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Moonflowers And Other Stories

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“MOONFLOWERS” AND OTHER STORIES

by

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ABSTRACT

"Moonflowers" and Other Stories is a collection of short stories focusing on complex relationships among characters who are estranged from their families and their pasts; some seek to reestablish connections, while others decide to simply walk away. All of the stories are set in Florida. In "Stained Glass," Abby returns home after seventeen years to help care for the father who disowned her. In "Blue Green Red," Melaney is compelled to find her brother after years of lying about his existence. Selina, the protagonist of "Fatty Walsh" is so embarrassed by her family she will not tell her friend Alucia where she lives, although she must ultimately choose between her younger brother and her friendship with Alucia. All of the stories in this thesis find characters desiring to establish or restore relationships despite past mistakes and grievances, evidence of their innate longing for human connection.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FROM JOHN GRISHAM TO ALICE MUNRO

Reading has always played a significant role in my life and in my writing life in particular. As a child, I read voraciously, and I believe that it was my love of reading that first inspired me to write. Growing up, I read a variety of authors, but I tended to focus on legal thrillers and suspense novels by authors such as John Grisham and Mary Higgins Clark. My selections molded my writing style: my early stories were marked by sensational plots, with very little attention paid to character development or concrete description. My taste in literature has changed notably over the years, from thrillers and suspense novels to literary novels and short fiction by authors such as Margaret Atwood, Stuart Dybek, and Alice Munro. One thing that has not changed, however, is the way other writers and works of literature influence my own writing. Many contemporary authors have shaped my current writing style, teaching me the power of carefully selected details and demonstrating the ability of complex, flawed characters struggling with everyday issues to connect with and move readers.

When I began work on my thesis, I discovered that I naturally gravitated toward certain subjects. As a result, many of the stories in my thesis share similar themes: loneliness and connectedness, or characters' desires to connect or reconnect with people from their pasts. Relationships, particularly familial relationships, are complex; in several stories, characters must decide whether they will attempt to mend a relationship or whether they will simply walk away. "Eighty-Six," "Stained Glass," "Blue Green Red," and "Fatty Walsh" all portray protagonists who are faced with this decision.

Complex family relationships are common subjects in the works of Edna O'Brien, William Trevor, and Andre Dubus as well. The dramatic weight of O'Brien's story, "Storm," is found in the tension between a mother and her son, a tension that is ultimately ignored. Trevor's story "Coffee with Oliver" and "A Father's Story" by Dubus both feature fathers who long to reconnect with estranged children. These stories served as models for "Eighty-Six"; the fathers in all three stories struggle with the same basic conflict.

In addition to complex family relationships, many of my stories include women who feel trapped, either by society, family, or their own choices, in a world in which they have little control over their lives. Margaret Atwood's works often share a similar theme; this is especially apparent in her novel *The Edible Woman*. In *The Edible Woman*, the protagonist is a woman who, in her attempts to be agreeable and avoid conflict, realizes that she is playing a role and will lose herself if she does not make a choice to stop trying to conform to society's expectations of her. Equally important in terms of theme was Alice Hoffman's work. *Illumination Night* portrays a mother whose panic attacks take her beyond figurative entrapment; she literally becomes unable to leave the house. Two of the stories in my thesis, "Cannon Beach" and "Conversations in Room 201," feature female protagonists who feel trapped and face similar dilemmas.

Flannery O'Connor and F. Scott Fitzgerald also have had considerable influence on the content of my work, particularly in terms of theme. O'Connor's work often deals with the theme of "grace," with characters seeking to alleviate guilt for what they feel are "sins." "The Lame Shall Enter First" is a prime example. The protagonist, Sheppard, realizes at the end of the story that he has neglected his son, Norton, and with the intent

of "redeeming" himself, Sheppard rushes upstairs to promise Norton "he would never fail him again" (O'Connor 190). Upon arriving in the attic, Sheppard learns he is too late; he will never be able to mend the relationship with his son. Fitzgerald's story "Babylon Revisited" features a father who attempts to regain custody of his daughter, the symbolically named Honoria. Charlie wishes to redeem himself and reconnect with his daughter in the same way that Nelson seeks redemption through reconciling with Jillian in "Eighty-Six." "Stained Glass" and "Espiritu Santo" also have protagonists who are haunted by previous actions and desire in some way to alleviate the guilt they feel, even if the actions were not their fault, even if they do not admit that they feel guilt.

Two of my favorite authors, whose work I go back to again and again, are Alice Munro and Stuart Dybek; their work has influenced the way that I structure my own short stories. Munro's work, in particular, deals with connections between the past and the present. Her short stories often do not have a traditional linear structure; the present action alone is not enough to convey depth of conflict or characters. Her stories make use of memory, with frequent shifts between the past and the present--a characteristic that I have tried to emulate.

I believe that this nonlinear structure is most readily apparent in "Blue Green Read," "Eighty-Six," and "Cannon Beach," all stories in which the present action would be thin and possibly meaningless without information concerning the past. In "Blue Green Red," for example, Melaney's motivation to return to her mother's house and her reluctance to share that information with her husband would be hard to determine without learning about her family life before she left for college, especially her brother Damien's illness. In "Eighty-Six," the reader may not be able to understand why Nelson has

suddenly decided to try and establish a relationship with his daughter if the reader was not connected, through Nelson's memories, to Nelson's strained and almost non-existent relationship with his recently deceased father.

Stuart Dybek's work also deals with connections between the past and the present, although some of his works are more experimental and structured through short, interrelated vignettes. "Nighthawks" and "Hot Ice," both from his collection *The Coast of Chicago*, are structured this way. The organization of these stories closely relates to the theme of connectedness; the form not only has function, but the stories could probably not be structured any other way without losing some of their meaning. "Orange Blossoms" was originally modeled after Dybek's "Nighthawks," although the final form is more similar to "Hot Ice." "Orange Blossoms" is modular in structure; it is composed of sections that shift between points of view. Like "Nighthawks," "Orange Blossoms" uses recurring images to link the different sections: different images of oranges recur, as well as images of various biting insects such as ants and mosquitoes. Another similarity that my work shares with Dybek's is the use of imagery and setting to convey meaning and develop characters. Most of Dybek's stories take place in Chicago, and the setting plays such a significant role and is described so vividly that it feels as if the stories could never take place anywhere else.

O'Connor is another writer whose work I have tried to emulate in terms of setting and imagery. In *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor writes about how important it is to not just drop the name of a city, but to bring that city to life through specific details. She does this in her own work with regards to the south. Her stories are distinctly southern; she captures life in the region through vivid and purposeful description of setting and

dialogue. Her stories realistically depict the life of people living in the south, but although her stories are realistic, they often describe extraordinary experiences or characters. In her fiction, characters are faced with situations that are not necessarily unbelievable, but which are not common enough to be referred to as "everyday"; these situations force her characters to "act on a trust beyond themselves--whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not" (42). O'Connor refers to these works as "grotesque": "Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected" (40). I would not say that my fiction shares all the same qualities that O'Connor states make her work "grotesque", but I believe that certain stories in my thesis do share some elements of the grotesque found in O'Connor's work. The father in "Stained Glass," for example, is extreme in his hatefulness and distorted views, and yet he is realistic enough to make a believable, if unsympathetic character. Abby, the protagonist, has every reason to dislike her father, and yet she finds herself compelled to return and help when her mother informs her of her father's illness.

The selections of poetry on my reading list have also had an impact on imagery in my writing. Although I primarily write fiction, I enjoy reading and writing poetry as well. I believe that poetry not only forces writers to be selective about word choice, but teaches writers to listen to the sound of the words on the page. Reading poetry can help fiction writers better hear and create musicality in their prose, as I hope it has done to a degree in my own work.

All in all, I have learned a great deal from the selections on my reading list, but there are some writers to whom I owe particular gratitude for helping shape my prose style as well as the content and structure of my work. No matter what I'm reading, I have

discovered it is the story that creates a realistic world and vivid, compelling characters that holds me captive and doesn't let me go, even long after I have finished reading. These stories stay with me and inspire me to keep writing in hopes that I can create an equally realistic world and equally compelling characters. I hope that, in the same way that the characters from the readings on my list have stayed with me, the characters in my stories will stay with readers in the future.

STAINED GLASS

On the day of the protest, I realized who my father really was. I left home that night and didn't speak to him again until I was thirty-five. By that time, he wasn't himself anymore anyway, and I came home only because of the desperation I heard in my mother's quivering voice.

"I done everything I can," she said when she called me. "But it's like he don't know me, like he ain't even there."

My father was nearly seventy-five at that time. The entire drive down Highway 17, past the familiar fields of yellow grass and saw palmetto, past leaning, rusted buildings where men with no shirts sat outside and smoked, past vegetables stands that advertised fresh watermelons and hot boiled peanuts, I thought about the last time I had seen my father, about the way the cold rain dripped from his flattened hair and the way he refused to look at me before I stepped out of the car. It was then I knew that there was no going back, and that's when I walked home, jumping over ditches filled with rushing black water and carefully climbing through barbed wire fences. I walked home, threw a handful of t-shirts and a couple of pairs of jeans in my backpack, and left. I moved around for a couple of months until college started, staying with different friends from school. To my knowledge, my father never tried to find me.

I don't really remember much about my father from my childhood, but I remember I wanted him to like me. He traveled a lot with the church and was gone for weeks at a time. He'd leave with his faded black suitcase sagging from the weight of his plaid shirts and the sweat-stained bandanas he liked to tie around his forehead to keep his frizzy curls out of his eyes, smelling like soap and the cinnamon gum he was invariably chewing as he leaned down to kiss the top of my head. Every time he left, he made me promise that I would be a good girl and help my mother with the chores. He kept his hand on the back of my neck and stared down at me with those gray eyes until I said yes, of course I would. Then he left, and I kneeled on the wooden rocking chair by the window and pressed my face to the glass until the old blue van disappeared behind the line of oak trees.

True to my word, I always helped my mother with the chores. By the time I was eight, we had a routine: I cooked dinner and my mother did the laundry. It wasn't that I didn't know how to do the laundry or even that I hated doing it; I was just scared of the room where the washing machine was. It was separate from the rest of the house. Half of the door had rotted away and wouldn't shut right. The washing machine was nestled in the back next to a rusted refrigerator where my mother kept the ice cream and a half-empty box of popsicles. The old sink in the corner dripped and formed a slimy green puddle on the cracked concrete floor underneath. Red and yellow banana spiders always seemed to be stretching their striped legs on webs that hung from the warped ceiling, and wasps flew around, their long, wispy legs trailing as they hummed by my head.

When it was just the two of us, my mother hauled the bag full of laundry to the room and I dragged the stool from beneath the kitchen counter so I could reach the

stovetop. I fixed soup, stirring and stirring until it bubbled and splattered onto the porcelain, or spaghetti, breaking the stiff, uncooked noodles just like my mother had shown me, being careful to stir so that the white foam that bubbled and rose as the noodles cooked wouldn't spill over the pot.

The only time I had to go into the laundry room was when my father was home. My mother was always busy cooking my father's favorite meals, things I couldn't cook, things like country fried steak or fried green tomatoes. The first time I can remember my father coming home from a trip, I stood in the kitchen, curling my toes on the sticky linoleum, quietly begging my mother to let me cook. I wanted to see my father smile when he saw the dinner and know that I was the reason he was smiling.

"Honey, why don't you wash his shirts instead?" my mother said, smiling and pointing to the suitcase that leaned against the kitchen door.

"But," I said. My father was sitting in the living room, drinking a glass of watered-down milk. He turned toward me when I spoke, but the room was so dark I couldn't tell if he was looking at me or at the television. I lowered my voice just in case. "But, the wasps."

"Abby," my mother began, but she was cut off when my father stood up. He walked into the kitchen and put his hand on the back of my neck. He didn't squeeze hard, but I could feel the pulse in his fingertips.

"Are you back-talking your mother?" he wanted to know. I shook my head.

After that, whenever he came home, I dragged his suitcase out to the laundry room and stuffed his wadded up, sweat-stained plaid shirts into the rusty washer. I sat outside until they were done, poking with a twig at the fire ants that trailed the broken

brick walkway, my stomach knotted at the thought of having to go back into the damp, dark room with the buzzing wasps and banana spiders.

When my father traveled and my mother had to work, I was sent to the daycare at our church. It had little carpet mats we got to sit on when we watched movies, and a full play kitchen, complete with swinging doors and different colored plates to put the plastic food on.

That's where I met Lana. I met her back before her parents divorced, before her father's friend moved in with them. We liked to play house. I was always the mother, and Lana was the father because she was taller and could make her voice deep.

We liked to mimic our own parents or the parents we saw on television shows. I cooked, and Lana kissed my cheek when she came home from work. Sometimes we had arguments and Lana threw the plastic food at me.

We even had a baby, a bald doll with holes in the hands where the rubber was tearing. It only had one outfit, blue overalls, so we decided it had to be a boy and play with the Tonka trucks the younger children grew bored with. We named him Tyler.

Playing house was our favorite activity, but we had to stop when Mrs. Sommerson found out what we were doing.

"Families can't have two mothers," she said. She pointed at Tyler, who was cradled in Lana's arms.

"Oh, no, Lana's the father," I tried to explain. "She can make her voice real deep."

Mrs. Sommerson reached out and took Tyler before either of us could protest. She shook her head. “Can’t you pretend to be sisters?”

Sometimes, after daycare, Lana came over to my house and we played baseball with the boys next door. The boys had a huge pond in their backyard, so they always headed over to my yard, which had three small oak trees that formed a lopsided triangle and served as bases. My mother hated it when we played back there because when I came home my feet were dusty black and covered in tiny green stickers.

“What’s wrong with your shoes?” she asked me one day.

“Nothing,” I said. “I just can’t run as fast with them on. I’m fast as the boys without them.”

My mother pulled me over to the outside faucet and scrubbed my feet with an old brush until they glowed pink.

“Maybe boys is supposed to run faster than girls,” she said.

