Femme

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Femme

by

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B.A. Colorado State University, 2001

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

May 2003

Approved by:

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Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

6-2-03

Date
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Foaling Season

Six months before Polly Cain drowned in the canal, my sister Nona ran off and married a cowboy. My father said there was a time when he would have been able to stop her and I wasn’t sure if he meant a time in our lives when she would have listened to him or a time in history when the Sheriff’s Posse would have been allowed to chase after her with torches and drag her back to our house by her yellow hair. He had been a member of the Desert Valley Sheriff’s Posse since before I was born and he said that the group was pretty much the same thing as the Masons, except without the virgin sacrifices. They paid dues, rode their horses in parades, and directed traffic at the rodeo where my sister first laid eyes on her cowboy. Only once in a great while were they called upon for a task of real importance, like clearing a fallen tree from a hunting trail or pulling a dead girl out of the canal.

Polly Cain disappeared on a Wednesday afternoon and at first, people were talking kidnapping. An eleven-year-old girl was too young to be a runaway, so they figured someone must have snatched her. But then they found her backpack on the dirt road that ran alongside the canal, and it wasn’t too long before they called my father. For the two days they dragged the canal, the Sheriff’s Posse traded in their white tuxedo shirts and black felt Stetsons for rubber waders that came up to their armpits, and they walked shoulder to shoulder through the brown water. I passed them on my way home from school. It was only April, but already the May flies were starting to hatch off the water and I watched my father swat them away from his face. I waved and called to him from the side of the canal, but he clenched his jaw and didn’t look at me.
“We found that girl today,” he said when he came home the next afternoon. I was making kool-aide in a plastic pitcher and he stuck his finger in and then licked it.

“Tangled in one of the grates.”

“Is she dead?” I asked and he stared at me.

“You stay away from that water when you’re walking home, Alice,” he said. “I mean it now.”

“Will there be a funeral?” I pictured myself like the women in movies, standing beside the grave in a black dress and thick sunglasses, too sad to cry.

“What do you care?”

“We were partners in Shop Class. We were making a lantern.” The truth was that Polly had been making the lantern while I watched. She had been a good sport about the whole thing and let me hold it when our teacher, Mr. McClusky, walked by so that he would think I was doing some of the work too.

“I don’t have time to take you to a funeral, Alice,” my father said and put his hand on top of my head. “There’s just too much work around here. I’ve already lost two days as it is.”

I nodded and stirred the kool-aide with a wooden spoon. There was always too much work. My father owned a stable. Between Posse meetings he gave riding lessons, bred and raised horses, then sold them to people who fed them apple slices by hand and called them “baby.” In the mornings my father and I fed the horses while it was still dark and I would walk to school shaking hay from my hair and clothing, scratching at the pieces that had fallen down the front of my shirt. In the afternoons we cleaned stalls, groomed and exercised the horses. It was birthing season and Dad didn’t like to leave the
barn even for a minute in case one of our mares went into labor. It was just as well. I didn’t have a black dress.

“You’ve been a trooper, kid,” he told me. “When your sister comes back, things will calm down.”

He always did this, talk about how my sister would come home and everything would go back to the way it was. For a while I wondered if he might be right. It had all happened so fast. Nona met Jerry on a Sunday and on Thursday she packed four boxes and a backpack and went off in his pickup truck. Jerry rode broncs on the rodeo circuit and married my sister in Kansas where it was legal for a seventeen-year-old to be wed without parental consent. My father said that Jerry would break his spine riding broncs and then Nona would have to spend the rest of her life pushing him around in a wheelchair and holding a cup for him to drool into. She wasn’t the marrying kind, my father said. She wouldn’t be satisfied to spend her life on the outside of an arena, cheering for someone else.

But the months had passed by and Nona’s letters were still filled with smiley faces and exclamation points. Compared to the horse show circuit, she wrote, rodeos were a dream. She and Jerry ate steak for dinner and slept in motels, which was a big step up from horse shows, where we ate granola bars and soda pop and slept in the stalls with the horses so that no one could steal them during the night.

Her letters were always addressed to me. They opened with, “Baby Alice,” and closed with “Give my love to Mom and Dad.” I would leave the letters on the counter for my father to read, which he hardly ever did, and after a few days I would go up to my mother’s room and read the letters aloud to her.
My mother had spent nearly my whole life in her bedroom. Nona said that before we came along, our mother had been a star in horse shows, had won left and right and even had her picture in the paper once. She said that one day when I was still a baby our mother had handed me to my sister, said she was tired, then went upstairs to rest and never came back down. Dad moved into the guest bedroom so as not to disrupt her and we were careful to take our shoes off when we walked passed her bedroom. She didn’t usually make much of a fuss. She didn’t call for extra blankets or crushed ice or quiet. She just stayed in bed with the curtains drawn and watched television without the sound and it was easy to forget she was there.

I would sit on her bed and read Nona’s letters to her by the blue light of the TV screen and she would pat my leg and say, “Real nice. It sound’s real nice, doesn’t it Alice?”

I would breathe through my mouth to filter the sweet, damp scent of her yellow skin and unwashed hair. My mother made me say the name of the town each letter had come from and what I thought each one looked like. The rodeo towns appeared to me as dry, dusty places with dirty motels and lines of fast food restaurants, but I tried to be inventive: McCook, Nebraska, had chestnut trees lining every street, Marion, Illinois, had purple sunsets, and Dexter, Missouri, had a park with a pond in the middle where people could feed ducks. When I couldn’t think anymore, I would say that I had to go to the bathroom or that I had to help Dad in the barn and I would creep out of her bedroom and shut the door behind me.

After Nona left, we were lucky to get Sheila Altman. She lived on the other side of Desert Valley and went to the new school with computers and air-conditioning. Sheila
Altman had green eyes and a soft voice. She said, “If I might,” and “Would you mind,” and finished every phrase with “please” or “thank you” until I wanted to rip her baby-fine hair out in tufts. When her mother drove her to our house, Sheila would rush into the stable to kiss the horses and feed them carrots she brought from home. Mrs. Altman would get out of the car with her camera and checkbook and watch her daughter scramble into the barn. “Well, Mr. Winston,” she always said, “you’ve got your work cut out for you today.”

Mrs. Altman told my father that for the last few years she had spent thousands of dollars to send Sheila to Equestrian Camp where for one week she got to care for a horse like it was her own, feeding it, grooming it, and cleaning its stall. My father had been joking when he said that he would let Sheila clean his stalls for half that, but when Mrs. Altman gasped and asked “Really?” he didn’t falter.

“For this girl?” he said. “Absolutely.” After that, Mrs. Altman would drive Sheila across the valley every day after school and pay my father to let her groom our horses and pick our stalls. While Sheila was there, my father was chipper and light-hearted. He told her what a hard worker she was and that he didn’t know how we had managed without her. After she was gone he would rub my back and say, “You give that girl anything she wants, Alice. Talk nice to her. Sheila Altman is our meal ticket. And she doesn’t have attitude like your sister.”

My father had always said that Nona had a wicked tongue and an ungrateful heart, but he usually smiled when he said it. She threw fits like nobody’s business. When she was thirsty, she shrieked. When she was hot, she cried. And when she was mad at my
father, her face would get so tight and rigid that it looked like it might split apart right between her eyes.

My father was being kind when he said I didn’t have the temperament for showing, because what he meant was that I didn’t have the talent. I couldn’t remember to smile and keep my heels down and my toes in and my elbows tight and my back straight all at the same time. When I focused on smiling, I dropped my reigns and when I thought about sitting up straight, my feet slipped out of the stirrups. My father said that he needed me more outside the ring anyway, but I saw how it was. We had a reputation to maintain and a livelihood to earn. It was my last name printed on the side of our horse trailer. In the end, I wasn’t good for business.

But Nona was good enough for both of us. She smiled and laughed and winked at the judges. Outside of the ring she would let little girls in the stands sit on her horse. While she showed them how to hold the reigns and where to put their feet, she would aim her voice at their parents and say, “You’re a natural!” Then she would flash her straight smile at the mother and say, “My daddy gives lessons. You all should come out sometime.”

Yellow Cap was the last horse my father bought for her. He was a palomino, the flashiest, the biggest, the most beautiful animal in the ring. The first time I saw him, I thought he would kill my sister for sure, but Nona could mount him like it was nothing. She would jiggle the reigns and say, “There’s my boy.” Yellow Cap’s neck would arch and his body tuck and they rode around the arena like they were under a spotlight. “That horse would walk on water if she asked him to,” my father would say. Nona won
trophies and ribbons and money and we won clients like we were selling the next best thing.

The day after they pulled Polly from the canal, we didn't have Shop class. Instead they took the whole sixth grade into the gymnasium and told us we could pray if we wanted to. Then they told us that we should go home and talk about what we were feeling with our parents.

When I got home, Mrs. Altman and my father were gathered around Sheila, who was wearing my sister's show clothes.

"I don't know," Mrs. Altman was saying. "I'm not sure about the color."

"I was just thinking that," my father told her. "I was just thinking the same thing about the color."

"She looks better in red." Mrs. Altman made a circular motion with her finger and Sheila gave me a shy smile as she turned around to let her mother see the back.

"We have a red shirt," my father said. "Alice, go up to Nona's room and get the red shirt." Sheila stared down at the pavement and I dropped my backpack and went into the house.

I had to pick my way through piles of ribbons and trophies to get to the closet and when I opened it, Nona's smell was gone from the clothes. I pushed my face into the different fabrics, trying to find a trace of her, the sweet, powdery scent of her deodorant, the fruity smell of her lotion, but there was nothing.
My mother’s door was open a crack when I passed it with the red shirt still on the hanger.

“Alice, is that you?”

I creaked the door open and braced myself against the wave of damp air. My mother was propped up on three pillows and the TV light flickered across her face. I arranged my feet in the doorway, careful not to let them cross the line where the hallway carpet changed into the bedroom carpet.

“Be my good girl and close the window.” She flicked her pale hand limply at the wrist and sighed heavily. “Those little white bugs are coming in. I’m afraid they’ll bite me in my sleep.”

“May bugs don’t bite, Mom,” I said, but I crossed the room to close the window anyway.

“I hate them,” she breathed. “Filthy things. Off that dead water.”

In the blue glow of the TV light, the May bugs looked gray and sickly and I tried to fan them outside.

From the window I could feel my mother’s stare on the back of my neck. “Would you like to stay and tell me what you learned in school today?” She patted the bed beside her.

I held up the red shirt. “I have to take this to Dad.”

She blinked at me for a second and then looked back at the television. “Better hurry then.”

It turned out that Sheila really did look much better in red and my father sold Nona’s shirt to Mrs. Altman for twice what he had paid for it.
In Shop Class, I didn’t know what to do with the half-finished lantern. I was afraid to weld and I didn’t think I could tape the pieces together. But the boys couldn’t get enough of welding and several of them bid over the chance to finish the lantern for me. In the end, I accepted an offer of three dollars and a Pepsi then watched while they pieced my lantern together.

Mr. McClusky told me that it would be a nice gesture to give the lantern to Polly’s mother, and after school I practiced what I might say when I rang Polly’s doorbell. I had barely known Polly and had never met her mother, but such a heartfelt gesture would probably make her cry. Maybe she would ask me to stay and visit. She would make me tea and feed me ginger snaps while she ran her fingers through my hair. “Come back anytime,” she would say. “Stay the night, if you want.”

But while I was practicing the right way to make my gesture, I couldn’t help notice the places on the lantern where I had smudged the paint by touching it to see if it was dry. Polly’s mother probably had rooms full of perfect things Polly had made over the years: neatly sewn bean bags from Home Ec., symmetrical clay pencil holders from art, the kinds of things that always came out gooey or crooked or lumpy when I made them. Giving her a crummy lantern would only confuse her. Instead of taking it to Polly’s house, I wrapped the lantern in notebook paper and hid it in my backpack. I walked home along the canal, sipping my Pepsi and wishing I had let the boys paint my lantern as well.
My father was sitting in front of the barn polishing Nona's show saddle when I got home. His face was red and the skin around his lips looked tight and drawn. "Your mother's been crying all day," he said when he saw me. "Where have you been?"

"At school like I always am."

"Don't you use that tone with me."

I stared at my feet.

"Now you go upstairs and be sweet to your mother. Tell her how much you love her. Make her feel special. Then come back and help me. There's a million things to do. I'm sick of doing all the work around here."

I looked at him. Nona wasn't coming back. Not ever. "Maybe Sheila Altman can do it when she gets here."

My father stood up then and he seemed bigger than any human being had ever been. For a second I thought he might hit me and I tried to gauge the distance to the house. I might be able to outrun him. But then he put his hands up to his face and his shoulders sagged. "Please, Alice," he said through his fingers. "Please."

Upstairs, my mother's face was streaked and strands of her dirty hair clung to the damp patches on her cheeks.

"Why are you crying, Mom?" I asked from the doorway. I meant for it to sound sweet, but it came out tired. "Are you sick?"

She let out a cry when she saw me. "Come here to me." Every part of my body went stiff, but I thought of my father with his face in his hands and I held my breath as I crossed the room to her. She pulled me into the bed with her and pressed my head against her shoulder.
“He sent you up here, didn’t he? I’ve been a nuisance today.”

“Dad’s worried about you,” I told her.

Her hair fell across my face and I tried to lift my head to breathe. “I used to be able to make him smile,” she whispered. “He used to look at me like I was a movie star. Do you believe that?” She sighed and straightened herself.

My mother bit her lip and looked down at her hands. “She was smart,” she said quietly. “Smart to leave when she did.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“She would have been used up here. She would be old fast and used up. And now she gets to travel to new places and meet new people.” She turned her head away from me.

Her nightgown was wrinkled and in the light of the television her skin looked dull and watery. “I made you something,” I told her. “In school.”

“You did?” Her mouth opened and she touched her hand to her chest. “Really truly?”

I sifted through my backpack. “It’s a lantern,” I said. “See? You put a candle here and then you can hang it and it will light your room.”

My mother gasped as I handed it to her and she touched her fingers along the welded edges and paint-smeared center. “You made this? For me?”

“Uh huh.”

“Oh baby,” she hugged me. “You and I will take care of each other, won’t we?”

I stood up and backed to the door. “I have to go help in the barn now. Dad said.”
Outside, Mrs. Altman was writing a check to my father. When I came up beside him, he raised his eyebrows at me and I nodded. "She’s fine," I said and he sighed.

"Who?" Mrs. Altman asked with bright smile. "Mrs. Winston?" My father and I glanced at each other. "I’d love to meet her."

"My wife keeps to herself," my father said awkwardly, his eyes on the check.

"She’s sick," I added and they both looked at me.

"With what?" Mrs. Altman glanced at my father.

"She has an allergy to the sun," I said. "And to fresh air." My father opened his mouth slightly.

"How awful!" Mrs. Altman gasped. "What happens to her?"

"Her head gets big," I said and they both stared. "And she gets hives. And fevers. And sometimes she faints." My father nudged me and Mrs. Altman clasped her hands.

"That’s dreadful. The poor thing!"

After she handed over the check and followed her daughter into the barn, my father clucked his tongue at me and gave me a look. "You’re a wicked lying fiend, Alice Winston." But he smiled when he said it.

Sheila Altman helped us clear the show horses out of the barn to make room for the brood mares, who got to live in the stable for a single week when they birthed. While we brought the pregnant mares in from the pasture, Sheila squealed and clapped her hands.

"I can’t wait for the babies!" she said to me.
Our brood mares had long heads and matted manes. They were slow and quiet with misshapen stomachs and simple names like Misty, Lucy, Ginger, and Sally. Sheila put her hands on the mares’ barrel stomachs and swore she could feel the foals moving inside.

