore. We couldn't ignore the shared burden of our actions and inactions, with our classmates missing and the world around us collapsing, as much as we couldn't ignore our collective hope burned down, gasped away on a train of unfathomable loss.

So when during recess Tom Davies caught our eyes, each of us watching the other, we allowed ourselves to move wordlessly to the rocket, pulled by common, magnetic force. We crowded inside the structure's cage, our separate shadows pooled beneath sun, melded darkly into one.

A familiar summit, an anniversary, where nearly a year ago we'd brought this on ourselves. The enclosed space of the rocket felt wistful, as if we were young again, as if we had a chance to take this back, to decide against speaking and summoning. But there was no
Nick, no Rachel, a profound lack that cast everything in true light. There was no Trina, no Craig hovered over mirror shards, friends we'd heedlessly traded for novelty, fleeting thrill. Tom looked at us, waiting, and Misty Jones blurted out, We could dig him up, we could set him free. We held our breath, a thought we'd all shared, our brains gravitating without cease toward the grave of Stillwater Park. But Tom said no, we'd be too obvious, with the police and FBI, volunteers swarming the streets. And Stillwater Park was closed, he said, at dusk due to curfew, and where would we find shovels? Would we have the strength to dig?

Tom watched us a moment, and we knew then that he'd formed a plan. I will have a party, he said. His birthday, two weeks away. We would all be invited, would share cake and ice cream, but when his parents went back upstairs, time alone he knew they'd grant us, we would gather in the basement bathroom. We would summon the Rosewood Phantom, just as he and his babysitter had done before, away from the rocket and the playground, from the watchful eyes of teachers. We would at last close this portal. We would send him home and away from us forever.

When Tom finished speaking, none of us said a word. We felt relief, to finally sense closure, some schematic of structure to reign in this chaos. We felt emboldened by solidity, a plan of action to eradicate all uncertainty, to place power back in our hands, every power we'd lost. But we were frightened, wordless in terror, of a specter we'd only imagined, one we'd seen in no more than fluttering curtains, in shapeshifting circles of pooled streetlight, a phantom that had trespassed our borders, that had haunted us all these months and would now be brought into the realm of real, an inevitability we flinched to face.

We have to do this, Tom said, and we knew how right he was. We knew the word right, as well as we'd known it then, though knowing cleared no path for us, no well-worn route to mercy. On the day of Tom's birthday party, our parents drove us willingly. A distraction, some flash of joy amid weeks of panic, and supervised, all of us in one place, all of us safe in celebration beneath the watch of Tom's parents. We wore party hats, festive cones. We brought gifts, ate cake, not caring whether we garnered a corner
piece or the middle, the amount of icing so trivial in the wake of our task. We pinned tails on a donkey, we watched Tom open his gifts. We wondered whether his parents knew, Tom's lack of zeal for each gift opened, or if they assumed only the heavy shade of our missing classmates, shared celebrations no longer shared, our sanctuary fractured and broken. When Tom finished opening gifts and asked if we could watch cartoons by ourselves, they didn't hesitate, moved upstairs, offered us the allocated solitude they must have guessed we needed.

When Tom heard the door to the basement shut, he raised the volume on the television, gathered us into the bathroom, lit a candle and turned off the lights. The pitch-dark startled us, no windows, no light and no sun, but only a flame casting our faces in ethereal glow, and illumining the outlines of the mirror and sink, Tom's bloodstain still darkening its edge.

We've come to summon you, Tom began, to drive you back from where you came. His introduction felt forced, even to us, and some of us laughed, giggled into our hands, out of nervousness, we knew, not humor. Tom stepped in front, before all of us, leaned his face close to the mirror, above flame. The candle lit his face from beneath, like flashlights held beneath chins before campfires, for ghost stories, a terror we longed for, something foreign and lost. Then Tom turned to us. Say it with me, he said. And though our hearts drummed anthems inside our chests, though our temples broke small beads of sweat, we stood as tall as we knew how, straightened our backs, like we'd learned to do before scoliosis tests, like we'd done against height charts.