When my father was home, we didn’t play baseball in the backyard, and after Lana’s parents divorced, I wasn’t allowed to go over to her house. For a while, Lana was allowed to come over and we could play horses or watch cartoons. One day, though, when I was nine, my father was in the den talking to someone from church, and my mother found Lana and me lying down next to each other on the couch. I didn’t think anything of it; the couch was the only comfortable piece of furniture in the living room, and it was cold, so we were wrapped in the musty old quilt my mother kept folded on the end of the couch. My mother, who was always quiet, always soft spoken, reached out and grabbed the quilt, yanking hard enough that I heard the thin material rip.

"Abigail," she said. "Abigail." She kept saying my name over and over. "Get up. Before your father sees you."

I sat frozen, too scared to ask her why. At that moment, my father walked up the steps from the den. His dark face was silhouetted against the hall light. He stopped when he saw Lana and me on the couch, and my mother began to cry.

The year I turned ten I got a glimpse into my father's life, although I was too young to really understand what I saw and heard.

That spring was when I started going to adult church. I hadn't even thought about it until my father mentioned it one Sunday morning as we were sitting around the table. He was sipping coffee and milk and reading the paper. He never looked up, just said "Abigail, you'll be going to church with your mother and me today."

Up until then, I had been going to children's church, which was in a small building behind the main sanctuary. I hadn't even realized that I was one of the oldest kids still going. I was nervous about going to adult church; I had heard the things the older kids said about the preacher, about how he yelled and called people names. Not people in the congregation, other people. Names that teachers in school said were bad names, names you should never call anyone.

I looked at my mother because I wanted to see what she thought. She was staring at my father, her lips pale and pinched, but she didn't say anything. Not then, anyway. Later, as she and my father were getting ready, I heard their voices, short and clipped, muffled behind the closed bedroom door.

"I don't want her to come with us," my mother said. "God, Rick, she's only ten."

"Too old already," my father said. "Who knows what she's been learning in school? We need to make sure she hears the truth before those teachers in school start twisting things around, confusing her."

And so it started. I went to adult church. It wasn't as bad as I expected. Everyone came in, got a bulletin, sat on the scratchy red cushion pews, sang hymns. The services were early, and the hot morning sun beat through the tall stained glass windows and made distorted prisms quiver on the floor. The preacher—he did like to yell, liked to talk about the same things, about the church's purpose. He talked about some guy named Calvin and pre-destination and being chosen. He talked about how America was doomed and why and how it was the congregation's job to let people know. At first, I was inspired; he seemed so passionate, so confident, and people would clap and cheer. It made me feel like I was part of something big.

That August, at the beginning of my fourth-grade year, my father came with me to Open House. I was excited; he'd never been able to come with me before because he was always away. He said he wanted to meet my teacher and make sure she was going to teach me right. He laughed when he said this, a deep, guttural laugh.

Open House was crowded, but I knew my way around the school and led my father straight to my new classroom. Lana was already there with her father and her father's friend. I smiled and went right over to her.

Lana's father smiled at me as I walked up, and his friend said it was good to see me again. They both looked so nice: their cheeks were smooth, their hair combed back and gleaming like it was still wet, and they smelled good, like the samples of cologne that were handed out at the mall.

“Where is your father?” Lana’s father asked.

I turned and saw him speaking to the teacher. I was suddenly aware of how he looked compared to Lana’s father: he was wearing his usual wrinkled plaid shirt, his peppery hair loose around his grizzled face, and he smelled like gas because he’d stopped to fill up the car on the way there and had dripped gas onto his pants.

“He’s busy,” I said, hoping they would leave before my father was finished speaking with the teacher.

Unfortunately, he finished a few minutes later. I forced myself to smile and introduced him to Lana’s father and her father’s friend. They both smiled and offered their hands. My father just stared at them, his face set like it was when he was listening to the pastor yelling in church. He reached down and grabbed my hand so hard I thought it was going to break. I tried to tell him he was hurting me, but he just turned around and headed towards the door, pulling me after him.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Jenkins,” he said to the teacher as we passed her. “But I’ll be withdrawing my daughter from your class."

Mrs. Jenkins pursed her lips. “Sir, it doesn’t work like that. You can’t just remove her from the class.”

“Watch me.”

He didn’t yell or even raise his voice, but the dark tone of my father’s voice made me shiver. I struggled to keep up with him as we headed toward the parking lot. I tripped once and fell to my knees, scraping my skin on the stained concrete. My father pulled me up and kept walking without brushing off my burning knees. The veins on his temples throbbed and his ears burned bright red.

"I'm sorry, Abby," he said. "But you understand. Right?"

I didn't understand, but I felt like I should, so I nodded. The afternoon was muggy, and my bangs were damp from sweat. They kept getting in my eyes, the salt burning, stinging.

I still saw Lana after that, in the hallways at school, on the playground, in the crowded lunchroom. We tried to play together a couple of times. We played freeze tag during recess once, but I got stung by a wasp and had to go to the office so the nurse could put nicotine and a band-aid on it. Another time we tried playing kickball during PE on the dirt lot behind the portables, but Lana had just gotten new white tennis shoes with sparkly pink laces and she didn't want to get them dirty.

Just before winter break my last year in high school, our church decided to replace the storytelling stained glass windows with plain purple windows. I was so disappointed. I liked to study the stained glass windows on Sunday mornings when the preacher's yelling became too much. The windows were tall and arched and showed different scenes from the Bible: Adam and Even in the garden, their nakedness carefully concealed by strategically placed palm trees; the angel Gabriel telling Mary she would bear God's son; Jesus hanging from the cross. I liked the smile on Jesus' face in the window depicting his resurrection. His hands stretched toward me, so welcoming. The Jesus in the stained glass window didn't seem at all like the Jesus our preacher always talked about.

I was at church, dismayed at how dark the new windows made the sanctuary, the night I first heard rumors about the new club starting at Bluff Hill High. The club was called GSA. It stood for Gay-Straight Alliance, someone told me.

I'd seen an article about it in the newspaper, but didn't think much about it until they announced in church that they would be holding several protests outside of the school that week. I had never been to a protest before because they were usually held out of town, even out of state, which was why my father traveled so often. But as soon as they made the announcement in church, I knew I would be going.

Tuesday night, the night before the first protest, I was at Youth Bible Study. By the time Bible Study started the sky was already a deep blue-black; the only light piercing the somber darkness was the feeble yellow light of the streetlights and the flickering light coming from the floodlights on the side of the sanctuary, where Bible Study was held.

Around seven o'clock the piercing sound of shattering glass rang out over the quiet yard. I wasn't sure if I'd heard right, because at first no one else acted like they heard anything. But then it came again, a swift, crashing sound that echoed for several seconds. Everyone jumped up and headed outside, crossed under the overhang that led from the fellowship hall to the main sanctuary. They went around the sanctuary, stumbling in the dark over materials left over from the recent renovation.

The perpetrators were already gone by the time we got there; the damage was done. They had kicked in the faded stained glass windows that had been resting against the dusty brick building ever since the new purple windows had been installed. Every pane had been destroyed: the faces of Mary, Pontius Pilate, Jesus all lay in a prism of shards scattered along the wet grass. The glass that remained along the edges of the

panes formed jagged circles, ready to slice and devour anyone who stepped through. The Bible Study leader began to cry.

"Who could do such a thing?" she asked over and over.

I bent down and picked up one of the shards of glass. Etched in the faded, peach-colored shard was part of a hand. I pictured the scene displayed on the window when sunlight filtered through it on Sunday mornings. It could be one of Jesus' hands, bound tight in front of him, or it could be Pontius Pilate's hand, pointing accusingly. I wrapped my fingers around it and started to squeeze. It was smooth, cold, wet. I knew it would cut me, slice right through my moist palm, but I couldn't stop squeezing. As the Bible study leader cried and mumbled something about calling the pastor, I imagined the perpetrators, probably teenagers, like me, out here just minutes before, swinging their legs as hard as they could, laughing as the windows split into sharp fragments and fell from the frames that held them together. I wondered if Lana had been among them. In my mind, I heard Lana's voice. *Come and kick, Abby*, she taunted. *See how much fun it is. You know you want to.*

The morning of the protest, I woke up to the smell of pancake batter sizzling in butter. I got up and dressed quickly, almost forgetting to brush my hair as I hurried down the hallway.

My father was waiting for me in the kitchen, the sleeves of his worn plaid shirt rolled up to his elbows as he flipped the pancakes in the frying pan. He was singing to himself, the national anthem it sounded like, but the lyrics were different. He smiled at me and stopped singing when I walked in.

My mother walked out a few minutes later, just as my father was sliding the pancakes onto a plate. He walked over and leaned in to kiss my mother's cheek, but she turned her face. Her pale yellow hair hadn't been brushed; it hung in gnarled strands down past her shoulders. She pulled her cotton robe around her like she was hugging herself.

"Want some pancakes, hon?" my father asked.

My mother shook her head. "It's raining outside, you know." She pulled the blinds back to reveal the pale gray sky, a seamless expansion of rippled clouds, the rain a light mist that seemed to float to the ground. "And it's cold. I don't think it's a good idea for you to go this morning."

My father sighed. "We'll wear jackets." He poured more batter into the frying pan.

My mother didn't say any more after that. She seemed like she wanted to; she just stood there for several minutes, tugging at the ties on her robe, her frown curving deep creases around the corners of her mouth.

The ride to the school was short and quiet; the only sounds breaking the silence were the hymns coming from the radio and the sound of the windshield wipers scraping across the barely wet glass. My father drove along some narrow back roads, the car bouncing over potholes. As my father made a final turn onto a wider road, the silver wire fence that surrounded Bluff Hill High came into view.

That morning, Bluff Hill High, a coral-colored building that sat alone in a sandy field, was strangely outlined against the leaden sky. A small crowd of people gathered in front by the oval-shaped bus ramp. As my father pulled off to the side of the road and

parked, I recognized several people from our church. I saw Mr. Hollins, the choir leader, and Mrs. Watson, a pale woman with thick round glasses who called me Audrey instead of Abby and liked to give me hugs even though I was eighteen. There were some other people that I didn't recognize: a man wearing a heavy black coat and taking pictures through a camera he'd set up on a tripod, and a few policemen who were sectioning off a large square with plastic yellow tape that read "Caution Restricted Area."

As we got out of the car, my father pulled a couple of pieces of thick neon poster board and a few folded flags from the back and walked toward the area the police were roping off.

Mrs. Watson spotted me almost immediately and came over, smiling and pulling me into a tight hug. Her sweater was damp and scratched my face, and she smelled like she'd forgotten to put on deodorant.

"Audrey, I'm so glad to see you," she said. "Here. Hold one of these."

She handed me a bright green poster board. It was thick and came up to my waist. I turned it around and read what it said. Splayed across the smooth surface in bold black marker were the words "America is Doomed". I stood staring at the sign for several minutes, reading the words over and over, my nails digging into the sign, marking it with my conscious.

When Mrs. Watson realized I wasn't displaying my sign as proudly as everyone else, she reached out, touched my arm, and motioned for me to turn it around.

"Just hold it so everyone can see it," she said, smiling.

I looked around for my father. He was standing at the back of the crowd with Mr. Hollins, unfolding the American flags. They were creased and so long they touched the

ground. My father and Mr. Hollins dropped the flags onto the ground and stepped on them. The ground was already slick and soggy from the steady drizzle of rain, and the flags immediately soaked up the moisture, turning the white stripes a dingy, ashen color.

When he saw me staring at him, my father smiled. "Come on, Abby. Here." He picked up one of the flags and rolled it into a crumpled ball. Dirty water dripped from the soaked material and slid along his fingers and wrists. He tossed the wadded up flag towards me. It landed at my feet, splattering mud on my jeans.

By this time, the crowd in front of the school was growing. Cars lined the street on either side. Several more people from the church came until there were about twenty squeezed inside of the yellow square. There were several people outside the square, too, holding signs that quoted verses about love from the Bible.

I don't know how long I stood there, my fingers aching from trying to hold onto the slippery poster, my tangled hair growing wet and cold and heavy on the back of my neck, before Lana came. Lana, and her fathers. They parked in the bus ramp and climbed out carrying flimsy white posters.

I realized how long it had been since I'd seen Lana. She was tall, taller than me, and her blonde hair had gotten long; even though it was in a ponytail, it still hung down to her shoulder blades. My face burned. I didn't want Lana to see me, not like this. My father stood near the front of the crowd, pressed against the quivering yellow tape. His bandana was soaked and slipping off his forehead.

As Lana and her fathers came closer, I was able to make out what Lana's sign said: "God is Love." It was handwritten in block letters, which were colored in with red and blue marker, all except for the first word, God. She came close to the yellow tape,

closer than her fathers, almost directly across from me. I knew Lana was looking at me, but I couldn't meet her eyes. I kept looking at the cameraman snapping pictures from his tripod, at the crumpled, dirty American flags that lay forgotten outside the restricted area.

After a while, the rain increased from a steady drizzle to a downpour. I expected everyone to run for cover, to call it a day, pack up and go home, but nobody moved.

"Abby."

I don't know if Lana whispered it, but I could barely hear her over the tinny drum of rain on the school's metal roof. I finally turned around. Lana's white shirt was soaked through so the lace on her bra showed, and her bangs were plastered to her forehead, hanging down over her eyes. Already her sign was soaked and had begun to sag and tear. The red and blue marker bled down the paper, staining the GO of God.

"How are you?"

My vision was growing blurry from the water streaming down my face. I blinked, tried to focus. "What?"

"Are you doing okay?"

I shrugged. I didn't like the way Lana was standing so close, holding her bleeding sign. I didn't want to be there, couldn't remember if I'd ever wanted to be there. I didn't want to wonder if Lana had been at the church last night, making her thoughts known as I bowed my head in compliance. I didn't want to be standing there in the cold rain with my father and his bandanas and those colorful signs declaring hate. I wanted to be home with my mother, standing over a boiling pot breaking noodles, playing house again, or out back running barefoot through the dirt and stickers.

After Lana left the protest, my father came up and told me it was time to go. I waited until he turned his back, until he was several feet away, and then I took the sign I was holding, grasped it with my numb fingers and tried to tear it. I tugged and twisted, but the board was too thick, too hard. I did little more than crease it. My father looked back when he realized I wasn't following him.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

I tried to explain it to him, but at first I couldn't make my mouth move. He turned away. As I watched his back move away, shoulders slightly hunched, plaid shirt soaked and clinging to his shoulder blades, I said, "Dad."