“IT kicked!” she told me. “I swear I felt it kick.”

After she left, I took Cap from his pen and tried to brush the snarls from his mane and tail. My father watched and he cleared his throat as I pulled the dead hair from the brush and let it fall on the ground.

“Mrs. Altman wants to buy Cap for Sheila,” he said.

I felt my fingertips go cold and I pretended to clean more hair from the brush.

“He’s too much horse for her.”

My father picked an invisible piece of lint off his shirt. “You want to show this year?”

I stared at him.

“Then keep your opinions to yourself.”

They held Polly Cain’s funeral at 5:00 on a Thursday evening at the cemetery across from the waterslide. When I got home from school, I practiced looking sad and remorseful in the mirror. Maybe my father would change his mind and take me and then Polly’s mother would pick me out of the crowd as someone who had been close to Polly. I would walk slowly up to her and let her pull me against her body. As I stared at myself in the mirror, I imagined the afternoons I would spend sitting with Polly’s mother at her
kitchen table with photo albums spread before us. She would point out pictures of Polly in Halloween costumes and at piano recitals. “See,” she would say. “See how much you look like her?” I would lean my head against her shoulder and her hair would smell like strawberries and lemons. I would tell her how much I missed Polly, how nothing would ever be the same now that she was gone and she would kiss my eyelids and fingers and cry into the palms of my hands. “She was my best friend in the world,” I would say. And maybe it wouldn’t be a real lie. No one could prove she wasn’t my best friend. She was dead, after all.

But before I could convince my father to take me, our mare Lucy gave birth to the first foal of the year and I knew that I would not be at the cemetery to pay my last respects. Polly’s mother would not see me distraught. She would not touch my face or stroke my fingers. She would cry into someone else’s hair.

I helped my father wrap Lucy’s tail with an ace bandage so that the foal wouldn’t get tangled in it. We moved around her on our knees, clearing the sawdust away from her legs to keep it from clogging the foal’s nostrils. It came out, blind and flattened wet, breaking the embryonic sack open with its weak, white hooves.

“It’s a colt,” my father grinned. “Look at him.” I pressed myself across the colt’s body to keep him still while my father cut the umbilical cord and then we watched him try to stand on his tiny pointed feet.

My father cupped the back of my head in his hand. “You did good, Alice,” he said. “You’re a pro.” We waited in the stall doorway until the colt balanced on his fragile legs. For a second it felt like we had made something happen.
When we heard the Altmans' minivan pull up in the driveway, my father closed his eyes and said, “Christ, I don’t have the energy for this today.”

Mrs. Altman got out of the car and began examining the grill. “There are tiny white insects all over the place,” she told us. “Their little corpses are stuck all over my car.”

My father shook his head at me and then walked over to look. “May bugs,” he announced. “They hatch off the canals. We found about a hundred of them stuck in that girl’s hair when we pulled her out of the water.”

Mrs. Altman had taken a towel from the backseat and was trying to wipe the front of her car. “Down the road it almost looks like it’s snowing, there are so many of them.” She looked over at me and stopped. “My God, Alice. What’s happened?”

I glanced down and saw that my tee-shirt was stained with blood where I had leaned against the colt when my father cut the umbilical cord.

“We got our first foal this afternoon.” My father gestured at the barn.

“I can’t believe we missed it,” Sheila wailed. “You should have called us!”

My father turned to me and rolled his eyes. “There will be plenty more.”

Sheila and her mother crowded around Lucy’s stall and began clicking and cooing at the foal. Inside, Lucy bared her teeth and flattened her ears. My father pushed Sheila away. “Let’s give them a while to adjust,” he said. “The mothers are a little protective at first.”

“I can’t believe I forgot my camera today,” Mrs. Altman gasped. “What a day to forget.”
"The others will probably come tonight," I told them. "They always come right on top of each other."

"Mom, can I stay?" Sheila clasped her hands against her chest and rose up on her toes. "If you wouldn't mind, that is," she added, glancing at my father.

In my head I tried to will my father to say no, but he didn't look at me. "She can stay the night," he told Mrs. Altman. "Alice and I will be up all night checking on the mares anyway."

"Oh please Mom?" Sheila begged. "It will be like a slumber party."

Mrs. Altman adjusted the fold of her collar. "Tomorrow is a school day, but for something like this—this is a life lesson and I think that's more important. You'll get to see the miracle of birth. It's the most beautiful thing in the world, isn't it Alice?"

I wanted to tell her about the blood and the smell and the sound the mares made when the flesh began to rip around the opening of the foal. I wanted to tell her about our bay mare a few years back whose uterus came out when she birthed and hung behind her like a sack of jelly. I wanted to tell her that the mare screamed a human scream, but stood to let the foal nurse, trembling on all fours. I wanted her to know that when the vet came to put the bay mare down, Nona covered my eyes, but I could still hear the bones crack when she hit the ground and that the foal cried out in its watery whinny for three whole days afterwards. But instead I smiled and said, "Yes. Beautiful."

Mrs. Altman left us money to order pizza and said that she would pick Sheila up in the morning. As she got into her minivan, she asked me if Sheila could borrow clothes so that she wouldn't bloody up her nice ones. I thought about Polly's funeral, just starting across town. Her mother would have taken her seat already. People would be
parking their cars and nodding to each other solemnly as they walked across the grass. I had never been to a funeral, but I imagined that everyone would come quietly, dignified and narrow in smart black dresses and stiff suits. They would sit, rigid against the pain, but yield to it as the funeral progressed. Their bodies would soften, then lean into each other, arms circling waists and shoulders, fingers interlacing as they lowered her into the ground.

We ate our pizza on paper napkins and played gin rummy in the tack room. We took turns walking through the barn to check on the mares and at two in the morning Sheila came back at a run. “Ginger’s lying down” she shrieked. “She’s sweating really bad.”

“Here we go,” my father said and we trooped behind him through the barn. My father tossed me an ace bandage and pointed to Ginger’s tail. I kneeled behind her and saw that the tail was already wet with clots of blood and mucus. Her muscles rippled across her body and her back legs pushed into the sawdust.

“You’re gonna get kicked,” Sheila whispered into her fingers.

“She can’t kick if she’s lying down, dummy,” I told her and my father pinched the back of my arm. “I mean, it’s okay.” I pulled the wet strands of Ginger’s tail into the bandage and closed it with a safety pin.

Sheila took a step backwards and whispered, “Hurry Alice.”

My father knelt beside Ginger’s head with his hands on her neck. He stroked her mane and talked in a low voice. “That’s my girl,” he said. “Come on sweetheart.” Most of the time my father referred to the brood mares as bitches or nags, but while they were
birthing he would cluck his tongue and whisper to them like they were children. “That’s it, love,” he purred. “You’re okay.”

Sheila crept beside my father and began breathing loudly in short breaths, like women on television did when they were in labor.

“You talk to her,” he told Sheila and she leaned down to touch Ginger’s muzzle. My father patted her shoulder and added, “Just be careful she doesn’t throw her head and knock your teeth out.”

Outside, I could hear the other horses pacing and pawing at the ground. The pens were rattling and my father told me to go check on them. Ginger began to moan and Sheila backed out of the stall with her hands up over her mouth. “I’ll come with you,” she whispered.

The show mares had gathered around the pasture fence. They were lying on the ground, their eyes rolled back and their bodies foamed with sweat. They lifted their heads and brought them down hard on the grass while they groaned and snorted.

“What’s wrong with them?” Sheila gasped.

“They’re trying to birth,” I told her and her mouth trembled.

“But they aren’t pregnant.”

“They get the smell,” I said. “They get the smell of the new foals and they try to birth.”

Sheila’s face froze and she covered her ears with her hands. I felt a wonderful nastiness rise inside myself. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

Sheila shuddered and turned away. “I can’t look at them,” she said.
Along the driveway, the geldings were stomping at the ground and ramming the gates of their pens with their chests. Their heads were wildly high and the whites of their eyes caught in the moonlight. Yellow Cap whinnied and I ran to his pen while Sheila watched. “It’s okay, Cap,” I told him.

“He’s freaking out,” Sheila said nervously. “They’re all freaking out.”

“He’s fine,” I told her and reached out to pet him, but he jumped and pulled away.

“Come on, boy,” I called and unlatched the gate to go in with him.

As I slid the gate open, Cap reared up and his shoulder hit me in the face and knocked me to the ground. I heard the metal gate clang against the pen and the sound of Cap’s hooves on the gravel as he ran towards the road.

“Stop him!” I called to Sheila, but she had covered her face with her hands. My hip and leg felt rubbery and weak when I stood up and my hands were shaking as I steadied myself on the fence. “I have to go get him,” I told her.

“Alice, your face is bleeding.” I could taste blood and dirt between my teeth and I touched my hand to my mouth. I couldn’t tell what was bleeding. My whole face felt numb.

“He could get hit by a car,” I said.

“He went towards the canal. It’s really dark.”

I pushed past her and she grabbed my hand. “We could tell your dad that I let Cap out. He won’t get mad at me, I don’t think. Or we could get your Mom.” I looked at her. “It’s night, so maybe she could come outside. Come on Alice, you’re bleeding bad. Let me come with you.”
The only thing that could get me in more trouble than losing Cap was losing Sheila Altman. I shook my hand away from her. “I’ll be right back, Sheila. Don’t be a baby.”

I ran until I thought my lungs were going to rise up into my mouth. It was dark and I tripped twice along the side of the road. When I had to stop running, I called for Cap and clicked my tongue. My nose was running and I walked to the sound of my breath heaving. I wiped my nose with the back of my hand and rubbed the raw sting in my elbow where I had scraped it when I tripped. The May bugs were floating in front of me and I waved my arms to push them away. Up ahead I could just make out where the canal water should have been, but there was a glimmering fog over it.

The May bugs were rising off the canal by the millions, their snowflake bodies and paper wings a blizzard over the water. I started along the dirt road, but had only gone several feet when I had to stop and shield my eyes from the swell of insects.

I could feel my heart beating in my throat and ears. I couldn’t make out the water, but I could feel its coolness all around and I pulled myself as far to the side as I could. I tried to wave my hand in front, but the May bugs swelled like vapor. I pressed my lips together to keep them out of my mouth and shook my head as hard as I could. I felt my way along with the weeds at the side of the road, bending at the waist to grasp them with the tips of my fingers.

“Here, Cap. Here, boy.” My voice was high and raspy and lost itself in the thick of insects. I tried to spin my arms in front of me, but the May bugs were catching in my nostrils and ears and I had to stop to paw at my face. When I saw the outline of his body
through the frost of wings, I thought it might be a mirage in the insects, but I stumbled
towards him with my arms stretched out.

I put my hands on his side, running them along his body until I came to his head.
Yellow Cap was standing stock still with his knees locked and his muscles twitching. His
eyes were wide and his lips grabbed at the cloud of May bugs. “There’s my boy,” I said
and he dropped his head against my chest. I hadn’t thought to bring a halter or rope and I
tugged at his mane and ears to get him to follow me. But Cap’s eyes were white blind
with fear and his legs were rigid on the ground. I couldn’t see where we were on the road
and all around us I sensed the water that killed Polly Cain. Maybe she had just tripped
and fallen in. Maybe she had dropped something. I thought of the time I had
accidentally inhaled in a swimming pool, the way the water stabbed pain into the backs of
my eyes, made my body wretch and heave until I gagged. There were no houses close
by. No one would have heard her scream.

I kicked at Cap’s leg and he bristled. “Come on!” I shouted. “Come on you
stupid horse. Move!” I pulled as hard as I could. I twisted his ear between my fingers
and wrapped my arms around his neck to pull, but my body hung uselessly from his in
the swarm of white. I would never get him back. He would bolt into the water and there
would be nothing I could do. I wouldn’t even be able to see him drown, only hear it.
“Please!” I screamed. “You stupid, stupid horse. Please!” I tried to pick up his front
foot and move it a step forward, but I couldn’t tell which way forward was.

When I heard my father’s voice through the buzz of insect wings, I thought I was
imagining. But then I heard it again. “Alice!”

“Dad, I’m here! I have him. We’re here!”
"I can't see a goddamned thing!"

"Here!" I called again, choking back the next wave of sobs.

His hand touched my shoulder. "Jesus Christ! What the hell are you doing?"

"Cap got out. I was afraid he'd get hit or lost or fall in the water." My fingers were wound through his mane and I twisted to get them free.

My father pushed me hard then and caught me by the arm before I fell. "I could kill you," he said. "I could kill you for being so stupid." I tried to pull away, but I stumbled into the white haze and grasped the pocket of my father's pants to steady myself.

He took off his shirt and wrapped it around Cap's neck. He had to pull hard, but Cap followed and we tried to brush the insects away from his eyes as we led him back to the road. My father went ahead, holding my arm to guide me and feeling his way along the weeds while I clicked my tongue to keep Cap moving. The May bugs swirled around us like a warm, dry snowstorm and when I looked up, I could see them rising into the black sky.

When the insects thinned and we found ourselves on pavement, we stopped breathless. My arm ached where he was holding me and when he saw me wince he let go. I rubbed at my arm with my free hand. "Sheila shouldn't have told you," I said. "I was fine."

"Like hell," my father said, but his voice was quiet and he loosened his grip to let Cap nibble at the weeds. He looked back over the clouded water and shook his head.

I held up the flats of my hands and touched at their delicate bodies, at their sheet-white wings as they billowed up from the canal. The petals of their wings brushed
against my palms and evaporated into the darkness. In the moonlight, my father's bare chest was pale and smooth against the rough tan of his arms.

“What about the mares?” I asked. “Should you have left them?”

“Alice, horses birth all the time. If a person had to be there to help them, they would have died out centuries ago.”

We walked back along the road with Yellow Cap between us, his head low like a dog. It was still dark, but there were cars on the road and they passed us with their windshield wipers on to clear their vision through the storm of May bugs.

“Well, Sheila Altman got her money's worth tonight,” my father said finally.

“I hate her,” I said. I didn’t care anymore.

“I know you do.” He smiled and pulled at Cap.

“I hate you giving her Nona’s horse.”

My father was quiet for a second. “This horse is worth a hell of a lot of money, Alice. More than you could even understand.” He sighed. “If I sell him, I can afford to hire someone to help me out here.”

I stopped. “You have Sheila,” I told him and he laughed. I touched Cap’s neck.

“You have me.”

My father started walking again, faster, and I had to run to keep up. A car passed us on the road and once it was in front of us I saw the trail of May bugs behind it, their bodies fluttering lifeless to the ground, sprinkling dead onto the pavement.

When we reached the driveway, my father stared up at the house. “There’s a light on in your mother’s room.” He pointed and I looked. It was small, yellow. A candle. A cloud of May bugs hovered at the light, touching against the glass of the window.
"It’s the lantern I made her."

"You made her a lantern?"

"Sort of." Polly Cain’s nimble fingers lay still beneath feet of dry, dusty earth. I only painted the lantern.

"Why did you do that?"

I looked up at the window. "She wanted something. That was all I had."

He ran his thumb along my lip and then wiped the blood with the heel of his hand.

"Why don’t you go in to bed now."

I turned my face into his touch and let my chin rest in the cup of his palm. He smelled like sweat and hay and leather. "You’re no good to me if you’re all worn out. Get some sleep."

He started toward the pens, tugging at the shirt around Cap’s neck.

"I’m not tired," I told him. "Really. Not at all. I’ll stay up."