Karen Kettleman, the quietest, said it first. Rosewood Phantom. The words on her tongue ripped chills across our skin, prickled follicles. But we said it with her, Rosewood Phantom, and thought of Craig, of Rachel, of Trina. We let go of their pencil boxes, their friendships bracelets, handed over our need of vigil, of memory. We thought of Nick and yearned for him the most, to tell us this legend was for children, that there was nothing to fear.

And then, as we watched, the mirror began to tremble. We watched Tom wince, for only a moment, and then he said it first, the second chant, the fugue of our voices all waterfalls behind
him. We heard ourselves speak as the mirror vibrated and shook, and for once we felt weightless, our guilt floated and hovering, even among terror, the greatest we’d known, every fear we’d held secret escaped and at hand.

The mirror rattled against the wall, a noise drowned by cartoons beyond the bathroom, a muted blare that spiked an ache inside our bones, to be there watching and not here. But we felt right, a right Tom had prepared us for, we felt so feathered and light, not just for our classmates but for everyone, those astronauts, each plane passenger, every voice choked silent by poison cloud or bloom that we pushed the last summon from ourselves, for them and for all of us, Rosewood Phantom, Rosewood Phantom, Rosewood Phantom. We screamed it for what we’d done, for what we’d stayed silent not doing and for every life ahead of us, every disaster averted, for everyone we imagined, every moment big and beautiful and rolled before us, unscripted. And as we spoke, the mirror stopped shaking, and a fogged swirl appeared in the center of the mirror. And then the candle blew out, quick eclipse, and Tom flicked on the lights and we stood together, all of us there, every one of us wild-eyed and breathless and still.

After the New Year, after we watched the ball drop with our parents, wishing the year goodbye in the quiet privacy of our hearts, a year we wished to never see again, the FBI caught a man in Illinois, 1979 Buick LeSabre Estate, his vehicle linked to Rosewood. They caught him in a motel with a nine-year-old girl, still alive, returned her to her parents, spread the news across Rosewood and across the whole nation, Rosewood killer caught, Rosewood terror laid to rest.

We grew up, in spite of ourselves. We never knew the stain of kidnap or murder again, not after that year, had classroom birthdays and Halloween costume parades, the same as every other kid. We graduated into junior high, then high school, bloomed inside the softness of first kisses, first dances, held each other awkwardly beneath banners and before photographers, made aching steps to connect. We never spoke of the Rosewood Phantom again, grew apart gradually, beyond initially comparing what we saw, what we might never have seen. Tom Davies swore he saw torn rags. Misty
Jones, the bloodied shape of a face. But we stopped talking altogether when the killer was caught, our fear still unsettled, a dread that we’d endure this once again someday. Because even though our town celebrated, though the FBI, the police and volunteers disbanded, we wondered what no one else addressed, what our parents hushed us for, when we raised the question unasked.

Why wasn’t that girl from Rosewood?

Every other child gone missing, all of our friends, every anguish we bore, all here. But not her, a question we knew our parents wondered too, at times, and the parents of Trina, of Craig, a closure they’d never find.

We grew up anyway. We left ourselves behind. We built homecoming floats, earned our driver’s licenses, attended proms though we held hidden, somewhere inside marrow, a flame of another kind, the burn of our classmates, who never grew with us, never bought their first cigarette packs, never held someone close inside a car, a kiss goodnight, never unpacked their suitcases in front of their college dorm, never waved their parents goodbye.

We see it from the other side, now. We hold that heartbreak as close as our children, those of us who have them, who didn’t turn away from the possibility of a grief so vast, who understand now what all those parents lost. We’ve survived the collapse of regimes, the collapse of buildings, shootings inside schools, disaster after disaster that we couldn’t have prevented, couldn’t have caused. We watch the news with feigned disinterest, and we tell no one of the dull ache that hides, always, beneath the bones that hold our hearts.

Because we are waiting, all of us, though we never speak to one another, though we never go home to Rosewood. We are waiting for our shadows to claim us, as we tuck in our children, as we watch the evening news, for a killer never caught, for a closure that we, too, have never found. We are waiting for a phantom to come for us at last, to pry open our windows, to kill this immeasurable guilt.