He turned back around. "Yeah?"

"I'm not going with you. To the other protests."

His brow creased. "What?"

"I'm not going," I repeated. "I don't want this. I don't want you, or your stupid God."

I handed him the creased board and climbed into the van, dragging gray mud and gravel over the carpet mats. My father stood outside for a few minutes, looking down at the board I had given him. When he finally got in, he threw the board onto the seat next to him, his mouth set.

"I know you didn't mean that," he said.

The caution tape that trembled in the rain had snapped and now lay shriveled on the ground.

"I did."

My father turned the key in the ignition and wrapped his hands around the wheel. "Get out."

I studied his face. His jaw was set, and he stared straight ahead.

"You think I'm kidding?" He reached back and manually opened the lock. "I don't got a daughter who would choose…" He paused for several seconds, his mouth slightly open. Finally, he shook his head. "Just get out."

I decided to return home and help with my father when I heard the desperation in my mother's voice, but I dreaded the confrontation; I dreaded his steel gray eyes staring at me with the cold look of hate that seventeen years could not erase.

As I pulled into the driveway that warm summer afternoon, I noticed that nothing had changed. The bricks in the walkway were still uneven from clumps of weeds pushing through the cracks; the white paint on the house was still peeling, revealing the faded wood beneath; the sickly blackberry vines still clung to their post by the garage, brown and withered.

My mother didn't greet me with a hug or even the forced smile I expected. Instead, she grabbed my arms, her face pale, her graying bangs stuck to her damp forehead.

"Your father's gone again." Her voice cracked; she didn't look panicked so much as exhausted. "Come on. We have to find him before he wanders out to the highway."

We made our way through the orange grove behind our house, trudging through the sandy aisle covered in deer prints, past black oranges nestled in the high grass, past a long forgotten toy truck half-buried under one of the trees, the paint near-white from

years in the sun. Mosquitoes hummed by our heads, and occasionally I felt the telltale prick on my arms or neck. At one point, as I furiously scratched a rising red welt on my wrist, I almost called out to my mother and told her I was heading back to the house. Let him stumble onto the highway, I thought, then felt sick to my stomach for thinking such a thing.

After half an hour we found him pacing between trees in the middle of one of the aisles. He was not what I expected: his hair was thin and wispy, revealing his mole-mottled scalp; his face sagged and there were dark circles beneath his eyes; he had lost so much weight his bones jutted through his skin, making him look sharp and frail at the same time. He continued to pace even after my mother called out to him.

"I have to find it," he said, lifting trembling hands to his head. "It's here. I know it. He'll be so mad at me."

I turned to my mother. She shook her head. "I never know," she said.

After a few minutes he finally stopped and stared at us. I studied his eyes, still the same blue-gray, but I couldn't detect any sign of hate. I couldn't detect anything.

"Honey, look who's come home," my mother said with a forced cheerfulness. She put her arm around my shoulders.

My father stumbled over the uneven sand and peered up at me. I was surprised by how much he'd shrunken.

After a moment of studying my face, he reached out a trembling hand. "I don't know who this is," he said, and I recognized a hint of the same snarl I'd always feared. "What do you want?"

The first weekend after I came home, I couldn't stand being in the house with its heavy silence, so I drove down Main Street past the train depot and the antique shops to the old coffee shop.

I didn't see her until after I had purchased my coffee. I thought about slipping out through the back, but it was too late. Lana was sitting near the entrance, the small table littered with empty paper packets and stray granules of sugar. She smiled and waved. She looked softer, her face a little fuller. Her hair was honey-colored now, a shade darker than the last time I had seen her, and it was short and carefully tucked behind her ears.

Lana invited me to sit down, which I did, hesitantly, my hands tightening around the small cup of coffee I'd just bought so that, despite the protective layer of cardboard, the heat still stung my fingertips.

"Wow," Lana said after a few seconds. She took a sip of her coffee. "How have you been, Abby?"

We made small talk for a few minutes. The coffee felt unusually hot that day, burning my tongue and throat as it went down.

"So, how is your family?" Lana asked after a few minutes. She still smiled as she said this, but the corners of her mouth wilted slightly, making the smile seem forced.

I shrugged. "They're okay, I guess." I studied the brown stains on the cardboard. "How is your family?" I said the words slowly, careful to say "family" and not "fathers". I didn't really know what the proper term was.

Lana seemed to sense my discomfort. "It's okay, Abby." She ran a hand through her hair. A few loose strands fell over her forehead. "My dad moved to San Francisco last year, actually. Said he needed a change of scenery."

We fell silent for a few minutes. I looked at my watch, trying to think of some way to excuse myself without seeming rude. I wasn't prepared for Lana's next question.

"So, are you still attending your parents' church?"

My throat tightened. "God, no. I haven't gone to church since high school."

Lana looked surprised when I told her this. "Really? Well, you should come check out the church I'm attending. I think you'd like it."

I knew I shouldn't say anything, that I should just smile and decline the offer, but I couldn't stop the words from pressing past my lips. "You go to church?"

I half-expected Lana to be upset when I said this, but Lana just laughed. "Yeah. You don't have to sound so surprised."

My cheeks grew warm, and suddenly the air felt stuffy, suffocating. "I didn't mean it like that," was the only thing I could think of.

Lana shrugged, turned the coffee cup in her hands. Thin streams of coffee trailed down the sides, staining the paper. "They're not all like…" She paused before finishing the sentence, stared out the window for a few minutes, the smile fading from her face. "Well, it's different at my church. Or any church, really."

I wanted to ask her what was different, how it was different, but Lana suddenly seemed to be in a hurry to leave. She stood up, slipped her purse over her shoulder. She paused to fish something out of her pocket. It looked like a glossy business card, except

that it was for her church. It had the address and the service times across the front in a cursive font.

"I really think you'd like it," she said.

I sat there for a long time after Lana left, holding the card in my hand so tightly that the edges dug into my palm.

I almost went once, the day after I saw Lana. I was taking my father for his daily drive and somehow we ended up parked in the grass across the street from Lana's church. My father didn't seem surprised that we'd stopped.

"That's a pretty church," he said. He pointed with a trembling finger. "Is that your church?"

I shook my head. My father turned to look at me. The years had turned his face soft, and his eyes seemed faded, more gray than blue. He smiled.

"Abby." It was the first time that he'd said my name since I'd come home. I closed my eyes and tightened my hands on the steering wheel.

"Can't we go inside? It looks so nice."

We never visited other churches; in fact, my father usually blamed other churches for our nation's "condition." It was the first time since I came home that I saw my father truly animated, though, the first time I'd even seen him smile, so I turned the car off and we slowly made our way across the dusty gravel parking lot.

Lana's church was a tall, narrow building made of whitewashed wood. What I immediately liked were the stained glass windows: they were tall and deep red. As we entered through the double doors, the first thing I noticed was the sunlight filtering

through the windows so they lit up like they were on fire, casting glowing red shadows on the pews.

The church smelled funny inside, like moldy carpet and fresh paint and melting wax. The smell gave me a headache. I slipped into the back pew and stared at the candles lit down by the altar until they all blended together into one big ball of light and my eyes burned.

As I sat in the pew, my father wandered slowly down the aisle. He seemed awed by the glowing windows, the wavering flames on the candles, the deep silence. At one point he stopped and motioned for me to follow him.

"Aren't you coming?" he called. "It's so beautiful."

Everything seemed to grow blurry as I studied his face. He was not the man that I remembered from childhood. As relieved as I was that he didn't remember me when I came home, I suddenly wished that I could have him back, my father, even if just for a moment. I wanted him back so I could ask him the questions I'd been pondering for seventeen years. I wanted him back so I could try to understand. So I could let go.

HARVEST SEASON

Joie wants to know why her big brother is crying.

I don't know what to tell her. She's only ten. But she's standing there, almost up to my shoulder now, staring at me. She just got home from school, and the hot Florida afternoon is still on her. Sweat beads under her bangs, trails the sides of her face, and her jeans are coated in white dust from our gravel road.

I want to tell her not to worry, that Dustin is fine, some girl named Jenny Lynn is fine, everything is fine. But Joie's got that look on her face—pinched brow, parted lips—that says she already knows that's not the truth. She gets that look from her father.

"He's in trouble," I say. That's not the whole truth, but it's enough.

She nods when I say this, her dangly pink earrings dancing and winking as they catch the sun coming through the sliding glass door. She's probably thinking got-a-bad-grade trouble or got-caught-smoking-a-cigarette trouble. I wish it was that kind of trouble.

"Just don't bother him, all right?" I say. She spins and heads to her room. "Don't say anything."

I don't like the sounds coming from Dustin's room. The door is shut, but the spurts of ragged hiccups slipping between the hinges remind me of when he was young, younger than Joie. They remind me of when he had reoccurring nightmares about dinosaurs and alligators and would wake in the middle of the night, gasping to get the screams out, shadows from the nightlight contorting his face. I want to go in there like I

did then and brush back his curls, feel his pulse slow under my fingertips, watch his eyelids droop as he forgets what was chasing him. But Craig is waiting for me on the porch.

Outside it's quiet, no noise except for the occasional crunch of gravel as cars bounce along our road, going much faster than they should. In the distance, the slender sugar cane stalks curve in the hot breeze, green silhouettes outlined in gold as the sun fades behind them. In another few days the field will go up in flames, the last field to be harvested, and the sky will be filled with sweet black smoke.

Craig sits on the yellow couch, his feet propped on the mold-spotted table, eating off a limp paper plate piled with leftover food from the restaurant. His dark hair is tousled and greasy at the roots; it curls above his shoulders. He doesn't turn to look at me when I close the sliding door.

I sit on the couch beside him and wait. He picks at a bun-less, dried-out hamburger and a mound of soggy okra as he stares at the sugar cane fields. His face is hard; lines trace his eyes and the corners of his mouth. He looks so much older than thirty-four.

"Stupid kid," he says after several minutes of silence. "Stupid."

I want to tell him not to talk about our son that way, but I know he's not really talking about Dustin, so I sit and wait. He takes a bite of the hamburger, still staring at the sugar cane, and forgets to chew.

I wish I had been here when Craig got home from work. I wish I had been here before he walked in and saw Dustin sitting on the couch, face ashen in the faded

afternoon light. I don't know what Dustin said, but he must have been too scared to lie. I don't know what Craig said, but I don't think I want to know.

Craig takes another bite from the hamburger and drops the plate onto the table. Two pieces of okra roll off the plate and bounce to the floor, leaving a trail of crumbs.

"I told him he can work at the restaurant," he says after a while.

"Work at the restaurant?" Craig has offered this to Dustin in the past, but Dustin never showed any interest, so we didn't push it. We always agreed we would never force the kids to work because we wanted them to focus on school, to be involved in church youth group and activities after school.

"Why do you got to say it like that?" Craig faces me for the first time.

I know it's pointless to argue when he gets like this, but I have to try, for Dustin.

"He's graduating in another year. He needs to focus. That school he wants to go to, that one in Miami, it's not easy to get into, you know."

Craig kicks the table. It's a half-hearted kick and the table barely moves, but his plate goes over the side, scattering okra along the brown carpet littered with dead love bugs.

"I know that," he says, lifting his hand and letting it drop to his thigh. "But he ain't going now."

My stomach tightens. "Don't say that."

He looks at me, sighs, his shoulders sagging. He runs a hand through his hair and along the back of his neck. Behind him, the last warm rays recoil and the sky darkens to a deep wine.

Later on, Craig goes out for a drive. I don't know where. He just says he needs some air, needs to be away from Dustin.

Once he's gone, I knock on Dustin's door. Everything is quiet now. Dustin doesn't answer, so I just open the door and go in.

The room is dark, stale, smells like sweat and burnt popcorn. The floor is covered with wadded up socks and loose CDs. I try not to step on them. I know how much he loves his music.

Dustin is curled like a fetus on top of the plaid comforter, his back to me. I reach out, touch his damp curls. I can't tell if he's asleep.

"Go. Away." He chokes out the words.

I remember the day we brought him home from the hospital. I didn't know how to hold him, what to do when he started crying. My mother, she said she would be waiting at the house when we got home. She said she would have everything set up and ready.

"I still have your basinet," she told me over the phone. "And some onesies, but they're pink."

When we got home, the part of the bedroom we'd cleared for the basinet was empty. I stayed up all night, rocking Dustin, feeding him, afraid to put him down.

Tonight, I ask him what he's going to do.

"Nothing." He scoots away as I try to rub his back.

"You can't just do nothing."

He sniffs, then bursts into a coughing fit.

"I didn't mean it like that," he says when he catches his breath. "I mean, like, I'm not going to tell her what to do."

There's a light rapping on the door. Dustin tenses.

"Momma?" Joie's voice is strained. I still haven't figured out how we should tell her. Or if we'll need to.

"Be out in a second, sweetie," I tell her, trying to sound reassuring. "Momma's just talking to Dustin for a while."

A few seconds later, her room door squeaks and clicks shut. Dustin rolls over but doesn't look at me. His face is streaked, bloodshot. His curls stick to his forehead, and the corners of his eyes are crusted with dried salt.

"What is she going to do?" I ask.

He shrugs. Every part of me feels taut, like I'm a frayed rope ready to snap. I want to tell him that he should know, he should care. Instead, I reach out to touch his forehead. He jerks away, rolling over to face the wall.

I leave, closing the door as quietly as I can so Joie won't hear. I go to my bedroom and lay on the bed, leaving the light off so I can't see anything but the blurry, shifting darkness.

I wonder what she looks like. With a name like Jenny Lynn, she must be a brunette. She must be pale, fleshy, and wear a lot of make-up, all the best from our local Wal-Mart: blue eyeshadow, clear gloss, lots of blush to give her bleached skin color. I don't imagine she's that pretty. Just pretty enough.

Two weeks later, Joie gets home from school and asks for a five-pound bag of sugar.

I'm in the middle of prepping for dinner. The counter is strewn with ingredients for the marinade: cracked black pepper, minced garlic, dark drops of balsamic vinegar.