Before he came out of the pen, he rubbed the spot between Cap’s ears and patted his neck. The gate clanged shut and as my father passed me, he shook his head. "Any other girl would go up to bed."

He put his hand around my upper arm and squeezed.

"You must be tougher than the rest of them."

My arm was still tender from where he had yanked me at the canal, but I flexed my muscle to make it hard. I waited for him to say something, but Sheila Altman came thumping out of the barn waving her arms above her head. "She did it," she gasped, jumping up and down. "Oh my God. It’s perfect. Come see, come see."

It was blind and wet like all the others and we huddled together to see over the stall door. Under the weak, yellow barn light the foal lay curled within its spindly limbs. The mare stood above it, eyes half closed as she lowered her head and paused to take in
her foal’s scent. Outside, the sky was turning tinsel gray and the air had a deeper chill. Pieces of hay and dust hazed the air around us and we stood silent in the barn, smelling of blood and earth and night, and watched their heads draw together to touch for the first time.
The first man I slept with kept his eyes closed the whole time. We did it in the prop room of my high school theater on the leather sofa my parents had donated to help me get a part in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. It would have been better if my mother could sew costumes or if my father could build scenery. But since my mother didn’t sew and since my father said that he would rather drive a nail through his tongue than spend his weekend building cardboard shrubbery, they gave the theater department two hundred dollars for programs and the sofa we’d kept in the garage since our dog chewed through the armrest. And voila. Town’s Person Number Three. I had a line too: *Somebody get the pastor!*

I was the only freshman and on the first day of rehearsals, I stood to the side while the rest of the cast members wrapped their arms around each other’s necks and kissed each other on the cheek.

“We’re all so close,” one of the Brides told me. “We’re like a great big family.”

The Brides and Brothers were all juniors and seniors and the rest of the Town’s People were sophomores. Our drama teacher, Mr. McFarland, didn’t usually cast freshmen. He believed in working your way up.

“You learn by watching,” he said. “Nobody walks in here a star.”

Dilly Morris was the exception to this rule. A junior, she had been cast as Milly—the main Bride. Besides myself, she was the only person who wasn’t jumping up and down and shrieking about how happy she was to see everyone. Dilly had been the lead in every musical since she’d started high school and there were stories about
tantrums, about Dilly breaking props when she was angry, screaming at stagehands, making sound managers cry, and storming out in the middle of rehearsals. Supposedly, she had thrown her shoe at the tuba player during Hello Dolly! when he repeatedly messed up that big parade song. And halfway through rehearsals of Oliver!, she’d had Bill Sykes replaced for making farting noises with his armpit during one of her solos.

After we introduced ourselves, Mr. McFarland had us sit on the stage in a circle. We were supposed to go around and explain our character’s motivations to the rest of the cast. Everyone else had done this before. I could tell. They didn’t just have lines. They had histories. Jack Owens, who was playing opposite Dilly, adjusted his baseball cap while he talked about the hardships of living off the land. Jenny Crews’s character milked cows. Lisa Anderson carried water from a well. And Allison Mosely had survived an Indian attack. It was like every one of them had spent their entire Christmas break in the library researching frontier life.

When it was my turn, I stared down at my hands.

“Well, Grace?” Mr. McFarland asked. “What’s your character like? What do you want?”

I squeezed my fingers around my thumbs. “I want for someone to get the pastor?”

The Brothers rolled their eyes and the Brides giggled into each other’s hair. Dilly stretched her legs out in front of her and leaned back on her hands.

“But why do you want someone to get the pastor?” she asked.

I tried to remember what was happening in the scene. “Because I hear a baby crying?” She smiled.
“Yeah?” she said. “So?”

My finger tips went cold and I could feel my throat tightening. Dilly leaned towards me. “It’s because you don’t think they’re married,” she said. “You hear a baby and you don’t think they’re married yet. Get it?”

I hadn’t thought of that, but it made sense. It was a pivotal moment, then. In my single line, I was speaking on behalf of an entire history. Those frontier people were probably really strict about premarital sex.

“Thanks,” I said and Dilly winked at me. It figured that she would know about babies and religion and not being married. The year before, her older sister had gotten pregnant and dropped out of school. I guess it was a pretty big deal, since they were Catholic and all.

After rehearsal, Dilly stood at the side of the stage, whispering to Mr. McFarland while the rest of us gathered up our scripts and backpacks. The Brides stood in a cluster, nudging each other and nodding in Dilly’s direction. I stepped closer to them, hoping that they would let me into the circle, speak to me with the silent language of their eyes. Suddenly Dilly laughed out loud and covered her mouth with her hand. “That’s terrible!” she cried and Mr. McFarland tapped her forehead with his finger.

When she turned and saw us, the Brides scattered and I looked at the floor so that it wouldn’t seem like I’d been watching her.

“Hey,” she called and trotted across the stage to me. “Hey you.” She snapped her fingers. “What’s your name again?”

I looked behind me, but there was no one there. “Grace?”
“That’s right. Grace. You’re a freshman, right?” I nodded. “Well, you did real good today.” Her eyes dropped down the length of my body and I covered my chest with my arms.

“Thanks,” I said. “You too.”

“I really like your skirt,” she said and I looked down. “It looks like something Milly might wear, don’t you think?”

Something fluttered in the back of my throat and I let my arms fall back to my sides. “You can borrow it,” I told her. “If you want.”

“Could I?” She ran her hand down the fabric of my skirt, gathering it in her fingers. “The costume department is absolutely grotesque. It’s an embarrassment.”

“I have others,” I told her. “Better ones. If you want to come over and look.” I thought of my clothes twirling around Dilly Morris on opening night, the fabric of my shirts touching her collarbone, the curve of her throat. It was the kind of thing I would be able to tell my children one day.

Dilly drove me home and when we stepped through the front door, she stood lock-kneed in the hallway. “Ho-ly shit,” she said. “Is your dad, like, a movie star?”

“He’s a doctor,” I told her.

“I feel like I should take my shoes off.”

I sat on my bed while Dilly stood in front of the closet. “Jesus, Gracie. Look at all this.” I could feel my heartbeat in the roof of my mouth. No one ever called me Gracie.

“My mom really likes to shop,” I told her.
"I guess so," she said. "You're lucky. My mom likes to watch infomercials in bed." She pulled out garment after garment, holding them up to herself in my full-length mirror and swishing her hips back and forth.

"This is really nice of you," she said and met my eye in the mirror. "You know, most people in the department don't like me much."

I tried to picture her nailing the tuba player with her shoe. "They're probably just jealous," I told her and she nodded.

"That's what Mr. McFarland says too."

Dilly took out every item of clothing that looked old-fashioned, and piled them beside me on my bed. I was getting used to the little noises she made in the back of her throat every time she saw something she liked, the clicks she made with her tongue as she pulled clothes off hangers, the way she sucked the air in through her teeth when she held them up to herself. But then her arm went stiff in my closet and her mouth pulled open like there was no air left inside her body. "Are these suede?" she asked and pulled out the pants I'd gotten for Christmas.

"Yeah," I told her and she held them away from herself like she was afraid to touch them. "But I don't think they're something that Milly would really wear. You know, since it's during pioneer times?"

But Dilly didn't answer. Slowly, she held up one pant leg and touched it to the side of her face while she closed her eyes and held her open hand against her heart.

"But you can borrow them for yourself if you want," I said and she reached out and took my hand.
“Seriously? I mean, really, seriously?” Her palm was cool in mine and I could smell her hair, sweet like cocoa butter.

“Sure,” I said and she shrieked as she clutched them to her chest.

“You know what I think?” she asked as she slipped off her blue jeans and stepped into my suede pants. “I think you should be my understudy.” She pressed one hand to her pelvis and the other to the small of her back as she twirled in front of the mirror.

I felt the air empty from my lungs and I saw into the future, the way that everything would be: I saw us sitting on the empty stage, eating red licorice and running lines. Front and center, arms linked in the cast picture. Dilly having dinner at my house, spending the night, going on vacation with my family. No one would know her the way I would.

“But doesn’t Mr. McFarland decide that?” I asked and Dilly circled with her hands above her head.

“Gracie,” she said. “You haven’t been around long enough to know this, but things almost always work out the way I want them to.”

During rehearsals, if she wasn’t on stage, Dilly sat beside Mr. McFarland in the audience with her feet propped up on the seat in front of her. While the rest of us worked through songs or scenes, they would tilt their heads towards one another and whisper
through their fingers. The background noise of their voices filtered through rehearsals and their laughter erupted during scenes that weren’t funny.

The day after she came to my house for costumes, Dilly watched with Mr. McFarland while the Town’s People worked through our big scene. I tried to be in the moment, to feel the weight of what I was saying, to really inhabit Town’s Person Number Three.

“Somebody get the pastor!”

When the scene was over, Dilly dipped her head towards Mr. McFarland and whispered to him through her hair. He cocked his jaw to the side and nodded. “Grace!” he called and I stepped to the edge of the stage. “Nice job with that.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“How would you feel about working with Dilly as her understudy?” In the audience, the rest of the cast widened their eyes at each other. “What!” they mouthed. The Brides slumped in their seats and Jack Owens covered his chest with his hands and fell to the floor like he was having a heart attack.

“Okay,” I said. “That would be fun.”

At the end of rehearsal, Dilly came up and squeezed my shoulder. “Ignore them,” she said. “The boys are morons and the Brides are bitches. Oh, and also,” she said. “I saw this blouse in a window downtown. Cream-colored lace.” She feathered her fingers down her torso. “It would be amazing for my ballad in the second act. Think your mom would buy it for you?”

“Maybe,” I said. “I’ll ask.”
“You’re the best,” she said and hugged my neck. “The absolute best. You’re going to be a great understudy.”

And that was that. I highlighted Dilly’s lines in my script and took notes while she was on stage. She started coming home with me after rehearsal. She said it was too hard to memorize lines at her house with her sister’s baby crying all the time. We would sit on my bed and talk about the play, about rehearsals, about who couldn’t act and who couldn’t sing and what Dilly should do with her hair for the different scenes. I was her protégé, her faithful confidant, ready to step in at a moment’s notice.

I imagined Dilly on opening night, deathly ill with something really serious like tuberculosis or brain fever. I would hold her hand and brush her hair off her forehead while she twisted and moaned. “Don’t worry,” I would say. “I’ll go on.” It wouldn’t be long before I was sitting beside Mr. McFarland during rehearsals and telling him the way I thought things should be. It didn’t seem too unreasonable. Dilly wouldn’t be around forever. Someone had to take her place when she was gone.

In some ways, I was better than she was. I knew the words to all the songs, for one thing. In the scene where she was supposed to be singing a lullaby to her newborn baby, Mr. McFarland had to stop Dilly mid-song.

“This is just embarrassing,” he told her. “You don’t look anything like a new mother singing her baby to sleep. You look like you have a migraine.”

“It’s because I’m trying to remember the words,” Dilly snapped. She walked to the front of the stage, dangling the baby doll by one leg. “This is a retarded song,” she said. “Can’t we just cut it?”
Mr. McFarland stood up in the audience and the Brothers made a big show of
diving to the floor. “Look out!” they yelled, and covered their heads with their hands.
“Get out of the line of fire!”

“I’m not cutting a song just because you don’t like it,” he said. “Learn the words,
Dilly.”

“It’s so sappy,” she moaned. “Wah, wah, wah. It makes me gag.” She held the
doll out by its leg and shook it at him.

“By next time,” he told her. “I want to see a loving mother up there, a mother
who knows the words, a mother who doesn’t waste my time by coming here unprepared.”

Dilly flung the doll out at Mr. McFarland and it landed at his feet. Everything
got still and the rest of us waited while they stood, staring at one another. Slowly, Mr.
McFarland bent down to pick up the doll, keeping his eyes locked on Dilly’s. They
watched each other like two angry cats as he moved forward to hand the doll up to her.
“I mean it,” he said when she reached down to take the baby back. “Learn the
goddamned words.”

But during the next rehearsal, Mr. McFarland stopped all of the girls before we
had gotten to the lullaby scene. The Brothers had gone to a costume fitting and the
Brides were trying to work through the wedding scene without them. Mr. McFarland
paced in front of the stage.

“What’s the matter with you?” he asked. “You’re bland. You’re boring. You
look like a bunch of kids up there!” He looked at the ceiling and shook his head. “How
do you expect three hundred people to pay money to watch you if you can’t even hold my
interest for fifteen minutes?” He hit his hand against the edge of the stage. “You think you can just show up and dazzle them? It’s a job,” he said. “You have to work for it.”

We moved into the first few rows of the auditorium while Mr. McFarland pushed my parents’ sofa onto the center of the stage and sat down on one side of it. “Okay,” he told us. “This is an exercise in charisma.” Some of the girls groaned and I turned in my seat.

“What is this?” I asked and Allison Mosely shook her head.

“The worst five minutes of your life.”

“Five minutes,” Mr. McFarland said, holding up one hand with his fingers extended. “Each of you gets no more than five. Don’t speak to me. Don’t touch me.” His voice dropped and he smiled out at us like it was a dare. “Just make me notice you.”

He didn’t make it easy. He didn’t give anybody a break. One by one, the girls crossed the stage to sit beside him. They smiled, batted their eyes, and played with their hair while Mr. McFarland stared out into the audience with an empty face. The harder girls tried, the worse it was. Allison Mosely kept clearing her throat. Lisa Anderson tripped and asked if she could start over. Jenny Crews tried to blow into his ear, but her aim was off and all she did was make a piece of his hair stick up.

When it was my turn, my body went stiff and I couldn’t find the right way to sit. I was all edges, all knees and elbows and knuckles. I traced the chew marks on the armrest with my finger until I had to press my hands between my knees to keep them from shaking. I tried to smile, but my lips were heavy and numb and I could see the other girls watching with blank, bored faces. I turned to face Mr. McFarland’s profile, to catch his eye with the power of my mind. Look at me. Look at me. Look at me. But he
didn’t. In the audience, Dilly dipped her chin to her chest and covered her face with her hand.

When Dilly walked up on stage, Jenny slumped down in the chair beside me and looked up at the lights. “Here we go,” she said.

Dilly crossed the stage like she was in no hurry at all and sat down beside Mr. McFarland without looking at him. Slowly, she extended her legs in front of her, crossing them at the ankles as she reached her arms up behind her head. She laced her fingers and pushed up with her palms until her whole body had curved and lengthened. She held the stretch, arching her back and closing her eyes as she tipped her chin from side to side.

“Shit,” Jenny whispered and the rest of us stared up silently.

Dilly slid one foot to the side and leaned forward to adjust the strap of her shoe. Her fingers moved down the ball of her ankle and traced the leather across the top of her foot. When she bent back up, she brought her leg with her, pulling her knee to her chest and circling her arms around the ridge of her shin. As Mr. McFarland began to turn, Dilly cocked her head slightly and rested her temple against her knee.

Everything went still. The space between them filled with something sharp and tight, something that swelled and spread and pushed all the air from the auditorium. I felt the rest of shrink under the weight of it until I could feel them on my skin, on my lips, inside my throat. Until I thought I might drown in the space between them. They only barely smiled before they each turned away.

As Dilly walked off, Jenny held one hand up at the stage. “How fair is that?” she asked and I looked at her.
“What?”

She leaned forward and shielded her mouth with her hand. “As long as she’s fucking him, I don’t think the rest of us can really hope to compete.”

“That isn’t true,” I said and Jenny rolled her eyes.


After we were all back on stage, Dilly linked her arm through mine. “I have a headache, Gracie. Want to fill in for me?” Her eyes looked heavy, like she was half-asleep, and she rested her head on my shoulder. It was the perfect chance to make them all forget how I had messed up the exercise. I took Dilly’s place for the lullaby scene and she walked down and sat beside Mr. McFarland in the audience.

I knew the words perfectly. I rocked the plastic baby doll and sang to it like it was the only thing I cared about on earth. Dilly had never once performed the song like she meant it. As I sang, I thought about the two of them watching me. I was sure that out in the audience Mr. McFarland was leaning into Dilly and saying, “Look at Grace. I had no idea.”

As the song finished, I leaned down and touched my lips to the doll’s forehead. It was a good move. Genuine. Maybe Dilly would even borrow it when she performed. The music ended and I raised my head to look out into the audience. But the seats were empty. I hadn’t lifted my eyes the whole time I was singing. I had no way of knowing when they’d left.

Dilly came home with me after rehearsal so that I could help her memorize the words to the lullaby. “I can’t have you fill in forever,” she said.
“How often do we have to do that charisma thing?” I asked and she smiled without looking at me.

“How? Didn’t you like it?”

“I wasn’t very good at it,” I told her and she looked up from her script.

“You just think about it wrong,” she said. “Like with Mr. McFarland. If you walk out there afraid of him, you’re gonna suck. It’s the same thing with an audience. You have to think about power. You have it. They don’t. You have to make them want you.” She touched my shoulder. “Make them love you. Make them go crazy stupid if they don’t get enough of you.”

“You were really good,” I told her.

“It isn’t as hard as everyone makes it out to be,” she said. “The next time we do that exercise, don’t go out there thinking that you need to make him notice you. Go out there thinking that he’s gonna beg you to notice him.” She shrugged. “Be captivating.”

“I don’t think I’m a very captivating person,” I said and she tilted her head.

“Then pretend you’re someone who is.”

Dilly stared at the ceiling and tried to recite the words to the song. “Shit,” she said. “This is hopeless. And I can’t mess up again. He’ll kill me.”

“You and Mr. McFarland are pretty good friends, aren’t you?” I asked and her jaw tightened.

“I know what people say,” she said. “And it isn’t true, just in case you were wondering.”

“I wasn’t,” I said quickly. “I wasn’t wondering.”
“Not that I couldn’t sleep with him if I wanted to,” she said. “He’s head over heels for me, in case you haven’t noticed. It makes him a little nutty sometimes.” She smoothed the pages of her script. “But I’m not sleeping with anyone. And do you know why?”


“God?” she said. “I don’t give a shit about God. Look at what happened to my sister. Did you know that she used to be a straight A student?” I shook my head. “She could have been a doctor, like your dad. But not anymore.” She sighed. “I’ve got a real shot at something, Grace. I’m not going to screw it away like she did.”

“Do you love him?” I asked and something in her face hardened.

“Love has nothing to do with it.” She looked down at her knees. “He knows what I am, what I could be. He understands.”

Dilly never forgot the words to the lullaby again, but it wasn’t because she’d memorized them. She tried a few times, but finally she got frustrated and wrote the words on a tiny piece of paper that she taped to the baby doll’s face.

“Look at that,” Mr. McFarland said while she was singing. “Do you see that? I want to believe the rest of you as much as I believe her.”

But the performance dates were getting closer and Dilly didn’t seem to care about Mr. McFarland’s compliments anymore. It was everyone else she was worried about. Nobody ever did anything well enough. We were clumsy, or off-key, or stepped on her lines. “I hate you all!” she would scream rehearsals. “Just do it fucking right!” I waited
for Mr. McFarland to step in, for him to calm her down or shut her up. But unless she was fighting with him, he didn’t seem to notice.

Dilly seemed to enjoy pointed out everything Mr. McFarland had done wrong. The sets were phony, or flimsy, or put together wrong. The props weren’t in the right places at the right times. The orchestra was too big, the backstage crew was too small, and the leather sofa looked absolutely ridiculous on stage. It was supposed to be the turn of the century, after all. Would they really have an Ethan Alan sofa sitting around in their log cabin?

Mr. McFarland paced and swore and held his hands up in defeat. “I’ve done everything I can,” he told her. “What else can I do for you?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Nothing,” she said slowly. “There is nothing else you can do for me.” She turned her back and Mr. McFarland hit the sofa with his fist as he walked off stage.

They didn’t say another word to each other until the last week of rehearsals when Dilly was working through her fight scene with Jack. In the middle of it, she pushed his shoulders hard with her fists and stomped to the front of the stage. That part wasn’t in the script.

“What now?” Mr. McFarland asked. He was sitting in the seat behind me eating potato chips from the vending machine.

“He’s supposed to be about to hit me,” Dilly said and I could feel Mr. McFarland’s foot kicking against the back of my chair. “He looks like he’s getting ready to serve a volley ball!”
Jack stood behind her and raised his hands like he was going to strangle her. In the audience, the rest of the cast laughed and Dilly whirled around to face him. “Sorry,” he said. “I don’t have a lot of experience hitting girls.”

“Have you ever watched a movie?” she asked. “A TV show? Jesus, it’s not that complicated.”

“Enough!” Mr. McFarland called and they both looked at him. “Dilly,” he said. “Stage Right. Jack, Stage Left.” They looked out with puzzled faces, but they moved to their assigned sides of the stage.

“Dilly,” he said. “Try to get to the other side of the stage. Jack, don’t let her get there.”

On the stage, Dilly and Jack stared at each other.

“How?” Jack asked and Mr. McFarland held up his hands.

“However you can,” he said. “I don’t care how. Just don’t let her get there.”

Dilly’s body went still and I could see the veins in her throat, the tremor in her breath. Her lip quivered slightly as she looked out at him. “What is this?” she asked, but Mr. McFarland didn’t answer.

“Go!” he said.

Dilly took a few steps forward and Jack stood taller, broadening his shoulders and holding his arms out to the sides. They watched each other’s movement, shifting their weight and flexing their fingers. Behind me, I could hear Mr. McFarland’s breath, faster, heavier than it had been a moment before. Dilly glanced out into the audience and then turned and ran towards Jack.
“Stop her!” Mr. McFarland called and Jack caught Dilly around the waist. They struggled for a second, a tangle of arms and legs, and Dilly broke free.

“Come on!” Mr. McFarland rose to his feet and grasped the back of my chair. Jack looked confused, but he dove and caught Dilly by one leg. She pitched forward, falling face-down on the stage. The sound of her bare arms hitting the floor cracked through the auditorium.

“That’s it!” Mr. McFarland yelled. I could hear Dilly struggling, her voice wet and wordless, the sounds of her body trying to get free.

Jack pulled Dilly backwards by the cuff of her blue jeans and she flipped onto her back and tried to kick at his hands with her free leg. But Jack crouched over her, pinning her shoulders to the stage.

Behind me, Mr. McFarland kneaded the back of my chair with his hands and it began to rock back and forth under the pressure.

Jack moved to straddle Dilly, but as he did, she lifted her knee up hard between his legs and his head wrenched back as he fell onto his side. In a flash, she was out from under him and across the stage. When she reached the opposite wall, she put her hands flat against it and leaned forward, her shoulders heaving. She stood like that for a moment and then turned towards us. Her lips were wet and swollen, her forearms pink and raw where she had hit the floor. On the other side of the stage, Jack stayed crouched on his hands and knees, his forehead touching the ground.

Slowly, the cast turned to look at Mr. McFarland who stood rigid behind me. “Let’s get back to work,” he said and I could feel the heat of his breath on the part of my hair, the ridges of his knuckles against my shoulder blades.
The day of our first performance, Mr. McFarland called the whole cast out of first period. We gathered on the stage with our books in our arms, looking back and forth between each other for an explanation. When Mr. McFarland came out of his office, his eyes were red around the rims. He told us to sit down, that he had something to tell us.

"Dilly isn’t here yet," I said and he covered his mouth with his hand.

"I have some bad news." His jaw was clenched and I could see his Adam’s apple trembling in his throat.

"Oh God," Lisa Anderson said. "Dilly’s dead."

"No," he said quietly and lifted his head to look at us. "Her sister’s baby is.”

Everything went still and cold and my head felt heavy, like it had filled with water. I felt bodies stiffen on either side of me and Allison Mosely began to cry into her wrist.

"What happened?" Jenny whispered. "My God. What happened?"

Mr. McFarland pressed his fingers into the ridge of his forehead. "They don’t know," he said. "They just woke up this morning and the baby was, they just woke up this morning and found her."

"Dilly’s not performing then?" I asked and Mr. McFarland straightened.

"She won’t be in school. But she’ll be here tonight." He nodded to himself.

"Dilly’s a professional," he said. "And she’ll be here."
That night, she didn’t speak to any of us. A couple of the girls tried to hug her, but she shook them away. She sat alone in the mirror, putting on her makeup. And then she dressed in my clothes and took her place on stage without ever meeting anyone’s eye. When the curtain rose, she filled with life. She sang and danced and kissed and fought. The audience cried, and during curtain call, she blew kisses to the little girls in the front row. When the curtain fell, her shoulders stooped and she stood with her head bent forward into the heels of her hands. Mr. McFarland put his hand on her shoulder, but she slapped it away and left him standing by himself, breathing into his fingers. Then she hung my clothes back in the costume room and left without saying good-bye. She did the same thing the next night. And the next.

On the fourth day, she called me. “The wake is tonight,” she said. “Before the show. I can’t go alone.”

“What about your mom?” I asked.

“She can’t handle it,” she said. “She hasn’t left her room since we found, since it happened.” Her breath was slow and heavy in the phone. “Will you come or not?”

When I climbed into her car she held up her hand. “Don’t ask me how I am,” she said. “Because I’m fine. I’m perfectly, one-hundred percent fine.”

The room at the church was dim and small, the size of my bedroom. I stood behind Dilly in the doorway and looked in at two rows of folding chairs. The room was empty except for a girl, a softer, paler version of Dilly who sat alone in the front row. On the other side of the room, a single light cast down onto a white bassinet and I turned my head away when I realized what was inside.

“This is my sister,” Dilly said to me. “This is Grace.”
The sister looked at me with dead, empty eyes and I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to say. “You guys look a lot alike,” I said.

“Nobody’s here,” the sister said to Dilly.

“Who would come?” Dilly asked. “We don’t know anybody.” The sister nodded and Dilly sat down beside her. “Have a seat, Grace,” she said. But I was afraid to lift my eyes off the carpet for a single second. I couldn’t trust them. I knew where they would look.

“I can’t stay long,” Dilly said to her sister. “I have to get into makeup.”

“No,” the sister said. “No, you can’t leave me here by myself.” My knees and ankles were beginning to tremble and I touched the wall to steady myself.

“I don’t have a choice,” Dilly said quietly and put her hand on top of her sister’s. “People are counting on me.”

The sister’s voice caught in her throat. “I’m counting on you,” she said and started to cry. “Please don’t leave me here by myself.” The room was too hot, but I felt cold all over. I clenched my jaw to keep my teeth from chattering, but it pushed the chatter down into my stomach and shoulders so that my whole body flinched and shook.

Dilly pushed her sister’s hair behind her ear with one hooked finger and touched her chin to her sister’s shoulder. “I told you I wouldn’t be able to stay,” she said, and the sister leaned forward to cry into her knees. Dilly stood up and twisted her hands in front of her. “I don’t know what to do,” she said. Then she looked at me. “Grace,” she said.

“No,” I said.

Dilly took my arm. “Grace, listen.”

“No.”
“Just for a little while. So she isn’t alone.”

I walked out into the hallway and Dilly followed me. “You knew this,” I said to her. “You knew you were going to do this the whole time.”

“Grace,” she said. “I have to be there. You know I have to be there.” I couldn’t stop the shaking. It was everywhere now, in my lips and eyelids, in the soles of my feet.

“I can’t,” I told her. “I won’t know what to do.”

“Jesus Christ, Grace. You don’t have to do anything. You don’t even have to talk. Just sit there.” I shook my head. “You know I have to be there, Grace. You know it.”

“So do I,” I told her. “I have to be there too. I have a line.”

Dilly hit her hand against the wall. “For fuck’s sake, Grace, somebody else can call for the pastor!”

We didn’t say much, the sister and I. She asked me how old I was and I told her. She asked me if I liked school and I said yes. I stared down at my lap and tried to think of reasons to leave. I couldn’t call my parents. They were at the play.

A couple of people came, the sister’s friends from when she was in school, and each time one did, I thought how I could get up and walk to the bus stop, how I could get back to school in time for the second act. In time to call for the pastor. But none of the friends stayed longer than a minute and before I could get up the nerve to go, the sister and I were alone again. While I was staring at my hands, she stood up and walked over to the bassinet.

“Do you like her dress?” she asked me.
“Uh huh,” I said, even though I was looking down and couldn’t see it.

“It’s a christening dress,” she said. “I think it’s beautiful.”

I pulled my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them to keep from shivering.

“Would you like to hold her?”

“What?” I asked and when I looked up, the sister was standing in front of me with her arms full of lace and white eyelet.

“Here,” she said and held it out to me. My arms moved without my mind and I stared straight ahead without looking down. It felt like nothing. It smelled like nothing. I watched the wall in front of me. If I didn’t look, it wasn’t real. It was nothing.

By the time I got back to school, the play was over and everyone was gone. I stood in the darkened costume room and shifted through Dilly’s wardrobe until I found one of my skirts and blouses. I had to get out of my clothes. I had to get that wet, nothing smell away from me, off of my body. The costume smelled like Dilly’s sweat and perfume, like something mean and powerful and inside them, I could still feel the heat from her body. I looked at myself in the mirror. She would miss the clothes. But that was just too bad. They were mine, after all. I was allowed to take them back if I wanted to. And I did. I wanted to take back all the things that were mine.
I pulled all of my clothes off the hangers and piled them next to the door. There would be nothing left for her tomorrow night, I thought. She could wear a potato sack for all I cared. She could go naked.

I thought of my parents’ sofa in the prop room. I wouldn’t be able to get it home, but I could beat it up if I wanted to. I could rip it apart with scissors and pull out all the fluff. I could peel back the leather and hide it in the dumpster outside. I couldn’t take it back, but I could make it worthless.

The prop room was dark, but it wasn’t empty. From the doorway, I could make out the silhouette of a person sitting on the sofa. “I knew you’d come back,” Mr. McFarland said.

“You did?” I asked.

“Grace?” he said and I nodded. “I’m sorry.” His voice was dull and sleepy. “I thought you were... You’re wearing her clothes.”

“They’re my clothes,” I said. “I leant them to her.”

“Why are you here?” he asked.

“Why are you?”

The air was warm and the room smelled safe, like sawdust and tempera paint. “I don’t have anyplace else to be,” he said. I could still only see his outline in the dark. He wasn’t a real person. He was only the shape of one.

“Neither do I,” I said and stepped closer to him.

“Has she said anything to you?” he asked.

I took another step forward. “She’s fine.”
“But she never says anything,” he said. “Does she talk to you?”

I could make out a face now. The whiteness of his skin. The dark sockets of his eyes. I could feel him breathing. I could hear his heartbeat. “She never talks about you,” I said.

I stood in front of him, close enough to smell his hair, to touch the toe of his shoe with mine. I could make him want me. I could make him love me. I could make him go crazy if he didn’t get enough of me.