"What do you need a bag of sugar for?" I ask her, not looking up from the cold chicken breast I'm jabbing with a fork. "You going to bake some more cookies?" Lately she's been going through a phase: she says she's going to open her own bakery when she grows up, and she's testing out all her recipe ideas on us.

"It's Sugar Baby Week at school," Joie says with a grin, as if this is enough of an explanation. She holds up a torn strip of paper. "I picked a girl. I'm going to name her Esperanza."

I drop all four chicken breasts into the plastic bag filled with marinade and put them in the refrigerator. "What is Sugar Baby Week?"

She sighs like she can't believe I don't know. She searches through her backpack and pulls out a wrinkled paper with the words "Sugar Baby Week!" in bubbled rainbow font.

"We have to be parents for a week," she says.

I scan the paper. Apparently she's supposed to turn a bag of sugar into a baby and carry it around with her all week. I'm supposed to make it cry and remind her to feed it. She's not allowed to ask me to babysit more than twice. It's supposed to teach responsibility.

"Have they done this before?" I ask. I can't remember ever seeing hoards of kids walking around Clewiston carting diapered bags of sugar.

"I don't know," Joie says. She sighs again, visibly annoyed that I'm asking so many questions. "Can we go to Wal-Mart? I want to get some baby clothes for Esperanza. That way she'll look real."

I tell her we don't need to go to Wal-Mart; we've got plenty of baby clothes in the attic. "Daddy will climb up there when he gets home."

I rummage through the pantry for an unopened bag of sugar. She smiles when I hand it to her, runs her hand across the folded top. She cradles it in her arms as she heads to her room.

Dustin makes it home around five-thirty and tells me that Craig will be late.

"How late?" I ask.

Dustin shrugs. He hasn't shaved in a few days, and a patchy shadow covers the sides of his face. His t-shirt is splattered with grease, and he smells like dead fish.

Craig has been coming home later and later ever since we found out. He used to take an hour break every evening to have dinner with us, but now he doesn't come home at all until after ten. When he gets home, he's quiet, barely talking to anyone except Joie, and even then, it's only a half-hearted question about school. Now he just takes his leftover dinner and a cold beer out to the porch.

I confronted him about it last night. The light on the porch wasn't working, and in the milky moonlight, I could see only the outline of his bowed head and stooped shoulders. The air was acrid from the burning sugar cane fields and thick with the smell of molasses.

"We're busy," he said when I asked why he was getting home so late. "Harvesting season."

"It's been harvesting season since October," I said.

He grunted and lifted the beer bottle to his mouth. "Well, it's been busier and that's why." He took another bite, another sip of beer, then stood and brushed past me into the house. He dumped his food in the sink and went straight to the bedroom.

I don't know how late he's planning on getting home tonight, and I don't ask Dustin. Instead, I ask him about Jenny Lynn.

"When are we going to meet her?"

He's stooped over the sink, scrubbing his hands. "I don't know."

I reach around him and grab the sponge to wipe off the kitchen counter. "We want to meet her, you know."

He turns off the faucet and dries his hands with a paper towel. "I know you do." He emphasizes the word "you."

I wish he wouldn't talk like that, but I don't say anything. He walks down the hallway, and I go out back to grill the chicken.

The evening air is warm and surprisingly dry, deep yellow, tainted with syrupy smoke and the aroma of garlic as the chicken sizzles on the grill. The grass is too high—Craig hasn't cut it in weeks—and tickles my bare calves. On the porch, Joie has markers and bright red yarn spread around her. She balances the sugar bag on her knees as she dabs the top with Elmer's glue and presses the yarn down.

"Momma, I can't get her hair to stay on," she says after a while.

"Give me a minute," I tell her. "I've got to keep an eye on this chicken."

Several minutes later, the sliding glass door rattles and Dustin steps onto the porch. He's showered and shaved and is wearing a clean t-shirt. He sits down beside Joie and, without saying a word, plugs in the hot glue gun and cuts new strands of yarn.

"Why is she a redhead?" he asks.

Joie huffs. "Why can't she be a redhead?"

Dustin holds up his hands and smiles. "Just asking."

The chicken is done, but I stand there poking at it, letting it burn just so I can continue watching them. Dustin looks so young, younger than sixteen, as he takes the bag of sugar from Joie and settles it in his lap, gingerly pressing the yarn into dabs of hot glue.

Thursday, when she gets home from school, Joie asks me why Daddy hasn't been coming home for dinner, so I tell her to get in the car and we drive down the dirt road jutted with potholes to the main highway that leads to his restaurant.

Craig opened his restaurant, Deep South Diner, a few years after Dustin was born. He liked to cook, and he knew a little about running a business from his father. Now Deep South Diner is the best place to eat, the only restaurant really besides fast food restaurants and an old barbeque joint that has been closed twice already by H&R. All the sugarcane workers come to the restaurant during their breaks for a glass of water or sweetened ice tea. They sit on the overstuffed barstools talking to Craig and running soiled handkerchiefs over their greasy foreheads. Craig is a rough-looking man, but he's pretty social, and his restaurant has the best peanut-butter pie in south Florida, so everyone seems to like him.

Craig is in the back when we get there, and Dustin is behind the cash register. He's wearing one of the only two button-down shirts he owns; it's faded black and wrinkled and covered with lint. It doesn't matter that the restaurant is not fancy by any means, and all the other employees wear jeans and t-shirts. It doesn't matter that Dustin would probably look more professional in a t-shirt that's ironed and lint-free. Craig insists that he wear a long-sleeved, button down shirt every day.

The other night, when Dustin claimed neither shirt was clean, Craig took the wrinkled shirt, balled it up, and threw it at Dustin's chest. "So wash it," he said. He never looked directly at Dustin.

I glared at Craig, but he never looked at me, either. That night, lying in bed, I told him he needed to go easier on Dustin.

Craig mumbled something, his voice muffled by the pillow.

"Seriously," I said. "You should be more understanding. You remember what it's like."

He spun around then, his palm slapping the sheet beside me. "Hell, yes, I remember. Dustin's got it easy, that's all I got to say."

I closed my eyes and rolled away from Craig. For a moment I was sixteen again, coming home from school, nauseous and light-headed, sweat pouring down the back of my legs, hair clinging to my neck. Craig was hunched in the corner of the sagging porch, shirtless, skin purpled and quivering, cool to the touch despite the sweltering afternoon heat. Behind him, white egrets waded through the charred sugar cane fields.

Today, Dustin gives us a half-hearted smile as we approach the cash register. His face is puffy, lips chapped, hair matted. Joie runs up to him. She grins and holds her hand out, palm up.

"I want a gumball," she tells him. "A green one."

Dustin reaches in his pocket for a quarter. As he pulls it out, it slips and clatters to the floor, rolling under the counter. As he stoops to get it, Craig comes out from the back.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, looking at me. His face is shiny, his apron splattered with blood and grease.

"Joie asked why you aren't home for dinner anymore," I say.

Craig stares at me, lips pressed together. Dustin straightens, the quarter face-up on his palm.

"Here," he says, handing it to Joie.

She gingerly lifts it from his palm and steps around the counter to the gumball machine. She drops the quarter in and twists the silver handle. Nothing happens.

"It's not working," she says, pushing her lower lip out. "Dustin, will you fix it?"

Dustin sighs, looks at the customers walking through the door. "Joie, I'm working." He turns back toward the cash register.

Craig moves forward, faster than I've seen him move in a while. He grabs Dustin's sleeve, swinging him around.

"Who do you think you are?" he asks, shoving Dustin toward the gumball machine. "You can help your sister, for God's sake."

Joie looks like she's on the verge of tears, so I step forward and take her hand. Craig turns around and heads back to the kitchen. Dustin's cheeks are red and Joie's bottom lip is trembling, so I lead her out to the car.

Tonight, Dustin beats Craig home from work again, although they both miss dinner.

I'm washing dishes when Dustin walks in through the laundry room. He pauses to slip off his shoes, although I don't know why; we don't have rules like that in our house. Both of his socks are worn around his big toes.

"When's your father getting home?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I don't know."

I lift a hand to rub my forehead, forgetting to wipe it off, and light suds stick to my face.

"You shouldn't be mad at him, you know," I tell him.

Dustin scoffs. "Why not?"

My hands are chapped and wrinkled from the hot water. I'm done with the dishes for now.

"When are we going to meet Jenny Lynn?"

Dustin steps around me and sticks his hands in the soapy water. "I don't know."

My chest tightens. "What have you two decided to do?"

He lifts his hands out, sloshing water along the counter. "I don't know."

"You don't know anything, do you?" I immediately regret saying it, but I don't apologize. I tear off several paper towels and mop up the puddle of water by the sink.

Dustin steps around me and leaves the kitchen. A few seconds later, his bedroom door slams, rattling the pictures on the living room wall.

I'm already in bed when Craig gets home, but I'm not tired. He strips out of his work clothes and lies down beside me. He smells like the restaurant: fish, oil, coffee. He also smells like alcohol.

"They haven't decided what to do yet," I say after several minutes of silence.

The mattress sinks as he rolls to face me. His breath is warm on my face. He had a beer for dinner. Maybe two.

"I know," he says. "I told him what they should do, though."

I don't like the way he says this, lightly, nonchalantly. "What did you tell him?"

Craig rolls onto his back and stretches his arms above his head. "Don't make a big deal out of this, Faye," he says.

I stare at the ceiling, watching the shadows of the palmetto fronds tremble on the ceiling, trying to think of something to say, but by the time I do, Craig's breathing heavy and even, and I know he's asleep.

The annual Sugar Festival is held in April to celebrate the end of harvest season. Every year we go as a family, even if we end up going our separate ways once we get there. Craig likes watching the car show and browsing among the old farming equipment on display; Joie likes riding the carousel and climbing the rock wall; Dustin likes watching the rodeo with a group of friends from school. I usually just walk around and look at the handmade quilts or the cane grinding.

When we were in high school, Craig used to take me to the festival. Before he could drive, he showed up at my door in baggy jeans and dirty sneakers and we walked along the highway to Civic City Park, dodging lumpy gray anthills and shards of glass from shattered beer bottles. Craig rode the carousel with me, raced me down the inflatable slides, and took me over to the booth where they ground the sugar cane. I hated the taste of raw sugarcane – it was tough and dry, not at all sweet – but Craig seemed to like it, so I always smiled and pretended I liked it, too.

This year everything looks the same: the park is packed with men in tight jeans and warped baseball caps, women with sunburned arms fanning themselves and showcasing their homemade desserts and hand-stitched quilts, children running around, hyper from cotton candy and pushing each other to be first in line for the carousel. Static-filled country music blares from speakers throughout the park, occasionally drowned out by the shrill voice of the rodeo announcer whenever one of the clowns comes close to being trampled by the bull.

Everything is the same except that it's only Joie and me. Craig is working, and Dustin said he wanted to stay home, that he had homework to do. Joie is quiet; she doesn't ask to climb the rock wall or ride down the inflatable slides. When I ask her if she wants to ride the carousel with me, she shrugs.

After half an hour, my arms are turning pink, my head is throbbing, and my throat is dry from the dust clouds. I'm about to ask Joie if she just wants to go home and watch a movie when I see Dustin.

He's standing under the rodeo bleachers, shuffling flattened cigarette butts and peanut shells with his foot. Next to him, striped in sunlight and shadow filtering through the metal stands, is a girl I know must be Jenny Lynn.

She doesn't look at all like I've pictured her. She's short, a good five or six inches shorter than Dustin, and thin enough I can see the vertebrae on the back of her neck. Her hair isn't brown; it's amber, and apparently long, although she has it piled on top of her head. She doesn't appear to be wearing any make-up; her face is pink, bloated. It looks like she might be crying.

I take Joie's arm and turn her around, but it's too late.

"Who is he talking to?" she asks, tilting her head back to see my face, squinting against the bright sunlight.

I'm having trouble swallowing. "I don't know, sweetie." I reach for her hand. "Are you ready to go? Momma's tired."

Joie's already in bed when Dustin gets home. Craig is in the den, watching television. I'm on the couch, trying to read one of my romance novels, but I can't make my eyes focus. I've started the same paragraph over five times.

Dustin walks in around ten, barefoot, skin coated with gray dust, curls stiff with dried sweat. He stands in the doorway to the living room, his face dark in the backlight from the kitchen. I put down the book and sit up.

Neither of us says anything for several minutes. Finally, I have to ask. "Was that Jenny Lynn today?"

He nods. I wait for him to speak, to offer an explanation about why he chose to lie and tell us he was doing homework when he knows I want to meet her. He doesn't say anything, just stands there, swaying slightly.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I ask.

He shrugs. "No need, anymore." He walks into the living room, sits on the couch slowly, as if he's in a daze. "She's moving." He stares at his hands for a while, then looks up at me. "It's gone, you know."

His voice is low, uninflected. I stand up.

"It's not her fault," Dustin hastily adds.

He's lying. I can tell by the way he avoids my eyes, the way he stares at his hands. The first time I ever knew for sure he was lying about something was when I confronted him about trespassing in the sugar cane field behind our house. He was ten at the time, short and awkward. He was late for dinner, and when he walked through the door his hair was matted with sweat, his hands were sticky and dirty. I asked him where he'd been.

"At Mike's," he said with a shrug. He kept staring at his hands, avoiding my eyes. "Playing video games."

Tonight, Dustin sighs and closes his eyes. "Dad will be happy."

A door squeaks down the hallway, and Joie appears, eyelids heavy.

"What are you talking about?" she asks, squinting her eyes against the bright light from the lamp.

Suddenly I'm very irritated. "Joie, what are you doing out of bed?" I'm being too harsh, I know, I can tell from the way her face falls, but I can't help it.

“But,” she says, hugging herself. “But, Dustin’s still up.”

“Joie.” My throat is tight, and I’m talking too loud. “Joie, just go back to bed.”

The door to the den opens. Craig appears at the end of the hallway, shirtless, scratching his stomach.

“What’s going on?” he asks, voice thick. He’s looking at Dustin.

“Don’t look at him that way,” I say. “You don’t need to look at him that way anymore.”

Craig stops scratching his stomach and looks at me. His eyes are glassy, unfocused. It’s the same look he had when I told him I was pregnant sixteen years ago.

Joie turns around to face Craig, her head tilted at an awkward angle as she looks up at his face.

“Dad, what are they talking about?” she asks.

Craig continues to stare at me until he realizes I’m not going to look away. Then he sighs and places his hand on Joie’s head, ruffling her tangled hair.

“Nothing,” he says. “Come on. I’ll tuck you back in.”

She follows him down the hallway. Dustin goes to his room, and I sit back down on the couch. I feel like I’m still sixteen, on the phone with my mother, hearing her reassurances, her promises, but not believing them, my questions stuck in my throat.

BLUE GREEN RED

Tonight she thinks about her family for the first time in several years. It isn't as if her memory hasn't tried to bring them back, especially on those foggy nights when her husband plays Pink Floyd's *The Wall*. On those nights, she goes into their bedroom and crawls under the thick sheets of their waterbed, shielding her face from the red gleam of the traffic light that slips through their bent blinds as the waterbed rolls and sloshes beneath her. She always pretends to be tired when he comes in later and asks what's wrong, though the whole time she's really trying to suppress the images that float to the surface of her memory: her mother's face, red and splotchy, lipstick dry and settled into the fine cracks of her lips, and Damian, sitting quietly, eyes absent, smiling at the wall.

Tonight, she's coming back from Bayside, where she and her husband, Eric, have spent several hours shopping. Melaney sits on the gum-stained concrete bench awaiting the metrorail and sees their faces appear against the hazy gray sunset. She closes her eyes, wills the images to drown in the blackness and the approaching grind of the metrorail.

Eric sits next to her, the coconut sculpture he bought at Bayside on his lap. His hair, soft curls normally slicked back behind his ears, springs forth in the heavy night hair, unruly from the humidity. His pale cheeks are tinged with pink, and thin trails of sweat slide down his temples. He's unused to this Florida heat, having grown up in a small New England town, but he's smiling, can't stop talking about the things he wants to do while they're down here. He wants to go to South Beach, take in the clubs and walk

along the warm sand. He keeps asking her to translate every sign they see in Spanish, but she tells him she doesn't understand, that she hasn't spoken Spanish since she left ten years ago.

"If you don't use it, you lose it," she says dryly.

He laughs, and asks her again the next time they see something posted in Spanish.

"I'm so glad we finally had a convention in Miami," he says, raising his voice over the roar of the approaching metrorail.

She thinks back to the first time she visited Eric's hometown, the small, neat town nestled among gray hills and trees naked by October. The sun didn't shine much while they were there, but she liked that, liked not having to pause every time they stepped outside to let her eyes adjust. She relished the chilly caress of the habitual morning drizzle that glistened on her heavy nylon coat and softened her hair to post-shower dampness. His parents had been neat as well, with trimmed hair and collared shirts and a house that smelled like vanilla. When his parents had asked about her family, she'd told them her family was dead.

That's what she'd told Eric six years ago. On their first date, he'd taken her to a Cuban restaurant. He knew she was from Miami, and he seemed to think the Cuban restaurant would impress her.

It wasn't anything like the restaurants in Miami. The white rice was sticky and clumpy, they served dark coffee instead of café con leche, and the sandwiches were made with toasted wheat bread and American cheese. She didn't mention the differences to Eric. When he asked how she liked it, she smiled and told him it was a refreshing change.

Later that night, over a stale guava pastry, he asked about her family.

"I don't have any family," she said, focusing on the thick red guava smeared on her plate. "My father, he's gone, been gone for as long as I can remember. My mother, she died of cancer." She didn't mention Damian at all.

"I'm so sorry," Eric said, his face soft in the dim light.

Outside, it began to snow. He never asked about her family again.

Tonight, the metrorail approaches slowly, its headlights casting golden beams through the murky darkness falling over the station. People shift simultaneously toward the rails. Once the metrorail stops and the doors chime open, Melaney and Eric move forward, twisting and squeezing, trying to avoid the bodies that press in on either side. She hears Eric mumbling apologies every few seconds, only to meet the scuffling of shoes on the rubber floor and the rustling of cloth as they continue to brush against other passengers.

They maneuver down the narrow aisles and slip into a row near the back. She slides into the dirty blue seat next to the window, tucked away from the mass of people brushing by each other in the aisle and squeezed next to each other in the seats. The metrorail is uncomfortably warm from the bodies pressed against each other.

Melaney leans against the window, clutches her purse. After everyone is seated, the metrorail jolts forward, and Eric leans in next to her, craning to look out the window at the glittering lights of the city awakening below. Their car is silent except for the occasional squeaking of brakes and the muffled music coming from the headphones of the young girl sitting in front of her.

Damian listened to music non-stop the night Dad left. The best she can remember, that's when it started. That was the day Dad and Momma got into another fight, only this one was different—longer and louder. She was so little she doesn't remember much detail, but she distinctly remembers that Momma wore only a bra and cut-off jeans, and that her eyes and Dad's eyes were bloodshot.

They were screaming and Melaney was holding her ears. She didn't start crying until Momma pulled out a knife and threatened to kill Daddy.

Even though she was old enough to know it was only a butter knife and Momma's threats were always shallow, Melaney was still scared, so Damian took her outside to their backyard, not much more than a lopsided, sandy square sectioned off by a fence whose links had been bent and stretched to accommodate the greedy claws of raccoons trying to get at their cat's latest batch of kittens. Damian led her to the skeletal orange tree that leaned against the corner of the fence, its branches spreading against the chromium sky like the fuchsia spider veins along her mother's thighs. Feeble as it was, it still managed every year to sprout a few pieces of fruit—sickly, speckled things that looked more yellow than orange and more often than not were infested with flies.

Damian, his face moist and flushed from the wet afternoon heat, told her to pick some, that they were going to make orange juice for breakfast and Momma would be happy. When they went back inside, Dad was gone.

That night Damian stayed up late and kept Melaney up late, too, blaring his favorite Pink Floyd CD so loud that even though the lights were off and he was wearing

headphones, Melaney could hear the lyrics over the whine of the air conditioning unit by their window.

She hasn't seen Damian since the summer before she started seventh grade, when he left home abruptly one overcast morning. He had never said exactly where he was going, but Melaney had seen an acceptance letter from some college sitting on his desk for months, so she felt it was safe to assume that's where he went. That's what she told their mother, anyway—not that it mattered much.

"Blue. Red. Green." The words, in short spurts, are soft but audible over the groan of the metrorail as it lurches to a halt. Melaney wants to turn, can sense the shifting bodies around her as people stare. Eric seems oblivious, keeps turning the creased map around in his hands, trying to figure out where their stop is.

At this stop, the metrorail empties significantly. People file out quickly and silently, and a group of young teenagers, three boys and two girls, clad in dark shirts and baggy jeans, hair stiff with gel, come aboard and sit down in the middle of the aisle. They pull out a pair of dice and drop them onto the dusty floor.

"Red. Yellow. Orange."

The words start up again as the metrorail jolts forward. It's a man's voice, excited but quiet. She tilts her head a little to the left, chances a glimpse out of curiosity. He's a small man, bony and disheveled. His hair is long and greasy, his face pale and oily, covered in a patchy, ginger-colored beard. She thinks he must be homeless—he's wearing nothing but a faded, crudely patched denim jacket and a pair of cargo pants that hang off his narrow hips. Something about him is familiar: his docile voice, maybe, or

the way he crouches in front of the seat, peering above the grimy sill like a child peeking at something he shouldn't see. She turns around, stares out the window, watches the spiny tops of palm trees and the Mexican-tile roofs of houses glide by.

At the next stop, the doors slide open and a rush of city noise greets them. Down below, a fluorescent-yellow ambulance pulls out into the crowded street, lights flashing and horn blaring. Melaney leans against the warm glass and watches it until the metrorail jolts forward again and the flashes of pulsing red slowly leave her line of vision.

It wasn't until she left Dade County that she realized ambulances in other places were red. The yellow ambulance seemed to frequent her neighborhood a lot when she was growing up—usually on Friday or Saturday nights, when she and Damian would lay in bed, on top of the sheets, with the old shutter windows cranked open to let in the slightly cooler night air. They could hear Mr. and Mrs. Rocio fighting on one side and Mrs. Arazoza praying loudly on the other, and then later the cry of the ambulance would drown them all out. Melaney could never figure out where the ambulances went. She'd been tempted to call the ambulance once, when she was ten and Damian had told her he thought he'd been poisoned. His face had been pale and his skin beaded with moisture, and she'd thought he really was sick. Then she'd asked him how he knew he was poisoned, and he'd said Momma was trying to kill him.

"Green. Orange. Red."

As she presses her forehead against the window and watches the shadowed roofs slide by below them, she realizes the homeless man is naming the colors of the roofs they're passing.

Eric finally takes notice, twisting in his seat for several seconds. When he turns back around, he shakes his head and begins to refold the map, although he's not looking at it. He's looking straight ahead, so the map ends up inside out.

The teenagers in the aisle have stopped playing their game of craps to stare. One of them, a thin boy who can't be older than fourteen or fifteen, laughs.

"What, did they close down Jackson?" he says. Jackson is a local mental health clinic. He says it loud enough for everyone in their car to hear. His friends laugh with him.

"Orange. Red. Orange."

The thin boy picks up one of the dice they were playing with and throws it at the homeless man. It clinks against the window and drops to the floor, bouncing down the aisle.

"Hey," Eric says, turning in his seat. They ignore him.

"They're just kids," Melaney says to him.

The boy picks up the second die and throws it haphazardly. The die falls short and rolls under the seat.

"Hey," Eric says again, more forcefully.

The teenagers finally look at him. They look at each other, then stop laughing. The thin boy shuffles down the aisle and collects the dice, and they return to their game.

Eric turns back around, his cheeks red. "So sad," he says, in a low voice she can hardly hear.

"Yellow. Red. Red."

Melaney hears the words continue in a steady, rhythmic manner until the metrorail reaches the next stop, Viscaya, the stop where they get off to go to their hotel. Here, the man stops counting rooftop colors and a heavy silence ensues, broken seconds later by laughter. It's a spasmodic laugh, light and lively like the laugh of an amused child.

Even though the metrorail hasn't completely stopped, Melaney grabs her purse and stands up. Grasping the cold metal poles for balance, she climbs over Eric, who stares up at her with his lips slightly parted. She stumbles over the teenagers, who lean out of her way and mumble in her direction. As soon as the doors chime open, she falls out into the sweltering night and maneuvers her way through the crowd to the escalator, waiting to lift her down from the lighted station and into the dark emptiness of the night.

Pink Floyd blared through the headphones the first time the laughter began. It was only nine o'clock and already they'd been sent to bed because Momma had company. They'd been watching television in the den, enjoying the air-conditioning, when Momma had come in, barefoot, her short hair stiff with gel, wearing a tie-dyed t-shirt that was so tight Melaney could see her nipples and had to look away. "Hey, you two, can you give me some privacy, you think?"

And so they'd obediently gone to their room to turn on the fans and lay spread out over the unmade beds, Damian to listen to music, Melaney to flip through a magazine she'd found discarded in the bus ramp at school. The shutters were open, and from outside she heard the steady chorus of crickets and the intermittent grunts of toads. And then the laughter.

Damian was laughing at something, staring at something in the dim light that she couldn't make out. His lips were parted slightly, skewed into what might have been a smile.

"What's so funny?"

He didn't answer, just continued laughing for several long minutes, softly, breathlessly, as if he was sharing a private joke.

"You're crazy," she'd said finally, dropping the magazine onto the floor and rolling onto her side so she could stare out the window. In the back yard, the skinny shadow of the dilapidated orange tree stretched and twisted over the mounds of dirt and faded grass, and she thought she could make out the shape of a small animal scurrying along the fence line. "Damian, I think the raccoon's back."

Silence then, except for the lyrics coming from his headphones, filling the night air.

For a while, Momma, too, had seemed to notice the changes, and Melaney had been relieved. More than once she'd come to pick up Melaney early from school. Melaney had known what happened every time the phone rang in the classroom and the teacher's eyes turned toward her. Momma would be waiting for her down by the office, her hair limp, her lipstick smudged, her ears sagging from the weight of her tarnished earrings. "He's done it again," she'd say, and that would be enough. Melaney would know that one of the high school teachers had found Damian wandering the hall, or some student had reported him, not knowing who he was, afraid that he was a stranger without permission to be on school grounds.

Damian would be waiting there in the principal's cramped office, slouched in a chair, staring at the ground, when Momma rushed in. Melaney learned to hate going into the high school; she hated the way boys would stare at Momma's breasts bouncing under her mesh shirt, the way everyone would stare while they walked out with Damian.

She thought that once Momma noticed these things, Momma would know what to do. But they happened again and again, and nothing changed. One day she found Momma alone in the kitchen, wearing nothing but an oversized t-shirt, making herself something in the blender. Melaney went up to the counter, climbed onto the lopsided barstool.

"Momma?"

The shrill grind of the blender filled the kitchen, and Melaney figured Momma hadn't heard her. When she switched the blender off, Melaney tried again. "Momma, what about Damian?"

"Damian?" Momma stared at her as if she didn't know who Melaney was talking about. She grabbed a couple of cracked plastic cups from the cupboard and began to pour her drink into them. "Want some, sweetie?"

The thick red liquid sloshed down the blender and dribbled onto the counter. She handed a cup to Melaney, who lifted it to her lips. It smelled like strawberries, but something else as well, something not as sweet.

"He's been laughing a lot, Momma." The cup was cold and made her fingertips go numb.

Momma took a long drink and shrugged, making the neckline of the over-sized t-shirt slide off her shoulder. "People laugh, Melaney. It means they're happy."

"And he talks a lot. In his room. To nobody."

Momma smiled, reached out and squeezed Melaney's hand. "Honey, sometimes people talk to themselves. It means they're smart. Haven't you ever talked to yourself?"

Not like Damian does, she wanted to say, but looking into her mother's face, where rosy blotches bloomed on her puffy cheeks, Melaney wanted to believe her, to know that Damian was smart and that was why he was different, and so she smiled and said nothing.