I slid my knee between his. “I held a dead baby tonight,” I said and his legs tightened around mine. His breath was harder. His hands moved up my hips and closed around my waist. As I reached out to touch his hair, he closed his eyes and leaned his face forward into my chest, pulling me closer and inhaling into the fabric of my blouse. He tightened his grip and breathed open-mouthed into my clothing like he’d never tasted air. Like he’d spent his whole life hungry. And then I was underneath him, under the heat of him, under the weight of him, under the moment of him that belonged to me. He didn’t kiss me. He didn’t say my name. He didn’t open his eyes until we were finished.
Company of Strangers

The only thing my brother and I ever agreed on was that I would die horribly. As a child, I knew that I could be trapped in a tanning bed until my skin bubbled and melted away from my skeleton. I could be swallowed by an earthquake, washed away in a flash flood, eaten alive by rats. I could spontaneously burst into flames or choke to death on a cheerio. I could catch the Ebola virus and bleed to death from my eyes and nipples.

Our father failed to recognize the seriousness of my impending death. A doctor, he saw only the facts: “Monkeys get Ebola, floods don’t hit the suburbs, and rats are just squirrels with naked tails.”

“Maybe I’ll be kidnapped,” I told my father. “On any ordinary, I could get stolen and chopped into little pieces.”

He sighed heavily and looked at me over the rim of his glasses. “By whom?”


My father glared at my brother who nodded. “It’s true. She could.”

Bad men were everywhere. They filled the pages of newspapers and monopolized the 6:00 News. It was only a matter of time before one came through my window at night and snatched me from my canopy bed. He would bruise my arms, pull my hair, tear my nightgown. A bad man could fill a child’s mouth with one fist to keep her from screaming, could duct tape her hands behind her back, could slice her apart and throw her into a river.
"I could be gone in a heartbeat," I told my father. "And maybe all the police would ever find is a finger." I wagged my pinky in front of him. "Better take a good look in case you ever have to identify me by it."

My father took a deep breath. "Let's not worry about it, shall we? You just be good and safe and remember what they told you in school about talking to strangers."

"It isn't always a stranger," my brother interrupted. "One of our neighbors could lock Lilly up in a cellar and take pictures of her without her clothes on."

"That will never happen," my father told me. "But if it does, I will save you."

Then he cuffed my brother on the back of the head and hissed, "For the love of God, Jackson, please don't make my life any harder than it already is."

My father's wife had died young. His job was demanding. His son was cold and his daughter walked home from school ready to accept candy from the first stranger who offered. The women he might have hoped to love moved through his house like a parade, smoked cigarettes in his kitchen then fled the first time they met his children. They left for good when his son looked them up and down and whispered, "whore," beneath his breath. They ran from the house screaming when his daughter smeared lipstick across her neck and wrists and lay naked in the bathtub the first time they tried to spend the night. My father's life was hard. But this was something my brother and I did not agree on.

When my father died, my brother flew into town to stand with me at the bedside and watch him draw his last breaths. I held my father's hand and thought about how he
would never kneel beside my coffin or cry over my tombstone while Jack used the hospital phone to rearrange meetings and cancel appointments.

"I hope he doesn't drag this out," my brother said between calls. "The kids are missing school."

In the hallway his wife read magazines while his children made trips to the vending machine on the first floor. When I passed by them to go to the bathroom, they stared at me like I was something from a fairytale: a unicorn, a hunchback, a three-headed dog, something they'd read about in books but never thought they'd see in real life. I only knew my brother's family from the annual Christmas cards my father forwarded to me, photos of the four of them engaging in festive activities, wearing matching holiday sweaters and smiling like a family made by Fischer Price.

After my father had taken his last breath, I stood in the hallway with my niece and nephew while my brother held his wife's elbow and whispered into her ear. "We'll deal with the formalities," he said when he turned back to me. "We'll go through the will and take care of the house." He tossed me my father's car keys. "You take the kids."

My sister-in-law made a face like she'd been struck by lightning. "Jack," she said in a strained voice and he touched her shoulder.

"Just for a couple of hours," he told her, then smiled at me.

"You're going to go through the house?" I asked. "Shouldn't I help?"

"Ann and I will make sense of things," he said. "The sooner we get through this mess, the sooner we can all get the hell out of here." He put his hand on his son's head. "The kids have spent all day in the hospital. They're restless." He checked his watch and filled my hand with bills from his wallet. "It will be much easier this way."
I pretended not to notice as Ann slipped some money to her daughter and whispered, “Just in case.” She followed us to the elevator, clapping her hands gaily as she called after her children, “Emma? James? Seatbelts!”

I looked down at my niece and nephew. “What do you want me to do with them?” I asked Jack. “Where should we go?”

He handed me a newspaper from a chair in the hallway. “Take them to a museum or something. Art show, historical exhibit, I don’t care. Just do something cultural.”

We had to drive thirty minutes to get to the pirate dinner theater. Emma played navigator with a map she found in the glove compartment. I turned when she told me to and smoked the cigarettes she’d found underneath the map. From the backseat, James tapped my shoulder several times a minute to remind me that he had to go to the bathroom.

Emma turned in her seat. “You’ll just have to hold it,” she told her brother. “I don’t think it would be a good idea to stop in this neighborhood.” Then she lowered her voice and gave me a sideways glance. “It looks unsanitary.”

We bought our tickets from a woman wearing corduroy pants and eye patch who told us that we were prisoners of the Yellow Pirate and to go on over to our table.

Once we were seated, Emma—who thanks to her father has a sense of such things—looked around at the cardboard anchors taped the walls and said, “I have a feeling that this is going to be terribly over-priced.”

“You can’t put a price on culture,” I told her.
James rolled his eyes. "You can't," he said. "It's Daddy's money."

"He wanted to pay," I said. "But I could have if I'd wanted to. I have money, you know."

Emma narrowed her eyes at me. "Do you have a job, Aunt Lilly?"

I narrowed my eyes back. "Do you?"

She leaned forward in her seat. "I'm eleven."

"You shouldn't think of excuses to fail," I told her. "You should think of reasons to succeed." Her forehead wrinkled and she looked at her brother, who cranked his finger beside his temple and mouthed the word, crazy.

"For your information," I said. "I have had many jobs. Most recently, I worked for the Red Cross in Rescue Relief." Emma's mouth pulled to the side doubtfully. "That's right," I told her. "Any time there was a natural disaster, they called me and off I went to be right in the middle of it. It was a great job."

I didn't tell them that the job was volunteer. The only person who knew that had been my father, who had groaned into the phone and asked to what address he should send a monthly check.

"You don't need to send money," I'd told him. "This is very dangerous work. Chances are that I'll be dead within the month." When he didn't answer, I gave him the address of Red Cross Headquarters and told him that they would be able to forward my mail.

"So?" James asked. "How come you're not doing it anymore if it was such a great job?"
“Well,” I said. “Sadly enough, it turned out that I didn’t have any skills. Everyone else on my team could do important things like CPR or lift fallen buildings off of orphaned children.” I ignored the glance exchanged between them. “I did what I could, though. I held up signs and handed out snack packs to the devastated.”

The Yellow Pirate came to our table with chips and salsa. He was small and thin with a black goatee penciled onto his chin and a yellow scarf tied around his head. After a great deal of grimacing and argh-ing, he took our drink orders and told us that he would make us walk the plank if we didn’t behave. “You especially,” he added, wagging his finger at me. “I can tell you’re trouble.” James snorted and Emma leaned her head against her hands. “Wow,” the Yellow Pirate said, looking us over. “Who died?”

“Our grandfather,” James told him. “But no one really liked him much, so it’s okay.” The Yellow Pirate stared for a second and then took a step backwards.

“You know what this table needs?” he asked. “This table needs to see my sword.” Emma yawned audibly and the Yellow Pirate leaned down and whispered to her, “This is a big deal. You’ll have to keep it quiet so that the other tables don’t get jealous.” He winked at me. “I don’t show my sword to just anybody.”

“Oh,” I said. “I bet you say that to all the tables.”

He made a great show of brandishing the sword before us, swishing it over our heads and growling for affect.

“It’s really big,” I said. “Can I touch it?” He set the gray plastic against the inside of my arm and I ran my finger along the edge. “I bet you can do some real damage with that.” I slid my foot from under the table and pressed it over the toe of his shoe.
“See?” he said to me. “I could tell right away about you.” Before he moved sideways to the next table, he reached down and touched the backs of his fingers to my hair.

When I looked up, James was staring at me. “My dad isn’t going to like that you brought us here.”

“You’re dad can bite me,” I told him and his mouth fell open.

“It’s all right,” Emma said nervously and patted her brother’s arm. “She doesn’t know what she’s saying. She’s bereft. Aren’t you, Aunt Lilly?”

I thought of Jackson across town, smoking a cigar and cursing to himself as he leafed through our father’s papers, through his receipts and tax returns and letters, things he never meant for us to see. “That’s right,” I told them and slipped on my complimentary eye patch. “I’m all torn up inside.”

“Daddy says that Grandpa was a bad man,” James said. He glanced behind him and lowered his voice. “Daddy says that Grandpa had girlfriends and it broke Grandma’s heart so bad it killed her.”

I lifted my eye patch to look at him. “That’s why Daddy is a lawyer instead of a doctor,” I told him. “Cancer killed Grandma. Check the charts of you don’t believe me.”

Emma was loading a chip with salsa and she stopped midway to her mouth.

“When you and Dad were little?”

“That’s right,” I said.

“What did you do?”

The pirates were gathering on stage and I folded my napkin across my lap.

“Well,” I said. “Once I dug my knee back and forth on the sidewalk in front of our
house. It bled much that the cement turned pink and Jack had to bandage me up with dish towels and masking tape."

"Did he cry?"

"Nah," I said. "He was pretty used to it."

"No." Emma dropped her chip back into the bowl and put her hands flat on the table. "When Grandma died. Did my dad cry?"

"Oh." I stared at the stage, hoping something would happen. "I don’t remember."

It was your basic pirate dinner theater scenario. There were two main pirates (the Yellow Pirate turned out to be a marginal pirate figure) and two captured princesses: a gypsy princess and a princess-princess. After various failed escapes, the princesses ended up falling in love with their respective pirates and in between our fish sticks and our ice cream sandwiches, the whole ensemble did a big dance number while the gypsy princess turned a series of back flips across the stage.

Sometime during the curtain call, James lost his shoe under the table and the rest of the audience filed out around us while I scouted on my hands and knees to find it. The cast was lingering in the auditorium, eating chips from abandoned bowls and clearing plates away in plastic bins.

As James was cramming his shoe back onto his foot, the Yellow Pirate sat down on our table and crossed his arms.

"So," I said to him. "Have you always wanted to be a pirate?"

He cocked his jaw. "Where are you going now?" he asked.
"We’re going back to our hotel," Emma said and gave me a firm look. "Mom and Dad are *expecting* us."

The Yellow Pirate kept his eyes on mine. "I think you should come to my place."

"I have the kids," I said and he poked my hip with his sword.

"I have a TV."

At the hotel there would be polite conversation. Jack and Ann would talk about their jobs, their kids, their friends. They would talk about the things they’d found in my father’s house and I would sit like a stranger between them while they picked a church and planned a funeral.

I handed my father’s car keys to the Yellow Pirate. "We can take our car," I said. "You drive."

As we walked across the empty parking lot, James tugged at hem of my shirt. "I want to go, Aunt Lilly. I’m hungry."

"You should have eaten your dinner," I told him.

He wrinkled his nose. "My fish sticks tasted like refrigerator."

Emma nodded. "Mine were frozen in the middle."

The Yellow Pirate started my father’s car and I guided James and Emma to the backseat. "We’ll stop for food," I promised. "Just get in." I held the door open and Emma took a step backwards.

"I think this is a very bad idea," she said and folded her arms over her chest.

"Well guess what?" I asked her. "I could care less what you think." As soon as I said it, I tried to smile, to make it a joke, but her lips froze and her face emptied. She swallowed hard and dropped her chin to her chest as she followed her brother into the backseat.
The Yellow Pirate lived in an apartment with stained walls and concrete floors. In the doorway, James reached for my hand. “Aunt Lilly,” he whispered with his mouth trembling. “I want my mom.”

“Soon,” I told him and shook his hand away. The Yellow Pirate turned on the television and James and Emma stood awkwardly in front of it, looking around at the piles of clothes and empty beer bottles while the Yellow Pirate touched his lips to my neck and breathed into my ear. I slid my fingers into the waist of his pants and over his shoulder, I saw Emma watching. Her face was empty, and our eyes locked for a moment before she turned away. “Wait here,” I said. “We’ll just be a minute.”

He didn’t tell me his name and I didn’t ask. In the bedroom, he shed his pirate garb in a heap on the floor and stood before me with thin arms and a narrow, hairless chest. We lay on his bed, a mattress on the floor next to the water heater, and he ran the palm of his hand up my shin and stopped at my knee.

“Nasty scar,” he said and I looked down. He traced the patch of pink scar tissue with his index finger and smiled. “Did you get it doing something brave?”

I closed my eyes. “I rubbed it on concrete until I saw bone.” His hand fell away from my leg and I tried not to smile. But when I opened my eyes, he wasn’t gaping in horror. His mouth was twitching and his chest was rising and falling in quick, shallow breaths.

“Jesus Christ,” he said into his hand. “You’re a masochist.”

Without the scarf and sword, he had lost a good deal of his mystique. His goatee had smeared up the side of his face like a giant bruise and his hair smelled like sweat and fish sticks. The lights were too bright and I wanted to get up, to get dressed, to get out.
But his little face looked so excited. After all his pirate work, his singing/dancing/table
waiting, it seemed rude to disappoint him. "I guess so," I said.

"Oh God." He jumped off the bed and began rummaging through his dresser
drawers. "I’ve done that show, like, a million times and nothing like this has ever
happened!" He turned back to me with a pair of furry rings dangling from his thumb.
"Check it out," he said and shook them in front of me when I didn’t respond. "They’re
handcuffs."

"They’re pink," I said.

"Yeah," he nodded. "Pink. You know, for girls?"

I let him move my hands behind my head and snap my wrists to the pipes of the
water heater. The television murmured from the other room and I turned my head to the
side so that I wouldn’t see the Yellow Pirate’s goatee smear onto my skin.

Jack would have finished with my father’s house. He and Ann would have had a
nice dinner in our nice hotel and they would be counting the hours until they could fly
back to their nice home with their nice family. We would put my father into the ground
and then they would be gone. They would reappear on the faces of future Christmas
cards smiling and laughing as they decorated a tree, sat in front of a fireplace, posed on
cross-country skis, cards full of matching outfits and warm wishes, cards I would never
see. From our family to yours. No one would ask what address to mail them to.

It would have been an easy escape. No police bursting through the door with
guns outstretched. No spot on the 6:00 News. No father swinging in like the Phantom of
the Opera to save me. The pink handcuffs had a self-release button. And the Yellow
Pirate didn’t try to stop me.
The living room looked the same, cluttered with empty pizza boxes and dirty dishes. But my niece and nephew were not in it. The lights were on and the TV hummed in the corner. We looked in the kitchen, in the bathroom. We crawled on our hands and knees to look under the furniture. We looked in closets and cabinets and behind doors. "Enough hiding," I called.

"Emma? James? Come out now. Aunt Lilly doesn't want to have to beat the hell out of you!" I listened for the sound of voices, of rustling, of breathing. Nothing.

"I'm sure they didn't go far," the Yellow Pirate said when I went onto the porch. "I'll help you find them. Just let me get dressed." I left him there and ran into the street.

There was no traffic, no light, no children. I checked inside the car, but there was no movement, no sound, no children. I yelled their names then screamed them. I stood in the center of the road, trying to be logical. If I was a kid, which way would I go? Which direction would I run to escape the lair of the Yellow Pirate, to get home, to get safe, to leave me behind?

There are rules for crises, codes for danger: starve a fever, feed a cold, stop, drop, and roll, stay with a buddy. But there was nothing useful. So I ran. I circled one block and then the next, calling their names until my voice went hoarse and the words fell dull and dead in my mouth. Until I couldn't remember which street I'd been down or which direction I'd come from. I passed three payphones, or maybe one payphone three times, and each time I did, I thought about calling the hotel. They might have gone back, might be in the arms of their parents, explaining the horrors which had driven them to venture alone into the night, into the cold, into a city they didn't know. I held the receiver in my hand and let my fingers shake over the keys. In the face of danger, what were you supposed to do? Call 911. Kick and yell. Scream fire. Scream rape. Make a scene.

This is not my father!
But if they were back, then they were fine. And if they weren’t. I hung up the phone.

I circled blocks of dark buildings and empty streets until I found myself at my father’s car, back in front of the Yellow Pirate’s apartment where I sat down on the curb and let my feet sink in the gutter mud. I smoked my father’s cigarettes with fingers numb from cold and stared at the dark sky. Around me, the city stretched into state, into country, into a whole world of strangers. The sphere of the earth was crowded with people who would never know me, would never look for me, would never try find me if I disappeared. I wrapped my arms around my knees. A person is only missing if another person misses them.

I smoked and waited. I waited for hypothermia or lung cancer or morning. Stay where you are and someone will find you. And someone did. I heard a door open behind me and the Yellow Pirate came out of his apartment with James and Emma on either side.

“Where have you been?” he asked. “I told you they didn’t go far.” They stood, the three of them, silhouetted in the light of his doorway.

“Where?” I said and tried to stand. But my ankles were numb and my legs felt stiff and heavy.

“Burger King around the corner.” They moved down the steps and into the street in front of me. “They’d said they were hungry.”

Emma was chewing on the straw of her paper cup. “We were hungry,” she confirmed. “You said we’d get food and we didn’t and we were hungry.”

The Yellow Pirate helped me to the car and held the back door open for James and Emma. “Come see the show again,” he said and I nodded mutely. “Bring your friends.”
I drove the car down the street, the same street I’d walked, but it didn’t look familiar. “I don’t know where we are,” I said. Emma didn’t offer to help with the map, so I just drove, working my hands around the steering wheel as the feeling came back into my fingers. In the backseat, James’ body slumped sideways into sleep while Emma sat rigid, staring out the window and squeaking the straw in the lid of her cup.

“Some night,” I said finally.

“Yeah,” she said. “Some night.”

“You know,” I told her. “Maybe we shouldn’t tell your parents everything that happened tonight.” The squeaking stopped.

“Are you saying to lie?” she asked. “We should lie to Mom and Dad?”

“No,” I said quickly. “It’s just that sometimes, the truth makes people upset. And it doesn’t do any good to make people upset. So maybe we could avoid the truth. Just a little bit”

“Aunt Lilly,” she said slowly. “That’s the exact same thing as lying.”

“No it isn’t,” I told her. “It’s like, when someone asks you how you are and even though you want to say that you feel like shit, that you’re miserable, that you cry until you gag and spend most of your time imagining ways to kill yourself, instead you just say, ‘fine thanks.’”

“I don’t think it’s like that at all,” she said. “I think that’s just good manners.”

The car was quiet for a moment and then I heard the sound of Emma’s seatbelt unhooking. There was a rustling noise and she was beside me, leaning between the two front seats. She touched my arm lightly. “Aunt Lilly?” she asked. “Are you miserable? Do you think about killing yourself?”
"Of course not." I tried to laugh. "I was just using that as a for instance."

"Oh." She touched the side of her face to my arm. "How was the Yellow Pirate?" she asked and I glanced down to see if she meant something by it. But her eyes were half-closed and her face looked soft.

"Kind of boring," I said and she nodded as if she'd suspected as much.

"Your voice is scratchy," she said. "Have you been crying?"

"My throat's just dry," I told her.

She climbed into the front and I put my hand on her back to steady her as she crawled into the passenger seat. "It's mostly ice," she told me and held out her soda cup. "But there's a little left." I reached out to take it and she touched her hand against mine on the cup. "Hey," she said. "Our fingers are the same."

I glanced down at our hands, at our square knuckles and oval nails. "How about that," I said.

She squeezed my finger and pointed ahead. "Turn here."

When we got to the hotel, James wouldn't wake up, and I had to carry him across the parking lot by one armpit and the crook of one knee, hiking him up by his clothes when he slipped. My brother and his wife were alone in the hotel lobby, pacing in front of the desk. Their heads snapped towards us when we walked through the front doors and my brother dropped his chin to his chest and exhaled slowly. Ann ran forward and snatched James from my arms, pulling his head to her shoulder and his legs around her waist. Her eyelashes were wet and I could see the veins throbbing in her neck as she
kissed James’ ear and touched her hand to Emma’s hair. She wrapped both arms around James and rocked him back and forth, whispering, “My God, my God.”

When she looked at me, her lip was quivering and her mouth opened and closed with each jagged breath.

“Well,” she said finally. “Don’t you have anything to say?”

Next to her, Emma’s body jerked like the question had been directed to her.

“Thank you, Aunt Lilly,” she said politely. “We had a very nice time.”

Ann looked at the carpet and held one hand up to Jack. “I’ll be up in a minute,” he told her and she gave me a narrow stare before taking her children into the elevator.

When we were alone, Jackson stood in front of me with his hands in his pockets and his jaw flexing. “Well, Lilly,” he said. “Ann hates you now.”

“She hated me before,” I told him. “I’ve just given her an excuse to say so.”

He leaned towards me and sniffed. “What’s that I smell on you?” he asked and I shrugged.

“Pirate?”

“It’s cigarette smoke,” he said. “You’ve been smoking in front of my kids.” He closed his eyes and shook his head. “God, Lilly.”

“I’ve had a rough night,” I told him and he held his hands up.

“I can’t do this now,” he said. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Wait,” I said and caught the sleeve of his shirt. “I thought we could talk a little bit, get a drink or something.”

He stared at my hand on his arm until I let it drop. “The bar closed an hour ago,” he said and stepped into the elevator.
"Just for a minute, Jack. Please." I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes to stop them from burning and swallowed hard to release the tightness in the back of my throat. "I've had a really terrible night."

Jack's face went hard and as the elevator door began to close, his hand slammed out and held it open. "Let's hear it, Lilly," he said through the clench of his jaw. "Give me one reason. Just one reason why I should feel sorry for you."

My whole body felt weak and hollow, like in one moment it might forget how to move, how to stand, how to breath. I touched my fingers to my lips in hope that they would remember my voice and say something, say anything. "My father died today." Jack watched me for a moment. He blinked several times, then looked up at the ceiling and laughed. He pulled his shirtsleeve up and lifted his wrist so that I could see the face of his watch. Then the doors closed between us and he was gone. The hours had crossed over the day my father died. And I was standing in a hotel lobby on just an ordinary day.
Eric Moe says that if we are caught, I won’t get fired, but things will be pretty
damn awkward for me all the same. He’s pretty sure that he can’t get fired either, but he
would be transferred at the very least. Our corporate office is kind of like the Catholic
Church that way. It’s real hard to get fired.

The first time I slept with Eric Moe it was on the table in the employee lounge.
As the manager, he had to stay late to count the safe and write the nightly report after
store had closed. I had forgotten my wallet in my locker and had to go back inside to get
it. He said it would be a one-time thing. His wife was going through a bad period. Had
cut him off completely. He hated his job. Felt disconnected from his daughter. The
backs of my legs scratched on the rough edges of the table and Eric Moe bit my lip until
it bled. Afterwards, I got dressed and left him sitting on the table, crying into the flats of
his hands.

“You’re kidding?” Mara asks. She is on her knees in the children’s section
scrubbing vomit out of the carpet in yellow rubber gloves like my mother used to wear to
wash dishes.

“Huh uh.” I say.

Mara trained me. She has been here for three years and knows the store better
than anyone. Telling her about Eric isn’t betrayal, it’s just information.

“He’s so old, Jill” she says. She dips her rag into a bucket of soapy water and
wrings it out over the stain on the carpet. “They don’t pay me enough to clean puke.”
She motions to me. “You know he has a kid, right?”
“April,” I say. “I give her flute lessons on Thursdays.”

Mara stops scrubbing and looks at me. “That’s fucked up.”

I shrug. “She wants to learn how to play.”

Two girls with shiny ponytails move between us and sit in front of a shelf, picking through thin, brightly colored horse and babysitting books.

Mara lowers her voice and gives me a look. “How many times?”

“I don’t know. Seven or eight.”

“Christ!” she says, then winces in the direction of the ponytails. “Where?” she whispers.

I glance at the girls and squat down by Mara, adjusting the handle of her bucket.

“The office, the stock room, European History, Film Studies—”

“You do it here?”

“—Feminism.”

She clucks with her tongue. “There is something seriously messed up with all of this.”

“It’s not a big deal,” I tell her. “And I don’t see where you get off being so holier than thou. You’ve slept with every boy here.”

She laughs. “Yeah. Both of them.” Eric Moe doesn’t like to hire boys. He says they’re sullen and dissatisfied, too quick to go out and find a better job. “But they aren’t married and it wasn’t like I had a thing with either of them. It was just for fun.” She cocks her jaw. “Did I tell you that Jake was a dirty talker?”

The ponytails turn and look at us and we step around a shelf.

“What did he say?”
"Things I wouldn’t repeat in this sacred place.” Mara grins. “I couldn’t stop laughing.”

"Eric never makes me laugh.”

"He won’t fall in love with you,” she says.

"Didn’t say I want him to.”

"Well, how is he?”

Eric Moe is too thin and too straight. Everything about him is straight. He has straight hair and straight teeth. He wears straight thin ties, and pants pressed with perfect straight creases. He uses words like “spearhead” and “eyeball” as verbs and drinks decaffeinated coffee because he says that regular makes him overly sensitive to sound. He is proud that our store is ranked first in cleanliness for our region, which I guess is good since it’s ranked last in sales. After we have sex, he always says it is the last time. He calls me a sadist. Says that he won’t let me break up his marriage. He loves his wife and daughter.

“He’s okay,” I tell Mara. “Not, like, amazing, but, you know, good.”

A woman comes around the corner and holds up her hands when she sees us.

“Thank god,” she says. “Why are you workers so hard to find? I’ve been looking everywhere.” She is wearing blue eye shadow and pink lipstick and I stare at her face. I didn’t know there were women who still went for the pink and blue look.

“Can we help you?” Mara peals off her rubber gloves.


“I haven’t read it,” I tell her and try to hand it back.

“You work in a bookstore,” she says. “Don’t you read the books?”
“I haven’t been here that long,” I say. “I’m only up to the K’s.”

Mara nudges me with her elbow and smiles at the woman. “This has been a very popular title,” she tells her. “Really high sales for this one. Take it home and read the first chapter. If you don’t like it, you can always return it.”

When the woman is gone, Mara’s face lengthens. “You shouldn’t fuck with them like that.”

I roll my eyes. “Does it matter?”

“Have I taught you nothing?” she asks. “Be subtle. You have to be subtle.”

“I’ll work on it.”

Mara knows everything about customers. When she trained me, she told me how to handle the mean ones. “Some of them just get off on being nasty. If you cry, they usually stop.”

“That’s sick,” I told her.

“But effective.” She touched her nametag. “It’s a power thing. Get used to it.”

“The customer is always right business?” I asked.

“The customer is usually a moron,” she said. “But if the boss has to choose a side, he will always choose theirs. With most of them, they just want to see that they’ve gotten to you. A few fake tears is all. It’s not that bad.”

Later, Eric Moe’s wife brings him dinner in a greasy paper bag and their daughter stands in front of me, smiling through her curtain of hair.

“Hi Jillian.”

“Hey April.”
April is eleven, quiet, respectful. Everything Eric Moe’s daughter should be. While Eric and the wife eat dinner in his office, she follows me through the store.

“I’ve been practicing,” she says.

“That’s great,” I tell her.

“I really like your shoes.”

“Thanks.”

“If I’d brought my flute, I could show you how much I’ve been practicing.”

“You can show me on Thursday.”

April stands on the other side of the cash register while I count the cash. She lifts herself up on the counter with her arms locked at the elbows and her feet dangling off the ground.

“I love Thursday,” she says. “It’s my favorite day.” She clicks her toes against the side of the counter and then drops back to the floor. “Because of flute lessons.”

“I’m glad,” I tell her.

When she follows me back to the employee lounge, she loops her arm through mine. “You smell nice,” she says and leans her head against my arm.

“It’s my perfume,” I tell her. We pass Mara, who is taking out the trash, and I can feel her stare on the back of my neck.

“Do you have it with you?”

“In my bag.” I pull my arm free to open the door to the lounge and April rises on her toes and spins around me.

“Could I try some?”
I stare at the closed door of Eric Moe's office and gesture to my purse, which April recognizes on her own. "Just a little," I say. "Your mom might not like it."

On our way out that night, I say I've forgotten my keys and go back. Mara watches me while the other girls get into their cars.

"Want me to wait?" she asks.

"Nah," I say and she shakes her head.

Eric is sitting in front of the open safe, head down, counting the money. From where I stand I can see the freckled birthmark on the back of his neck.

"Hey."

He turns and smiles. "Well hello there."

"I forgot my keys."

He holds one arm out to the side like I'm going to walk over to him. But I lean in the doorway and cross my arms over my chest.

"Well you probably shouldn't walk out alone now," he says. "I'm not supposed to let you do that. For safety reasons." I nod.

"You never know what could happen out there," I say. "Rapists and murderers just waiting to attack in the bookstore parking lot."

His smile says that he is not sure if I am joking. He coughs and looks at the floor. When he starts to pass me in the doorway, I rotate my ankle and follow him with my eyes. He stops and puts one hand out against the doorframe. I stare.

"Let's do it on the safe," he whispers.
"It hurts my back," I say.

He sighs and walks past me into his office. Having the wife bring him dinner was stressful. I could tell because after she and April left, Eric Moe's forehead was sweating and the skin around his wrist looked puffy and raw. Eric is trying to quit smoking and lately he wears a rubber band around his wrist, which he snaps whenever he wants a cigarette. I tell him that they make hypnosis tapes for that sort of thing, but Eric Moe believes in conditioning and pain.

I stand and watch him straighten the papers on his desk. I point to April's school picture. "That's, like, three years old," I say. "Shouldn't you update?"

His arms go still and his head drops. "You always do this."

I smile. "She's doing really well with the flute," I say.

I see Eric's jaw tighten. "Stop," he says.

I take a step forward. "God, she looks like her mom."

When he grabs my shoulders and shakes me, I tell him, "Let's fuck in Fly Fishing."

On the floor, the back of my head bangs against the bookshelf and Eric laughs when I gasp. He forces his hand into my mouth and I feel the skin on my lips split as they strain and stretch and he pushes my skirt up over my waist. I let my teeth find the clink of his wedding band and I push at it with the flat of my tongue and bite into the flesh around it. When he pulls his hand back, I think he is going to hit me. But instead he pulls off the ring and throws it against the shelf.
It’s fast. Hard. He says words I can’t make out and moans when I dig my chin into the hollow of his shoulder. When we’re finished, I stand in the aisle touching my hand to my swollen mouth while Eric searches for his ring underneath the bookshelves.

“This is a mess,” he says and gestures to the books that fell when I hit my head against the shelf.

“I’m off the clock,” I tell him.

He doesn’t look at me. “Then go home. I’ll fix it myself.”

Mara says she has to find another job. “This place is killing me.”