Later that night, she lies between stiff cotton sheets in the dark hotel room and watches the colorful shadows from the television dance on the wall. Eric has gone to dinner with his colleagues, to Joe's Stone Crab. He invited her to come, tried to tempt her with the menu descriptions he'd read on the restaurant's website, but she'd pled fatigue and had crawled onto the lumpy queen mattress before he'd even left. Now, an hour later, she's still in the same curled position on the bed, monotonously pressing the channel button on the remote control—not to see what's on the different channels, but to watch the colors change and shift on the wall.

Red. Green. Blue. She hears the man's voice, soft and distinct, even though he's probably miles away, possibly still riding the metrorail. She wonders what he's saying now, though, because it's too dark to see the tops of the houses clearly.

On the next channel she pauses. The whole wall glows red. She glances over at the television screen. *The Wizard Of Oz* is playing and Dorothy's slippers are glittering at her from the screen as Dorothy clicks her heels together. As Melaney watches, the screen fades from red to black and white as Dorothy wakes up to find herself in her bed at home.

Melaney flips off the television. The room is hazy gray, illuminated by the pale yellow light of the city. Noises drift in from the street: cars honking, tires squealing, music blaring. In the distance, a solitary siren begins its ominous wail. Melaney lies listening to it for a minute, then slips out of bed. In the dark, she feels along the rough carpet for her shoes.

Downstairs, she hails a taxi. As she climbs into the smoke-tainted back seat, the taxi driver asks her where she wants to go. She gives him the address of her mother's house.

The taxi jerks forward as they make their way through the grid of streets leading into her old neighborhood. The houses crawl by, bright pink, sherbert green, golden yellow, some with hand-painted murals, some with mold-spotted statues lining their cracked driveways. The harsh yellow streetlights cast inky shadows over the yards littered with car parts and broken toys, over the untrimmed cherry hedges and tilted sable palms. And then, several blocks later, it comes into view—her mother's house, a simple concrete block house, no murals, no statues, just a few withered milkweed bushes and a basketball hoop whose netting has rotted away. Her mother's car sits in the driveway, an old Ford with peeling paint and a broken taillight, the same car she was driving ten years ago when Melaney left for college.

Melaney pays the taxi driver and climbs out, breathing in familiar scents: the floral smell of the angel trumpet blooming in Mrs. Arazoza's yard, the burnt smell of warm asphalt, the musty-smoke smell of her mother seeping out from the cracked shutters of her mother's old bedroom window. Melaney stands frozen for a minute as she watches the taillights of the taxi fade in the distance and eventually blend with the river of red that

flows down 57th Avenue.

She walks across the short front yard, along the cracked sidewalk leading up to the front door. She hesitates before trying the doorbell. She presses several times but fails to hear any resounding chime announcing her presence. After another pause, she tries the doorknob.

Very little has changed in the house since Melaney lived there. There's the same flattened green carpet, the same rattan couch, the same crystal dove pendant dangling from the window, casting dancing prisms from the streetlights off the cracked glass coffeetable, the same portable fans humming and swiveling in the corners of the room.

The drone of the television floats down the hallway, and the pungent smell of her mother's habit chokes the air. Her mother's door is cracked open just enough for Melaney to make out the shadowy figure of her mother sprawled on the bed. She thinks she should keep going down the hallway, tap on the door with her knuckles, tell her mother she's come by to visit. First, though, she slips into the dark room on the left, the room she used to share with Damian.

Even in the dim light, Melaney can see that nothing much has changed there, either. There's a new comforter on the bed closest to the window – her old bed – and a few stiff, dusty silk flower arrangements placed on the nightstand, as if her mother were trying to add color to the room. Damian's bed sits untouched, his CDs still stacked on the floor by the desk, the poster of Pink Floyd still tacked to the ceiling. Melaney walks into the room, sits on his old bed, runs her hand along the worn comforter. She wonders if the crumpled lottery ticket is still there, tucked under the mattress.

A couple of weeks before he left, Damian had come to her, clutching the lottery

ticket in his hands. She distinctly recalls his face, his thin lips twisted in excitement, unruly hazel hair falling over his eyes—the way he'd come to her and grabbed her wrist, so quickly and tightly she jumped and pulled it away.

"What are you doing?" she hissed.

"We're going to win the lottery," he said in a shaky voice, holding out the ticket to her.

"Yeah, okay." She turned back to her homework.

"No, really," he said, grabbing her arm again and attempting to force her to look at the ticket.

"Let me go!"

"God told me the numbers."

"You're crazy."

"Five. Ten. Eight. Two. Three. Six." He'd said the numbers in short, rhythmic spurts, his voice trembling. "God told me. I heard him."

He'd held onto the ticket for the rest of the day, often looking at it and laughing, or talking under his breath. She'd seen him carefully tuck the ticket under the mattress that night before going to bed. After the winning numbers were announced the next day, the ticket was never mentioned again.

Tonight, Melaney runs her hand along the comforter, feeling the spots where the material has thinned and torn and stringy cotton falls out, runs her hand along and along until it finds its way under the mattress, her fingers digging between the mattress and the cold wire springs, searching for the crumpled paper, softened and frayed with age. After several minutes, her fingers meet with nothing but cold, twisted metal.

Outside, the clouds shift and hinder the moonlight, and she can hear the distant roll of thunder. She slips off the bed and back into the dusky hallway, closing the door behind her. She walks down the hallway and touches the door to her mother's room, feels the splintered wood beneath her fingertips as she pushes the door open wider.

She can see the shadowed outline of her mother's sprawled body against the pale yellow light from the street. In the shifting light cast by the television, she can see her mother is either sleeping or unconscious. Her hair is longer, darker, and strands of it cling to the sides of her face from the moisture in the night air. Melaney stands in the doorway for several seconds before she says, "Mom."

Her mother shifts, curls her legs up next to her body, mumbles.

"Mom."

In the dark it's hard to tell when her mother's eyes open, but suddenly her mother sits up, the frayed spaghetti strap of her shirt sliding off her shoulder, her damp hair falling over her forehead. She sits frozen on the bed for several seconds, and Melaney wonders if she's really awake.

"Well, look who it is." Her voice is grainier than Melaney remembers, weak and raspy. "What a surprise."

"I was in the neighborhood." She doesn't move from the doorway, and her mother doesn't move from the bed. The wind is picking up outside, making the shutter windows rattle. "My husband has a conference down here."

She can make out the outline of her mother's head as she nods. "Your husband?"

"Four years. His name's Eric."

More nodding. Melaney waits for questions, hopes they'll come in quick

succession so she can answer automatically and leave. She wants her mother to ask her about college, her job, where she lives, if she has kids. When the silence ensues, the stillness of the room broken only by the jerky movement of her mother's head, she knows she has to ask.

"How's Damian?"

The nodding stops. "Damian?"

"Yes. How is he? Have you heard from him?"

Her mother reaches over to switch on the lamp that curves over the dusty bedside table. In the bleached, flickering light, the bright red of her mother's rosacea spreads along her puffy cheeks and lined forehead, and Melaney can see the discolored patches in her hair where dye is beginning to fade.

"He's fine." She bends down and picks up a clear plastic cup from the floor. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"You've heard from him?"

Her mother's eyes have wandered from Melaney's face back to the television. She lifts the cup to her lips. "Yeah. About once a year."

Melaney reaches out and curls her hand around the doorknob. It's cold and slick beneath her moist palm. "How is he?"

Her mother shrugs. "He doesn't say much. Just sends birthday cards." She shifts, leans down to pull open the drawer of the bedside table. She lifts out a handful of creased, yellow-tipped cards and hands them to Melaney. "Sent one to you, once, a few years ago. I don't remember which one it was."

Melaney tilts the first card to see it better in the light. It's a simple white card with

a teddy bear clutching a bouquet of flowers. On the inside, a cursive font wishes her mother a happy birthday, and Damian's signature is scrawled in blue ink.

The next card has a painting of a kitten. It looks like the kitten was originally adorned with glitter, although only a few glimmering specks remain. Melaney glances at the inside. It's a neutral message, not addressed to mother or sister.

"Can I keep this one?" Melaney asks, moving the card so that the flecks of glitter sparkle in the faint light.

"Of course, hon." Her mother yawns and lies back down on the bed.

Melaney glances over the rest of the cards. As she steps forward to hand the cards back to her mother, keeping the kitten card separate, her cell phone begins to vibrate. She pulls it out. Eric's number glows in the dim light. She drops the phone back into her pocket.

"The husband?" her mother asks.

Melaney nods. "Was there a return address? On the envelopes?" she asks as her mother puts the cards back into the drawer.

Her mother hesitates, staring at the ceiling, her brow creased. She rummages through the drawer again and pulls out a creased yellow envelope. There's no name in the upper left hand corner, only an address scrawled in the same blue ink as Damian's signature. In the dim light, she deciphers the handwriting. The address is in Hialeah. She tries to make out the date stamped on the envelope. The red ink is smudged and faded. She thinks it says November 1, 2005. Less than a year ago.

Melaney steps back into the doorway, slipping the card and envelope into her pocket. Her mother smiles at her, and Melaney notices the layered creases at the corners

of her mouth.

"Thanks for stopping by," her mother says. "Bring the husband by sometime. I'd like to meet him."

As she walks back down the hallway, Melaney decides to go out through the porch, still cluttered with cacti and aloe plants and dead orchids, out through the sandy lot, where the orange tree still leans against the fence, bare except for a few scrunched leaves that tremble in the breeze and speckled oranges that weigh down the weak branches.

As she lets the porch door swing shut behind her, she has the sudden urge to slip off her shoes and feel the warm sand and threads of dry grass between her toes, but she fears the shards of broken brown glass and angry fire ants that hide beneath the mounds. Instead, she leaves her shoes on and feels the sand trickle down the sides and bunch under the balls of her feet. She walks over to the tree and pulls an orange off the branch closest to her. She rolls it around in her hands; it's smooth and firm, not squishy and riddled with holes from flies.

A gust of wind picks up loose pieces of grass and spins them by her ankles. She peels the orange, picking and picking with her fingernails until the thick rind lies in jagged pieces on the sand. The sticky juice trickles down her fingers and wrists as she separates a slice and slips it into her mouth. As she bites down and the fresh, sweet juice of her childhood floods her senses, her cell phone vibrates again. This time she pulls it out and presses it to her ear.

"Hey," Eric says as she answers. "I'm going to be later than I thought. I didn't want you to worry."

"Okay," she says. As she speaks, a car comes flying down the road. As it passes

the yard, the driver honks the horn and yells something at her out the window.

"What's that?" Eric says. "Where are you?"

She hesitates, considers the lies she can tell. She could lie like she did the time she sat in the guidance counselor's office at her elementary school and told her everything was normal at home. She could tell Eric that she stepped outside because it got cold in the room, or that she was bored so she walked down the street to Latin American Café for some café con leche.

"I'm at my mother's house. Visiting."

There's a long pause. "Your mother?" The wind picks up, interfering with the reception. She hears Eric sigh on the other end, but it could just be the static from the wind.

"I should be back by eleven," he says. "Will you be back by then?" He pauses. "I think we need to talk."

"Yes. I'll head back soon."

As the dark clouds from the approaching storm roll in, she takes the metrorail, not a taxi, back to Viscaya. She walks along the shadowy station, dodging the puddles of beer and urine that have collected along the concrete, the creased envelope and birthday card clasped between her fingers. She boards the metrorail and sits next to the window with the card in her lap.

The metrorail is empty, quiet except for the groaning brakes and rush of air when the doors open. She wonders what she'll say to Eric when she gets back.

Yes, my mother is still alive. And I have a brother. I never told you? An older brother.

The brakes signal the next stop, and she presses her forehead against the warm glass. As she watches the shadowed rooftops—blue, green, red—glide by, the darkened colors glittering like onyx through the late night condensation, she wonders what would happen if she just showed up at Damian's house. She imagines that he is tall now, and thin, with an angular face and glassy eyes. She imagines that he lives in a dark house and sleeps in the den, where the air conditioning unit hums outside the window. He probably falls asleep every night listening to music, staring at the ceiling, maybe talking to God, or talking back to God. He wouldn't be happy to see her. No, she decides, he would probably just stare at her with those empty eyes, maybe reach out and grab her wrist, and ask her why she's there. She would feel so helpless, standing there with the old birthday card, the acid from the orange still on her tongue. She wouldn't know what to say.

ORANGE BLOSSOMS

Galoshes

Bluff Hill, Florida

The pond overflowed when it rained. It rained every summer, almost hourly it seemed, cold slivers slicing through the hot summer air, pummeling the saturated soil in the backyard, the neglected garden and flowerbeds. The sisters would spend the afternoons reading or pressing their noses against the warm sliding glass door to watch the water slowly slide over the bank of the pond, slither through the rusted links of the fence, and curl around the wide trunks of the dead oaks. They watched and watched, their soft breaths forming wet clouds on the smudged glass, until the edges of the puddles and the pond merged into a seamless expanse of murky brown.

They had galoshes, but only Rachel wore them. She was younger by four years, but she knew the galoshes would protect her from the broken acorns sucked into the soil, the angry fire ants floating among the tender stalks of drowned grass, eager to cling to anything in a last attempt to survive.

Katie knew of these dangers as well. She'd seen her sister's pus-filled flesh, the skin torn by empty shells and snapped twigs. She'd also seen the flaky silhouettes of the moccasins their father caught and saved. He kept them as a warning, hanging in his shed as a reminder, but still she plunged ahead, relishing the way the grass felt, soft and slick between her toes. This was the only time the grass didn't scratch and itch.

The only time they played together was when it rained. They liked to reenact their favorite movies. Katie was always the main character, the star. She would jump from the top of the partially submerged picnic table and splash around, dirty water flying, hair soaked and clinging to her face, smiling and claiming she was going to be a famous actress when she grew up. She was going to move far, far away, out of little dead-end Bluff Hill to a big city, one with tall buildings that lit up at night. Rachel was always a supporting character, the one who didn't have to jump off the picnic table.

This play usually occurred only when the rain was letting up, when the floodwaters were still and about to recede. When hot white lightning splayed in the gray sky and rain whipped through the porch screen and soaked the furniture, Katie still ran outside, her arms swinging, her palms slapping the surface of the water and making it fly, but Rachel stayed inside. She remembered what it was like to feel the electricity of a nearby lightning bolt as her fingers touched the faucet: it was like a sudden punch in the arm.