We are shelving books in Addiction and Eating Disorders. “It’s not that bad,” I say.

“Do you know that my sister makes sixty thousand a year working for some cooking show?”

“Which show?” I ask.

“Some shitty little show in Florida. Florida! And she can’t even cook. She types memos or something.”

I hand Mara an AA book. “I don’t get why we keep the alcoholics and the bulimics together,” I say.

“I don’t get why we keep the tarot cards and the bibles together,” she answers. “Your problem is that you expect things to make sense.” Mara takes an armload of books from the cart and crams them onto a shelf in no particular order.

“We’ll never be able to find those,” I tell her.
"Like anyone cares," she says. "I hate this fucking place."

"It's not the kind of place you fall in love with."

I'm at the computer when Angry Guy says she needs to find a book. She doesn't know the title or author. "It was just on TV and I think the cover is red." I look at her to see if she is serious and she raises her eyebrows expectantly.

"Well," I say slowly. "That's lucky because we actually organize our books by color here."

When she asks to speak to my manager, I page Eric Moe over the intercom. He walks up smiling like a game show host and I nod towards the woman with my eyes.

Eric is all business. "I'm the manager ma'am." He keeps smiling. Extends his hand. "What can I do for you?"

She wants me fired and tells him so. I cross my arms. Wait to see.

Eric Moe's mouth tightens and he doesn't look at me. "Jillian is one of our best employees," he tells her. "I'm sure there has just been a misunderstanding." He steps behind the desk and the woman shakes her head. It is non-negotiable. If I keep my job, she will never shop here again.

This is the best solution I have heard so far.
Eric says that he is so sorry she had a negative experience. Just like that.

“Negative experience” and I feel my face begin to get hot. He says he’ll have a talk with me and offers her a gift certificate for fifty dollars. She accepts.

She looks at me and her mouth curves into a tight little smile. As Eric is filling out the gift certificate, he puts his foot over mine and presses it down onto my toes. He leaves it there while he apologizes again to the woman for her “negative experience” and I have the sudden urge to lean my head against his arm. But I don’t. When she is gone he touches my elbow and winks at me. “Don’t be a bitch to our customers.”

That night we do it in Crafts and Hobbies and when Eric Moe rips my blouse I tell him that his wife has the look of a woman who is about to walk.

“You’re pissed about that woman earlier,” he says.

“She makes more than you do. You might get alimony.”

“I have a boss too, you know. I tell some customer to fuck off and she would just go above my head.”

“Think how much easier it will be,” I say as he digs his fingers into my hair and pulls it hard in fistfuls, “when you only have to father on weekends and occasional holidays.”

He pushes me backwards with so much force that the shelf shakes and flower art books waterfall down on us as he pins me to the floor.

“She wanted me to fire you,” he whispers.

“So fire me.”

He works his mouth around my ear and I flinch, expecting him to bite.

“Blackmail,” he says. “Is that how you’ve kept your other jobs?”
“Other jobs?”

Afterwards, we stand in front of my car while Eric writes me a check for April’s flute lessons. He tears the check off and blows at the ink. “You’re a snake,” he says. “Drive carefully.”

Mara is using the phone to prank call the store. She holds her finger over her lips to silence me and when she speaks, her voice is thick and affected.

“Yes,” she says into the phone. “I’m looking for a book.” She says the author’s name and the title and then gives me the thumbs up sign. “I’m on hold,” she tells me.

We are in the stock room and Mara is spinning so that the phone cord winds around her body and her shirt balloons between the tight black lines.

The thick voice comes back when she starts to talk again. “I’m not positive that’s the one, hon,” she says. “Could you just read me the back of it?”

Of course, Mara is positive that’s the one since we spent the last fifteen minutes searching through Romance to find the book with the most graphic description printed on the back.

“How come none of them use the word ‘pussy’?” Mara asked.

“They’re romance, Mara, not porn.”

“Is there a difference anymore?”

Dirty-talker Jake is assigned to phones and before Mara called she made me walk by the front desk to ensure that Jake was surrounded by as many employees and customers as possible.
Mara covers the receiver with her hand and holds the phone to the side so that we can both listen to Jake.

"...But Randolph throbs with longing to make the chaste Muriel his own. Only his desire is stronger than her will. And in the thrust of one heaving summer, they defy her uncle and join their passion in the vineyards of her inheritance."

After she hangs up with Dirty-Talker Jake, Mara tells me that I ought to go look like I'm working. "If you slack too much and Eric doesn't say anything, people will put it together."

I dust in Classics until it is my turn to get the phones. The first call is a man who needs a book on restoring 1970s fiats. He says he saw it in the store three weeks ago.

"Someone might have bought it between then and now," I tell him.

"No one bought it," he says.

"I'll have to go look." Nothing in Automotives is ever in any kind of order.

"I'll wait," he says.

I have to get on my knees to search the shelves and I bump against men's legs as I run my finger along the spines of books. Two different men step on my hand while I am on the floor.

"Do you have to do this right now?" one asks.

It takes almost fifteen minutes, but I finally find it. It's skinny and bent at the corners, crammed between two motorcycle books.

"I have it in my hand," I tell the man when I pick up the phone.

"It took you long enough," he says.
“I’ll hold it for you.” I am searching through the drawers to find pen and paper so that I can write his name down.

“Don’t bother,” he says. “I’ll come in later tonight.”

I want to tell him that finding it once was a miracle. Finding it again would be a sheer impossible act.

“I can’t guarantee that it will be here if I don’t hold it for you,” I try.

“Why’s that?” His voice is dull, humorless.

“Someone might buy it,” I tell him.

“Listen Gidget, no one will buy it.”

I want to tell him that the book looks so interesting that I think I might buy it myself, but instead I try to think what Mara would do. After he hangs up, I take the book and reshelve it in Cooking.

After that I get two phone calls wanting to know when the next Harry Potter book will be released and one who wants to know what the soup of the day is at the restaurant next-door. Their line is busy.

“Some horny bitch made me read a romance novel to her over the phone,” Jake says when I hang up.

“Bummer,” I tell him.

“Everyone laughed at me.”

“With you,” I promise.

When I hear him, he’s already yelling. “I talked to some girl! She found it less than an hour ago!”
I’m sorry, sir. I can’t find it,” Mara says back. Her voice is small in comparison to his, thin and light. “Maybe someone bought it between then and now.”

He pounds his fist on the desk. “It’s the most obscure book in history,” he shouts. “Nobody fucking bought it! Look again.”

As I walk up to them, I can see Mara’s chin beginning to pucker, her eyes reddening around the rims.

“Some girl,” he says again. “Some girl with a watery little voice found it. Had it in her hand fifty minutes ago.”

“What’s the problem here?” I ask.

His head snaps up at my voice. “You,” he says. “I talked to you.” Customers around us have gone strangely still and are and staring over the tops of their open books.

“You told me on the phone that you had a book.”

“We’re very busy here, sir,” I say evenly. “I’ve talked to a lot of people on the phone.”

He flares his nostrils and I raise an eyebrow at him. “A book on fiats,” he hisses. “Less than an hour ago. Ring any bells?” I want to laugh and I glance sideways at Mara, whose face seems stuck in about-to-cry mode, not sure if her tears will do the trick.

“I remember.”

“Well she can’t find it” he points at Mara and instantly her lip begins to tremble.

“Where did you look?” I ask her.

“Automotives. I didn’t see it there.”

I look back at the man and shrug. “Someone must have purchased it.”

His face hardens and his frame squares. “No one purchased it,” he says.
Customers are beginning to exchange looks with one another. They think he’s a lunatic. Some angry person who makes scenes in public places. His pupils narrow and I stare at him. "We could order it for you," I say. "It would be here in five to seven business days."

He takes a step toward me and I can feel his breath on my face. "It’s here," he hisses. "I saw it here three weeks ago."

I keep smiling. "Maybe you should have purchased it then."

Mara and I stand shoulder to shoulder and he looks back and forth between us. "You’re idiots!" he says. "You’re both fucking idiots!"

Eric is walking up in a fast pace, his eyes darting between us and the customers watching. "What’s the problem?" he asks Mara, who has dropped back behind me.

I feel Eric Moe at my elbow, trying to move between us, but I take a step closer, sugar my voice, show him my teeth, and stare hard. "Now sir," I begin, slowly, like to a child. "I’m trying to help you." I talk louder, loud enough that everyone listening can hear. "But this is a public place and I am going to need to you lower voice and be a gentleman."

His lips are hard white lines when he grabs my neck. I hear people gasp. My eyes and tongue push forward and my eyelids go taught. My heartbeat is in my temples, my lips, the bridge of my nose and the light dims around his face. It isn’t until my head hits the ground that I hear the sound of Eric Moe’s fist, the wet noise it makes as it hits again and again and I feel Mara’s hands on my face.
In the back of a parked ambulance a man touches my neck with his fingers and
looks into my mouth and eyes with a flashlight. "You’re okay, honey," he says and starts
to bandage Eric’s hand.

I tell the police that it happened so fast. I tell them that I was just trying to help him.
Behind the policeman, I can see him sitting in the back of the police car, his head dropped
forward so that I can’t see his eyes. I tell them that all I did was ask him to lower his voice. Five
employees and thirteen customers tell the police it happened just that way. I had been perfectly
civil. Completely professional. He was out of control. Went crazy. Just like I said.

When the police talk to Eric, they take notes. “You really went off on him,” one
says.

“He was choking me,” I say and the policeman holds up his hand.

“Broke some teeth, I think. Was he still threatening the girl when you did that?
How many times did you hit him exactly?”

“I couldn’t breathe,” I say, but no one is listening.

Eric Moe and I stay late to fill out the nightly report. He is sitting at the desk and
I sit on the floor with my back against the office door. My neck feels thin and long and
my head rocks on top of it. The report is blank on the desk and Eric is smoking.

“I’ll lose my job,” he says. His eyes are swollen, he watches an empty space on
the wall.

“You hate your job,” I tell him and he ashes into a styrofoam cup.

“I hit him,” he says. “I could get sued. The whole company could get sued.”
My tongue is thick and dry. It pushes uselessly over my bottom teeth. I try to steady my head with my forearms.

"I hit him many times."

"And they say chivalry is dead."

"This isn’t funny, Jillian."

"I’m not laughing, Eric."

Eric stubs his cigarette out on a pad of post-its then blows the ash onto the carpeting. "My wife is going to leave me."

I stare up at the florescent lights, the water-stained ceiling. I can’t think of a single thing to say.

He blinks at me. "You look like shit," he says. He picks up a pen and taps it on the empty report. I extend my leg in front of me, but my foot doesn’t quite reach his and he looks down at the place where we almost touch. Tomorrow is Thursday and in the afternoon I will listen to April play scales on her flute. I will wear a turtleneck so that she doesn’t see the marks under my chin. If my eyes are still red, I will tell her I have allergies. Pollen, ragweed. I’ll tell her I have a cold. But now, right now, we sit like this, Eric and I, almost touching, and don’t say anything.

The next day, April rides her bike to my apartment after school. When I open the door she drops her backpack on the floor and stares at me.

"I heard my dad tell my mom what happened," she says.
I close the door behind her and she watches me. "Your eyes are really red," she tells me. "Have you been crying?"

"No," I say. "It happened last night."

"Show me your neck." Her face is strangely empty and I pull my hair back so that she can see.

She touches her fingers to the bruises beneath my chin and her hands feel cold.

"Does it hurt?"

"Kind of."

She pushes a little harder and I pull away.

"I don’t want to play the flute today."

"Okay." I am tired. I don’t really want her to play the flute either.

"Let’s watch TV instead."

I nod and walk to the refrigerator. "I have one Coke left," I tell her. "Do you want to split it?"

"I want my own." I turn to look at her, but she has her back to me, facing the blank TV screen. "Which channel is MTV?" she asks and picks up the remote.

"I thought you weren’t allowed to watch that," I tell her as I pour her Coke into a glass. She doesn’t turn to me, but holds the remote in front of her.

"Which one?"

I wait for a second and then say, "Thirty-two." She sits on my sofa and I hand her the coke. I feel strangely nervous around her. She’s too quiet. Too still. I sit down on the opposite end of the sofa. On TV there are men sweating and circling around gyrating
women in hot pink leather pants. She doesn’t say anything and neither do I. We just stay like that, quiet, for the longest time, until the hour is up and April goes home.
To begin with, they were Catholic. They weren’t weird Catholic; they ate meat on Fridays. But they were Catholic enough. They prayed to Mary, but did not worship her. Sometimes they would sneak candy or let the dog sleep inside, but they were mostly good. Once they stole an emery board from John Bee’s Drug Store. They sat next to each other in school, because they were both shy and because they were friends. They said, yes please, and no thank you, and didn’t take God’s name in vain. They went to Sunday school. They knew that they were born sinful and would die sinful, that it was a woman who released sin into the world, and another woman who redeemed them. Their names were Emily and Cheryl and they were eleven.

They knew that Adam Reekers gave Cherie Jacobson hickeys in the custodial closet during lunch hour because everyone knew that. But they did not know that years later, Cherie would accept Jesus Christ as her true lord and savior around the same time that they decided he had done about all he could for them and moved on to more interesting men like Lucas Frank and Max Freedman, who smoked marijuana and played in a band. Once during choir class, they watched Cherie Jacobson touch herself between her legs and say loudly to her friends that she was too sore to sit. That Adam Reekers was huge. They talked about this on the way home from the bus stop. Cherie had stringy hair. She wore lipstick and shirts with too big collars that hung off one shoulder. She was probably lying.

They were not allowed to watch MTV. This was what their parents said. Their parents, in fact, had signed a petition to ban MTV from their town. They did not dress
like Madonna or tease their hair. Instead, they stole a blank video tape from John Bee’s and went to Cheryl’s house after school because both of her parents worked. They would run from the bus stop and they would sit inches from the TV, remote posed, buzzing until Madonna appeared and then they would press record. There were interviews, commercials, videos. They did this from 3:30 until 4:55 at which point Emily would have to go home at a dead run. She was to be home by 5:00 every night and what she didn’t tell anyone, not even Cheryl, was that she got slapped once for every minute she was late. They hid the tape underneath Cheryl’s bed, between the mattress and the frame and swore that if they were caught, they would die before they said it had been Emily’s idea, which it had.

They sang. Emily was a soprano and Cheryl was alto. Sometimes at school assemblies, they would sing the National Anthem a cappella into a microphone while they stared at their feet. No one ever clapped afterwards, because that would be inappropriate for the National Anthem, which was to be a serious and pensive moment. Their teachers said they had very pretty voices and it was lucky that the school could depend on them to set an example for patriotism and pride. Their parents were friends in the way that adults are friends when they attend the same church and live in the same neighborhood; they waved when they passed each other on the street. But at home, Emily’s parents disapproved that Cheryl’s mother was divorced and remarried and Cheryl’s mother thought it archaic that Emily’s father still beat his children, and probably his wife too, which Cheryl’s mother never said in front of her. Sometimes Cheryl’s real father would call from the far away state he lived in. He would be drunk and call Cheryl by her mother’s name, say he had a gun to his head, that no one loved him. Cheryl would
say, I love you, I love you, I love you, until the words lost their meaning and she felt polluted with their emptiness. She would say this while her mother set the dinner table around her and told her to, just hang up, honey. He did this maybe twice a year, call and make Cheryl I-love-you all over him. He never pulled the trigger.