Instead, she stayed inside amid the smell of incense and forgotten orange peel rotting in the garbage, playing the piano as best she could, trying not to hit the wrong keys, while her mother slept in the stale, dark bedroom on the other side of the wall and her father watched television in the den. She played every song in the beginner's book, pressing the pedals with her foot because it sounded nice, while Katie splashed in the dirty water and spun in circles, her arms stretched out, her mouth open to the rain.

Carbon Dioxide

Key Largo, Florida

The mosquitoes made me think of home.

Swarming around Liz's car, they bumped against the glass like they were trying to peck their way through. It made my skin pucker like when I watched scary movies.

Next to me, Liz took a sip of her warm Coke, made a face, probably because it had gone flat. She looked at the button to roll down the window, but I think she knew that the consequences of rolling it down outweighed the inconvenience of a bottle of flat soda.

"It's the carbon dioxide," she said. "They sense it, like an animal breathing. They probably think we're a giant cow."

Images came: the large, sun-dried pastures back home in Bluff Hill, full of mud-covered cows and horses swishing their tails absentmindedly at persistent flies. There were mosquitoes there, too, huge ones, loud and fat with cow blood. They would bite us till we looked like we were breaking out in hives, even though we were always slick and smelly from the repellant our mother drenched us in.

The red taillights from the truck in front of us blinked as the driver briefly let off the gas. Liz put her hand on the gear, ready to go, sinking back in the seat when she realized we weren't moving. I closed my eyes and imagined I was a famous actress, going down to the Keys to shoot a movie in which I was the star. I was going to spend my days on the warm beaches, curling my toes in the soft white sand, running through the foam-flecked waves that lapped the shore. I was not stuck waiting for the bridge to lower over Lake Surprise, on the way to my father's new house with his new wife.

"I'm going to call your father, Katie," she said, digging her cell phone out of her purse. "At this rate, we're definitely going to be late."

I thought of my father and immediately thought of my mother, of Rachel, and wished I was back home, that we were all back home, out riding four-wheelers through the long grass or fishing off the dock my father built. I wanted to smell the freshly cut grass and sweet orange blossoms blooming down the street, not the marshy mixture of mangroves and car exhaust that seeped through the air vents. I pictured my mother's pale face, cheeks creased in a smile as she waved good-bye when we'd left earlier that day. I tried not to think about Rachel, eyes red-rimmed, lying on her bed, refusing to come out.

"What are you thinking about?" Liz asked.

"The beaches," I told her. "Does Dad live by the water?"

"Everyone down here lives by the water," Liz said. "But don't get too excited. The beaches down here aren't like the ones you're used to. Lots of shells and rocks. Not much sand."

I opened my eyes, looked out at the salt-studded mangroves. I squinted and tried to see through the small gaps between the leaves, to see the turquoise water.

"Oh, thank God. Looks like the bridge is going down," Liz said. She shifted the car into drive and it lurched forward, the cloud of mosquitoes thinning and disappearing. Suddenly we were moving, mangroves flying by in a blur of brown and green.

Sweet Feed

Bluff Hill, Florida

One day during the summer she was twelve, the horses in the pasture across the street got loose—three of them, one so round and heavy Rachel knew it was pregnant. She was lying on her belly, stretched out on the prickly grass, reading *Black Beauty*, a book she'd read three times already. Her mother liked to chastise her for that.

"Why do you keep reading that stupid book over and over?" she asked every time Rachel picked up the thin paperback and ran her fingers over the creased and torn cover. "There are so many other things to read. You should try something new. Expand your mind."

The day the horses got loose, her mother was inside, resting because she said the heat took everything out of her. Rachel had just gotten to her favorite part—when Joe rescues Beauty—when she heard the abrupt clatter of metal on the warm asphalt. The horses were running three abreast toward the highway.

She had never met the man who lived across the street. She had only seen him at a distance, riding the horses, his lanky form slightly stooped in the saddle. She'd always thought he had dark hair, but as he ran out that afternoon she realized it was red-brown and gray flecked. His weathered skin formed sad semicircles under his eyes, and he seemed lost as he stood at the end of his gravel drive and looked out past the thick brush of saw palmetto and poison ivy.

"Can you help me?" he asked, and at first she didn't realize he was talking to her. She had never touched a horse before, at least not a real, big one, only the shaggy pony

her mother made her ride one year at the fair. She wasn't the type to catch horses; that was for her sister. Katie was the brave one, the one who would do anything. Katie would help him if she were there. But she wasn't, she was in Key Largo, where their mother said Rachel should be. When Rachel saw the way the man's shoulders slumped, the dirty halters grazing the ground, she said okay.

The horses hadn't gone far; the man and Rachel found them grazing in the neatly trimmed yard belonging to an elderly couple down the street. The man brought a bucket of feed and shook it as they approached.

"Here. Take a handful," he said as they stood on the side of the street. "They'll come right up to you. Just hold out your hand like this." He showed her how, stretching out his hand palm up. She followed his example, the gummy clumps of oats and molasses crumbling and falling between her fingers.

The horses came up right away, their soft lips flapping as they ate the sweet feed out of her hand. Their whiskers tickled and she wanted to drop the feed and run, but the man was beside her, slipping the halters up over their heads and buckling them tight. When he was done, he handed her one of the lead ropes. "Just follow me," he said. "Don't worry. She's a quiet one."

They walked on the side of the road. In the distance, the fragrant vapor from the citrus-processing plant billowed in the sky, and the air smelled sweet and smoky at the same time. Rachel kept her head down, looking ahead to where they were walking. The ground was littered with people's unwanted items: empty beer bottles, crumpled receipts, flattened cigarette butts, an unwrapped tampon. She tried to steer the horse that ambled at her side, tried to lead it away from the gray mounds of ant beds that, undisturbed, had

built up in the high weeds. The horse didn't seem to notice; it plowed through the beds, its heavy hooves sending the dirt and angry ants flying.

When they got to the man's pasture, he took the lead rope and thanked her. She reached out hesitantly as he led the horses away, letting her fingers run through her horse's mane. It was stiff with dried sweat, and when she pulled her hand away, her fingers were black. She watched as the man led the horses down the gravel road and disappeared behind the thin pines and palmetto bushes, then walked back to her house, to her discarded book splayed open on the grass. She sat down, opened it up, tried to read, but her mind kept drifting away, distracted by the smell of oranges in the air, the smell of sweaty horse that clung to her skin.

The Driskill

Austin, Texas

The hills reminded me that I wasn't in Florida anymore.

There weren't many in the city, just one sloping street lined with cars and clubs whose neon signs were hard to read in the warm afternoon sun. Outside of the city, the interstate wove through hills mottled with cacti and red clay, but I hardly saw that side of my new home.

I lived in a studio apartment with a working stove and laundry facilities littered with socks and discarded static cling sheets. It had a high ceiling with water stains and a balcony where dark rust peeked out from behind the peeling pink paint on the rails. It wasn't too bad, I guess, for where it was: right in the middle of the city, close enough that I could walk to school and work.

Every morning, I left early with a mug of black coffee warming my fingertips and a granola bar tucked in my pocket. Every evening I walked back along 6th Street just to be among the throng of warm bodies that brushed past each other on the speckled sidewalks. Smoke filtered out of the dimly lit bars, and the lilted song of the blackbirds mixed with guitars strumming.

Sometimes I took a detour and walked down Brazos Street so I could walk past The Driskill. It wasn't that I liked to admire the high arches or fancy windows, or that I hoped to see someone famous. It was because every night there was at least one horse-drawn carriage parked next to the motorcycles and limos that lined the street, and if there was no one waiting, the driver would let me pet the horses. They were much taller and thicker than the horses back home. Their manes were tightly plaited and they wore dark blinders around their eyes, so I was only allowed to pet their faces. "Otherwise you might startle them," the driver told me. Their faces were soft, their noses smooth, not stubbly like the noses of the horses back in Bluff Hill. Sometimes I stood there too long, and the driver had to remind me he had customers to drive.

From The Driskill I always walked quickly back to my apartment, careful to stay out from under the blackbird-filled trees. As I got closer to my apartment, the streets changed: the music got louder, angrier, and the people wore fewer clothes. Sometimes men (or boys, I often couldn't tell) in passing cars would roll down their windows and yell things I couldn't understand.

One night I passed a young man sitting shirtless on a bench outside the entrance to the complex. He was hunched over, hugging himself. He couldn't have been much more than thirteen or fourteen. His hair was gnarled, oily, hanging over his face as he

rocked back and forth. I told myself not to slow down, not to stare. As I walked past him, headlights slid over his pale body, showing pink scars, the curved outline of ribs, quivering gooseflesh. I wondered who he was, why he was all alone, rocking back and forth. Even as I pulled open the heavy glass door and headed up the dim staircase to my studio, I couldn't help but wonder if he had a mother, a sister, a family looking for him, wishing he would come home.

Moccasins

Bluff Hill, Florida

Her mother wasn't at all happy when Rachel told her. Rachel showed her the ring, the tiny fragment of a diamond glittering on her pale finger. She smiled as she talked about how Danny got down on his knee in the parking lot, in front of everyone. She told her mother that all of her friends were excited because she was the first one of them to get engaged.

"You're only eighteen," her mother said.

Rachel paused, lifted her hand to look at the ring, twirled it around her finger.

"You were nineteen."

Her mother didn't look at her, just kept staring out the sliding glass door at the backyard. The pond was low, the grass too high around it. The girls' father used to cut the grass twice a week over the summer; the rain made it grow so fast he could barely keep up. More than once he'd shown her the sliced remnants of a moccasin caught under the blades. Every once in a while he'd find one alive and decapitate it with a garden hoe. She never let the girls watch as its body jerked and twisted as if trying to find the lost head.

"Do you want your marriage to end up like mine?"

Rachel shrugged. "Lots of people get divorced. People who get married when they're thirty-five."

Her mother was quiet. In the back yard, a small hawk flew from the naked branches of a dead oak tree to the dock her husband had built back when the girls were little.

It's not just the age thing, she wanted to say. But her daughter wasn't listening anymore. She had gone down the hallway, back to the bedroom she'd slept in alone ever since Katie left. Her mother wished she could go back to the bedroom and open the door to find Rachel young again, lying on her stomach reading *Black Beauty*. If she could, she would make Rachel leave with her sister, make her go live in Key Largo, where the air smelled like salt and fish instead of horses and orange blossoms.

Frond Flowers

Austin, Texas

The flowers reminded me of home.

At least, I think they were flowers. The man making them never told me.

I had stopped by the drugstore on the way home, the small white paper that was supposed to solve all of my problems tucked in my purse. This would help me sleep, the doctor had said as he handed me the prescription, his smudged signature scrawled at the bottom. That's all I wanted. Just a few nights of rest, of blackness and nothingness, instead of staring at the water-stained ceiling, or the glaring red numbers on my alarm clock, or the intrusive amber light that leaked in through the bent blinds as the fan in the corner buzzed and rotated, unable to soften the stifling air.

The man was sitting on a bench by the front entrance to the drugstore. He had dirty blonde hair pulled back by a rubber band and white socks that came up to his knees. Beside him on the bench was a pile of palm tree fronds. He had one in his hands, twisting it like he was making a balloon animal, as I passed him on the way into the store.

The pharmacist told me it would take an hour to fill the prescription. "Would you like to wait or pick it up later?" she asked.

I thought of the streets winding back toward my apartment, filled at this time with mint green taxis and mini vans carrying families home after a long day of work and school. I thought of the empty apartment awaiting me, the unmade bed with tousled sheets draped to the floor, the answering machine flashing with a message from my mother wanting to know how I was doing, how my job was, what great man I'd met recently, what was new and exciting.

"I'll wait," I told her.

After a while I headed back outside. As I passed through the door, I noticed that the man had finished twisting the frond. It now sat on the other side of him, separated from the pile of straight fronds. It was curled and twisted at the top to resemble flower petals.

"How much?" I asked the man.

He looked up at me, then down to the frond in his hand. "How much?"

"Are you selling them?"

He looked at the pile next to him, then shrugged. "Sure."

"How much?"

"Ten dollars."

I pulled out my wallet, sifted through the wrinkled bills, and handed him a bunch of singles. He took them and, without looking at me, handed me the frond flower.

It was green, a deep, healthy green, and smooth beneath my fingers. I wanted to ask the man where he got the fronds, where in this state there was a subtropical environment to support the trees they grew on. But he was already back to work, twisting a new frond, the wrinkled singles lying on the bench beside him. Instead, I sat in my car with the windows down, twirling the flower in my hand, closing my eyes and lifting it to my nose like I used to do with the orange blossoms back home. During the summer, when the branches were heavy with fruit and fragrant blossoms, I would slip through the barbed wire surrounding the grove and bring home a bouquet for my mother. Rachel was always too afraid to come with me, always afraid we would get caught, but she liked to smell the flowers with me, liked to put them behind her ears.

The frond flower was too long, too stiff to put behind my ear, and it didn't really smell, but I put it in a vase when I got home anyway, and set it on the bed stand beside the alarm clock to give me something new to stare at when the deep blue darkness fell.

Blue

Bluff Hill, Florida

The day of the shower, blue was everywhere: gleaming from the surface of over-inflated balloons, filling the computerized calligraphy that stretched across the laminated banner, dangling in threads of fraying ribbon from the fan. Rachel even wore blue, a light blue tank top that was too tight and didn't cover her stomach, showing everyone the jagged amethyst stretch marks. Completely inappropriate, her mother thought.

Everyone from Bluff Hill had come to the shower, it seemed like, come to celebrate her nineteen-year-old's swollen belly and fingers. Her aunts were there, her mother's sisters, as well as their daughters. All of Rachel's high school friends, most of them still living close by, were there, their bangs high and curled, their necks gleaming with gold chains, their ears sagging with heavy hoop earrings. A couple of the girls had recently gotten married. They tried to show Rachel's mother their tiny diamond fragments glittering on their pale fingers, but she smiled politely and looked away. The only person who wasn't there was Katie. Rachel periodically asked why she wasn't there, but her mother never answered.