Because they shared their lunch, drank from the same milk carton, licked from the same popsicle, it was no surprise that they got strep throat together and missed the same four days of school. It was their shared absence which caused them to miss the sign up for Career Day and when they returned, all of the field trips were full, except the one to U-tech. The girls were all going to department stores to see fashion ordering and to get free perfume samples and most of the boys were going to the post office to learn the perks of a government job. But they had to go with six other boys, including Adam Reekers, to a square brick building where they would teach you how to do body work on cars if you didn’t want to go to college. They stood at the back of the group, staring at their shoes on the dirty concrete floor while the boys said, awesome and cool, and their English teacher Mr. Lee told them that there was good money in auto repair.

Mr. Lee had volunteered to take the U-tech bunch because he was a young teacher and thought himself most equipped to handle the behavior problem boys. He said he understood where they were coming from, had been a troubled boy himself. He could handle it. Mr. Lee was hip and progressive. He tried to make English exciting. He knew it could be tedious for young people, and because of this, when the boys read *Call of the Wild*, he made the girls read *Mrs. Mike*, which would surly interest them more. He had proposed to his wife over the loud speakers at a baseball game and had invited the entire
sixth grade class to the wedding. That was the kind of teacher he was. He thought U-tech might be fun.

Emily and Cheryl didn’t complain, mostly because they didn’t care, but partly because it would have been rude. And they were supposed to eat lunch at Arby’s with the rest of their class afterwards, so they figured the whole ordeal wasn’t that bad and was definitely worth the six missed days from school. But Adam Reekers said, bullshit, three times at the U-tech and because of that, their whole group got sent home early and missed the fast food lunch.

They rode in a public school van which looked like a block of cheddar cheese and Emily and Cheryl sat in back. On the way home they thumb wrestled and sang “Like a Virgin,” quietly, harmonizing in the places they could. They didn’t give much thought to singing this particular song. Of course they knew what a virgin was, being Catholic. But their knowledge of sex was limited to Cherie Jacobson and Adam Reekers in the custodial closet and to their sex education class at school in which they received a gift bag with a free maxi pad and a bag of Doritos and watched a cartoon hosted by the Broadway cast of Annie. They knew where their fallopian tubes were and that they had been born with all the eggs they would ever have. They knew to be careful in hot tubs. Since the song did not mention hot tubs, fallopian tubes, or maxi pads, the fact that it had any sexual implications whatsoever completely escaped them.

Mr. Lee, who was not quite as hip as he thought he was, didn’t realize what they were singing until they reached the chorus, at which point he swerved the van to the side of the road, jumped out, ran around and slammed the sliding door open. The whole van stared at him in confusion. He screamed at Emily and Cheryl, pointed his finger at them
and told them they were filthy, disgusting. Yelled that if he ever heard such garbage out of their mouths again, he would call their parents. He called them brats and said that if he was their father, boy oh boy. He threatened to make them walk the rest of the way.

The boys turned in their seats, stared. And they surprised everyone, even themselves, by not crying. Adam Reekers, who did not even know their names, knew only that they were the kind of girls Cherie wasn’t friends with, watched their mouths curl up into nasty smiles and said approvingly, god damn, girls. God damn.

After school, they ran to Cheryl’s from the bus stop, their hearts thumping violently in their chest cavities by the time they reached her front door. They didn’t put their tape in or watch MTV. Instead they ran through the house like wild animals, singing “Like a Virgin” at the top of their lungs. They screamed the words and slammed their bodies into the walls and against the furniture. They knocked books off the shelves and pulled clothes out of the closets. They broke a vase and three dishes and jumped on Cheryl’s parents’ bed so hard that it broke in two places and collapsed on the ground. They pulled at their hair and laughed while they screamed the words, their voices growing thick and coarse and they spun around violently in the living room, the backs of their hands thwacking against walls, against chair backs, against each other until they fell to the floor and lay side by side, panting, sweating, their limbs twitching on the carpet.

Emily took the long way home afterwards, newly aware of the pieces of her body which were strong enough to fight her father: her knees, elbows, fingernails, teeth. The small, powerful parts of herself which she had never thought much about until she had made the dishes shatter, the bed break. Until she had felt them come alive, throbbing and
rock-ribbed on Cheryl’s carpeting. She wouldn’t win. But for the first time ever, she would fight.

They would grow up and be mostly normal. Emily would marry young and divorce in the same year. She would have a brief affair with heroin after her father died. Cheryl would drop out of college and go through a period where she would sleep with men twice her age and call it therapy. But in the end, they would turn out about as all right as people turn out. They wouldn’t lie excessively or set fire to things. Neither would ever be arrested. They wouldn’t partake in self-mutilation or join cults. They would go to school the next day and sit quietly in the back row, memorizing spelling words and fractions.

Cheryl’s mother came home from work exhausted, as she always did, from a long day and from the energy it was taking her to keep up pretty appearances, things being not quite as good with Cheryl’s stepfather as people, including Cheryl, thought. When she saw her house torn from end to end, she didn’t yell, just sat down on the steps and cried into her silk scarf. Cheryl stood at the top of the stairs deadpan, arms at her sides, shirt untucked, ponytail askew and said over and over again: the dog did it.
Where I come from is not important. You might not ever ask, and I will never tell. But if you look backwards through your life, through the tangles of adolescence, the shadows of your childhood, through the clumsy missteps of your first love and the vows and secrets of your last, you will see that I have always been there. I am Simone, or Abigail, Mary or Michelle. I am your classmate, your coworker, your next door neighbor. I have held your hand in crises, have talked you through the terror moments of your bad decisions and laughed with you after they passed. I have seen you cry. I have seen you bleed. I have seen you shatter and rebuild and shatter again. I have seen all the pieces of your life you never meant to be seen. I am your very best friend.

When we meet, you notice my isolation. You think I am distinct, guarded, solitary. You think I’m interesting. You don’t understand a woman who doesn’t have friends. You are intrigued by me or sorry for me or confused by me. You always smile when you see me and your eyes linger a little too long until I finally speak to you. I like your shoes, your sweater, the way you’re wearing your hair today. When I ask about your weekend, I really want to know. I’d like to have coffee sometime, spend time with you. I want to get to know you better.

We talk about books and movies, about places we’ve lived and men we’ve dated. I am quiet, a good listener. I nod knowingly and make little noises in my throat when you talk. I want to know everything about you and I watch while you speak. I catch the weaknesses in your voice, the moments your eyes shift and your lips tense. I have studied the map of your face, every whisper of every expression, every thought you have.
Your nostrils flare when you’re nervous. When you doubt yourself, your eyebrows tilt inward. When you’re caught off-guard, you laugh with your mouth open and when you’re embarrassed you smile into your shoulder.

You talk into the back of your hand when you tell me about your mother. She is lonely. She calls you three times and cries from missing you so much. She says that you are all she has in the whole world. You are all she loves. Why do you have to live so far away? When can you come visit? When can you move closer? Your mother is not sick, but she says that one of these days she will die. She will die alone and then how will you feel? Will you let her die with strangers? How can you not want to be with her, now, while she’s still alive? But you are busy. You have a job, a husband, a life. You can’t just fly across the country every time your mother cries, every time she feels alone. You don’t know what the answer is. You don’t know what to do.

“You can’t allow other people to have so much control over you,” I say. “You’re not in charge of the world.” You have to learn to put yourself first. You have to be able to trust other people to take care of themselves. People take too much from you. They use you. Don’t you want to be independent? Don’t you want to be strong?

I let you talk about your father, how he calls and bellows at you at any hour, five in the morning, midnight, noon. He calls when he’s drunk and sometimes forgets who you are, calls you by your mother’s name, or by a woman’s name you do not know. He gets angry because you do not care enough about him. He says you don’t give enough, don’t love enough. When you try to reason with him, he cuts you off. He will never speak to you again. You are out of his will, out of his life, out of his head. He doesn’t
have a daughter. You are dead to him. He hangs up on you and won’t answer when you try to call him back.

I say the words you don’t allow yourself to say: jackass, bastard, lunatic. It is a testament to your gentle spirit, your forgiving nature, that you defend him. “He’s crazy,” I tell you. “Why do you keep crazy people in your life?” You deserve better. No one would blame you for cleaning up the space around you, for evicting such toxicity from your life. Don’t you do enough? Don’t you work hard? Don’t you take care of all the people around you? Why do you put up with this? Why do you let people hurt you again, and again, and again?

You close your eyes and dip your chin against the rim of your coffee cup. “He’s my father.”

You work too hard. You give too much. And you will be old before your time if you don’t learn to put yourself first once in a while. Do you want wrinkles? Do you want eye strain and neck pain and sallow skin? Because that’s the way you’re heading if you don’t watch out. You have to learn to take time. Call in sick. Go on vacation. If you don’t spoil yourself, who will?

We play hooky together. You fake a flu and promise to come into work over the weekend to catch up. We go to the movies, see the one your husband wouldn’t take you to. We eat ice-cream and buy shoes you say you can’t afford. “Splurge,” I tell you. “Once in a while won’t kill you.” You’ve earned a day off. Let someone else do the work for a change. Get two pairs of shoes if you want them. Put them on plastic. Get a manicure. Get a facial. Get a shirt that doesn’t go with anything and a dress you know you’ll never wear.
I love to hear about your other friends, the ones who don't know me and the ones who don't like me. The ones who look at me uneasily, smile stiffly when I walk into a room. You are annoyed with them, frustrated. You don't always trust their motives. You're worn out by the effort it takes to be with them, are sick of feigning interest in their streams of never-ending problems. You're tired of pretending to like their husbands: the alcoholic, the liar, the loser, the asshole. Every time you answer the phone, someone is crying, someone is raging, someone is begging you to solve their problems.

"I'm just not happy," they say.

"I'm so tired."

"I feel ugly."

"I've gained weight."

"When do things get easy?"

"He said he loved me."

How can they expect you to drop everything, to coo and cluck and stroke their fragile little egos? You care about them, but Jesus Christ! How can they expect you to care all the time?

You shouldn't feel guilty telling me these things. You have to vent. You have to talk to someone. It's not betrayal. I promise. You can trust me. Unlike your other friends, your needy friends, your tell-me-what-to-do-help-me-fix-my-life-I'm-so-unhappy friends, I am there for you. When you confront your mother, I send you flowers. When you hang up on your father, I bring you cheesecake at work. You have never had such a caring friend.
I don’t have many people in my life. But I love you. I have let you get close to me. I have let you see the good in me. Your other friends are suspicious, but you’re sorry they don’t know me the way you do. They can’t see my sweetness, my humor, my thoughtfulness. They don’t know the things you know. You are insightful. You can sense that I’ve been wounded or misused, can sense that I have a problem with trust. But you are patient with me. You see me the way I really am. You are special.

There are things that seem too dangerous to talk about. Things that are better left unsaid, left alone. But who else can you talk to? Your husband, there’s something different lately, something you can’t explain. Something you’re afraid to name. He is strange. Distant. When you look at him now, you can’t remember the person you were when you married him. You live like comfortable strangers, like characters in a play. You’re afraid. You don’t remember how to talk to him. You don’t remember how to touch him. But it isn’t as terrible as you think. Everyone has felt the way you do. People change, after all. People grow apart. And you don’t want to spend a life pretending, do you? Why do you keep trying when he doesn’t try at all? How much is it all worth to you?

“He’s my husband.”

Last week, you came home from work and found him sitting naked in an empty bathtub, crying into his knees. You stood in the doorway and stared because there was nothing you could think to say. Maybe this has been coming. Maybe this is normal. And maybe you aren’t as afraid as you ought to be. You have started sifting through his wallet when he’s not in the room, looking for phone numbers you don’t recognize or
receipts you can’t explain. When you do the laundry now, you smell the collars of his shirts because, you say, a woman can always smell another woman.

I touch your hair when you tell me this. “It’s all right,” I say. “Your feelings are just your feelings. You don’t need to validate them.” Cry if you need to cry. It’s all right to feel out of control. It’s all right to feel crazy. And it won’t last forever. Sooner or later, your vision will clear. The answer will present itself. Sooner or later, something is going to give.

In grade school, you confessed to me when you didn’t do your homework. You whispered through your fingers, through my hair. You’d never forgotten before. You were afraid to be noticed, to be failed, to be hated. And I nodded and held your hand. I thought I would defend you. I wanted to protect you. But when our teacher moved between the aisles to collect our papers, something caught in my chest, something tight and hot. It swelled inside my lungs and throat until there was no room left for you inside me. All you could do was stare stupidly when I smiled and asked, “Where’s your assignment?” in front of our teacher.

In high school, I asked your secret crush, your Rick or Matt or Jeffery, to the winter dance and shrugged at you. “You weren’t going to ask him. Why should he sit alone all night?” I told you not to be so weepy, so mopey, so sensitive. “Have a sense of humor,” I told you. “Have a little perspective.”

Once you see who I am, you say that nothing I do will surprise you. You make excuses for me: difficult childhood, low self-esteem, unbalanced hormones. You think I might be schizophrenic, bipolar at the very least. Damaged. It seems so obvious and you wonder how you didn’t see it before.
But I am in your world now. I drink with your friends and play tennis with your husband. When I see you out, I kiss your cheek and call you “love,” “pet,” “darling.” I ask about your mother and about your work. But I’ve stopped smiling when you walk into a room. I don’t always meet your eye when you pass. I am often too preoccupied to notice you at all. You tell yourself that I am a blessing in disguise. A litmus test. “A woman like that,” you want to tell your friends. You want to tell them everything. But when you speak of me, you have to be kind. You have told me too much. You can’t afford to make me an enemy.

Instead, you say that I am troubled, unhappy, confused. I must have had terrible things happen in my past. But here is the truth: I didn’t exist before I met you. You cannot judge. You cannot condemn, cannot hate. But you can be afraid. You know what I can do because you have given me the power to do it, given me all the power I need. But you will never hate me. Love, pet, darling, you can never hate me. Love. Pet. Darling. You made me.

Everything you have, I can take. Everything you want, I can get first. I will watch what you do and I will do it better. I have a soft voice and deep eyes. I know how to look weak, how to look hurt, how to look harmless. You cannot turn on me. You cannot send me out. And you cannot get close. I will forget to return your calls. I will stop finding time to have coffee, to go shopping, to see movies. I will sleep with your husband or not sleep with him. You will never know.

But you’re scrappier than you seem. You won’t lay down and die, and frankly, I would be terribly disappointed if you did. The fact is that eventually I will decide that your life doesn’t fit me any better than any of the others I have tried on. I know your
friends now. Many of them are more interesting than you are. They have stranger
frailties, quirkier relationships, uglier secrets. You can’t warn them against me, and after
trying once or twice, you give up. You figure that you’re not responsible for saving your
friends. After all, no one tried all that hard to save you. And they’ll learn. They’ll figure
it out. And eventually, I will move out of your sphere all together. And then you will all
be free to talk, to recreate our interactions and volley stories back and forth with your
friends. “But did I tell you what she did to me?”

You will say that after everything, I was surprisingly ineffectual. You will think
of me less and less, forget what I looked like, forget the things you told me. I will fade
away piece by piece until I only occupy a fragment of your life: a picture in a yearbook,
a certain table at a certain coffee shop, a scratch between your college roommate and
your husband’s godfather on a Christmas card list. Your friends, your family, your
problems, your world, they will all belong to you again. And maybe in time, you will
forget that there were moments when you wanted me to have them. You will forget the
moments when you wanted to give it all away. But you’re still young, a whole life in
front of you. Those moments will come again. You will weaken. You will need. And I
will want to help you. I will want to save you. Until then, I will wait. I will blink and
breathe and swallow. Outside your world, I will keep waiting. I will keep watching. I
will keep wanting, and wanting, and wanting.