They played games, but not the games Rachel had requested to play.

"Guess the baby's name," the mother said. "How many words can you make out of this name?"

They scribbled on napkins with their dull golf pencils. They guessed Michael, and Shawn, and Daniel.

"What's your guess, Grandma?" one of the engaged girls asked.

"Don't call me Grandma," the mother said. "I'm not old enough to be a grandma."

Rachel opened gifts next. More blue: blue mittens, blue socks, blue overalls that said "Mama's Little Angel" on them. Rachel laughed, held them up for the flash of the cameras, bent ungracefully for the next bag.

The last gift was a bassinet. Rachel smiled as she studied the picture of it on the outside of the box.

"How beautiful," one of her aunts murmured. "You should get your husband to put that together tonight."

They didn't play any more games after she finished opening gifts. The guests partook of cake and juice and were gone. Before leaving, one of Rachel's aunts came up to her, whispered, "Just wait till the baby comes. She won't be able to resist when she holds him in her arms."

Rachel's mother stood by, pretended not to hear. When they were all gone, she hurried around, picking up the blue shreds of paper, the loose curls of ribbons, the banner, shoving everything into a black trash bag. Finally it was gone, every trace of blue, and she smiled.

Blind Spot

Austin, Texas

I don't even remember how it happened. All I remember is that my cell phone rang, and as I picked it up to see the number, the car in the middle lane swerved. It was a gold Honda, slightly ahead of me in the middle lane, and then next thing I knew it swerved and hit the front right side of my car. I dropped the cell phone, tried to control the car as it fishtailed.

I immediately pulled off the Interstate to assess the damage, as did the driver of the Honda. My car had a large dent by the bumper, and the hood had shifted, making it difficult to open the driver's side door.

"I'm so sorry," the driver of the Honda said as she got out of the car. She was an older woman with stiff gray curls and smudged pink lipstick. She had a thick southern

accent. “This car was merging on my right and I thought it was going to hit me. I didn’t even see you.”

“It happens.” I climbed back into my car, searched for my cell phone to call the highway patrol. I found it lying on the floor, partially hidden under the passenger’s seat. Before I dialed the highway patrol, I looked to see who had been calling me. It was an 863 number, but not my mother’s number.

The highway patrol took almost an hour to get there. We stood on the side of the Interstate amongst clumpy red clay, dry grass, and people’s unwanted items: old cigarette butts, a few crumpled soda cans, a lone leather sandal. The sun was hot and bright, and I could feel my skin burning. There wasn’t enough moisture in the air to sweat.

The woman talked the whole while. She talked about how crazy the drivers were nowadays and how her husband refused to drive on the Interstate anymore. Then she noticed my license plate.

“You’re a long way from home,” she said. “Where in Florida are you from?”

“Bluff Hill.”

“Is that close to Disney World?”

“Sort of,” I told her. I figured anywhere in Florida was closer to Disney World than here.

“I went to Disney once,” she said. “Cleanest bathrooms I ever saw. I told everyone about those bathrooms.”

The highway patrolman finally got there. He walked around the cars, surveyed the damage, asked us what happened. I let the woman talk to him first.

“I didn’t even see her,” the woman said. “She was in my blind spot.”

When he turned to me, I said, “That’s pretty much it.”

He took down our license information. “Is this your current address?” he asked.

I hadn’t even been back to Florida since I left for school. “Yes.”

It took him about twenty minutes to write the report. I stood staring at my license, watching the way the light reflected off the shiny pink and green and yellow plastic. I looked so young in the picture, my face flushed and smiling, so naïve.

When the officer was done, he handed us back our licenses and a copy of the report. I walked back to my car, slipped the license into my wallet, but didn’t leave right away. Instead, I pulled out my cell phone, looked up the 863 number. It looked familiar to me, although I couldn’t place it. I thought it could be my mother calling from work, or it could be one of my aunts. I thought it could be Rachel. I pressed “send”.

Leo

Bluff Hill, Florida

Her mother had never liked Leo, not one day since her father brought him home ten years ago, a fuzzy, blue-eyed kitten who yowled at five in the morning and climbed her drapes. After her father left, leaving Leo behind, her mother kicked him outside to chase the squirrels.

“How long do cats live?” she used to ask Rachel, even though Rachel had told her on numerous occasions that cats could easily live to be fifteen years old. “I can’t believe your father didn’t take that cat with him,” her mother would respond. “He knows how I hate cats.”

“Moving is traumatic for cats,” Rachel told her. “They prefer to live in one place their whole lives.”

Rachel was the one who discovered Leo the day he was hit. She had come to tell her mother that she had talked to Katie, that Katie had some exciting news to tell her. She had eighteen-month-old Timmy with her. She was pulling into the driveway when she saw Leo. He sat off to the side of the road, head bent, sides heaving.

She went inside, Timmy perched on her hip. "Mom, is Mr. Kay home? Leo's been hit by a car."

Mr. Kay was the man who lived next door. Whenever the girls were young and Leo or some stray dog dragged a torn, half-dead rabbit through the yard, her mother always went to get Mr. Kay, who took his gun and the wounded animal back to the woods.

"Leo's been hit?" her mother said. She was in the kitchen, her graying hair pulled back in a sloppy braid, her hands covered in sticky dough. "Go get the carrier."

Rachel shifted Timmy to her other hip. "It looks pretty bad."

"I'm pretty sure the vet's office down the street is open," her mother said, wiping her hands on a soggy dish towel. Her hands trembled as she hung the towel on the rack beside the sink. The towel slid off, and her mother bent to pick it up with an exasperated sigh.

"Well? Are you going to get the carrier or not?" she snapped at Rachel.

Rachel helped her mother load Leo into the carrier and drove them down the street to the vet's office. It was a small trailer lodged between a used car dealership and the citrus processing plant.

The inside of the vet's office smelled like bleach and urine and fresh wood shavings. Her mother took the carrier from Rachel and went straight to the front desk,

her small frame straining as she tried to keep the carrier from bumping against her legs. The receptionist peered into the carrier, shook her head.

The vet came out a few minutes later. "I'm going to give him something to calm him down," she said. "We'll have to watch him for a while to see if he has brain damage."

"We'll wait," her mother said.

"It could be a while," the vet told her, looking down at her clipboard. "Maybe hours."

"We'll wait," her mother said again.

The walls of the office were covered with paintings and photographs of all sorts of animals. On the wall directly across from where they sat was a bulletin board where people posted fliers for lost pets. Rachel bounced Timmy on her knees, tried to think of how she could tell her mother about Katie.

The office was fairly empty. Every once in a while someone came in, the sweet scent of the citrus plant following them through the door, temporarily masking the odor of bleach and urine and shavings.

"I hate the smell of that plant," her mother said. "You can smell it all over town. Like burning orange peel."

Rachel didn't mind the smell. She'd much rather the smells of the processing plant than the smells of the burning groves that seemed to have permanently tainted her home. Every week a new grove had canker, a new plume of yellow-black smoke filled the sky and seeped under the doors and windowpanes into her house. Her mother was lucky; the grove on her street was the only one in all of Bluff Hill that was still healthy.

Timmy eventually grew fussy, so Rachel left. She decided to tell her mother about Katie when she got home, maybe over dinner.

A few hours later, her mother called.

"They had to put Leo down," she said. "His jaw was crushed."

"I'm sorry," Rachel said. "At least you're rid of him five years early."

Her mother didn't answer. The next week when Rachel came over to visit, she found a new kitten, a furry calico, perched on the window sill, moist nose to the glass, watching squirrels dash across the yard.

Orange Blossoms

Bluff Hill, Florida

It hasn't rained at all this summer. The sisters sit in the driveway in sagging lawn chairs, Katie with a bottle of warm beer, Rachel with a Sprite. Their mother is inside, in her room, where she has been ever since Katie called a few weeks ago to tell her she was coming home.

The sisters have done a lot of walking this summer, crossing all the ground of their childhood. Sometimes they walk across the back yard, through the creaky chain-link gate, all the way to the edge of the pond, where the murky water is low and the long grass sprouting through the thin layer of algae is brown and brittle. The thirsty grass covering the lawn is stiff, a brown-yellow-green, and crunches under their feet when they go walking, Katie's feet usually bare, Rachel's always clad in thick-soled tennis shoes. The oak trees are dead and bare, tiny holes and powdery sawdust at their trunks evidence of the bugs that gnaw inside their bark.

When Katie first arrived, they walked down the street to the orange grove so Katie could slip through the rusted barbwire and pick a handful of the white blossoms to place in a vase for their mother. She placed them in her mother's favorite pink vase, the one with hearts etched in the glass, and put them on the kitchen counter so their fragrance would sweeten the air. In the morning, she found the vase emptied and sitting by the sink, the wilted blossoms curled on top of newspapers in the trash.

For the last few days, the smell of smoke has tainted the air, billowing in thick black funnels that can be seen for miles. The sisters watch sometimes, their noses pressed to the faded windows in the living room as their mother sleeps in the dark bedroom down the hall. They watch as, day after day, the hot red blaze crackles and consumes the grove down the street, turning the trees, the diseased oranges, the fragile blossoms into paper-thin ashes that float down over the driveway, the roof, the pond.

Today, they sit and sip their drinks and contemplate the charred black silhouettes down the street. They don't say much, but they both wonder what will happen to what's left of the grove. They wonder if the rain, when it comes, will wash the air of the smell of smoke and wash the soot away, wash away all that's left of the canker. They wonder if, eventually, someone will start a new grove, or if the field will remain black and ashy and barren, what their mother will always refer to as an eyesore.

ESPÍRITU SANTO

One day we were out by the lake, where we spent most of our time sitting on the hot concrete dock and dangling our feet in the murky water. Danielle, our cousin, sat next to me, swinging her legs back and forth. We called her Dani. She hated that, said it sounded like a boy's name. Her name was beautiful, feminine, Hebrew, she liked to remind us.

A dark shadow, probably a bass, floated far beneath us, along the algae-covered sand.

"It means 'God is my judge,'" Dani told us.

"Glad he's not mine," my brother Corey said. He reached around me and pushed Dani into the water. He laughed as her head bobbed to the surface and she sputtered a weak scream.

"Hannah, don't let the gators get me," she pleaded, looking at me with her big hazel eyes, her lower lip trembling.

We heard the glass shutters rattle as the front door to our grandmother's house slammed. Our grandmother stood on the dusty brick steps, her flour-covered hands resting on her hips. She squinted against the bright orange sun.

"Dani, your mom is on the way," she called.

Three times a week, Dani's mother took her to church. They attended this Methodist church on the outskirts of town, right in the middle of a cow pasture. It must have been a hundred years old. It was all whitewashed wood and had dark red carpet and pews, and even smelled old inside, like the yellowed pages of the first novel I read by myself, *Black Beauty*.

Sometimes Aunt Wanda would invite us to church, but my mother didn't like us to go. She said Aunt Wanda only liked church because it made her feel a part of something. She said that Dani was going to grow up to be just like her mother.

"Divorced and unhappy," she said. "Church ain't going to make no difference."

I went to church with Dani once, when we were in middle school. It was Wednesday night, and all the people there were our age. The youth leader did all the talking. He was a young man, probably in his mid-to-late twenties. He was short, with cropped blonde hair that crept up from behind his ears and stopped just before the crown of his head. He wore glasses that made his eyes look twice their actual size.

All he talked about that night was sex. How God liked sex. God created sex. If you waited until marriage, sex could be the greatest thing you ever experienced.

I couldn't believe he was talking about it, saying the s-word so openly. Adults never talked about sex, not at home, not at school. Our friends didn't really even talk about it much. Mostly we saw it on television, but we didn't pay much mind to it then.

That night, after the service, a few of us went out into the pasture behind the church: me, Dani, and two boys. I couldn't remember their names. One of them I recognized from school. He was lanky, with bushy brown curls and a gap between his two front teeth.

The ground was soft and slick from a recent rain, and the air smelled of pine, manure, and moldy hay. The sun had set while we were inside the church, and now the sky was a deep, even purple. In the distance, headlights bobbed as cars hit potholes along the dirt road leading to the church.

"We shouldn't be out here," I told Dani. "My mom will be here soon."

"Come on, Hannah," she said, grabbing my hand. Her nails dug into my skin.

As soon as we were far enough from the road, the boy with curly hair took Dani's arm and led her towards a cluster of pine trees and saw palmetto. Dani looked over her shoulder and smiled at me. The other boy placed his hand on my back.

I pushed him away and ran toward the road, slipping on the slick grass and mud. My shirt caught on the barbwire as I climbed through. My mother was standing by her car, waiting for me, a frown marring her smooth face.

When we were young, elementary school-aged, before her parents divorced, Corey and I spent a lot of time at Dani's house. We went there every day after school because our mother worked until eight. I didn't mind it so much, but Corey hated it. He said the whole place was disgusting and made his stomach churn.

True, Dani's house was musty and had dark corners. It was an old house, over a century old, as were most of the houses in Bluff Hill. It was a wooden house with peeling white paint and cockroaches as big as my fist. I remember the roaches. They scurried along the grimy linoleum and burrowed in the crevices between floorboards. When I spent the night at Dani's, I could hear them crawling in the walls.

Other than the roaches, though, it wasn't so bad. She had a trampoline. We could spend hours on that, doing flips and toe touches, trying to avoid landing on the sharp acorns that fell from the thick oak tree branches hanging overhead. The backyard was large, square, and filled with soft dirt, easy to dig through. Our favorite thing to do besides jump on the trampoline was to dig large holes. On hot summer afternoons, we'd take the popsicles we'd made out of frozen orange juice or fruit punch and slide down into one of the holes, relishing the cool, damp earth, the smell of dirt and the tender roots of grass we'd left piled above.

This is where we were sitting, inside one of our freshly dug holes, the summer that we were ten and Dani told me her parents were getting divorced.

"Mama says it's not such a big deal," she told me. Her lips and tongue were bright red from the popsicle she was sucking on. "She says lots of people get divorced."

"Well." I didn't know what else to say. I didn't know if that was true or not. My parents had never even been married.

"I don't get it," Dani continued, staring at the nub of a popsicle left in her hand. "The Bible says divorce is wrong, right?"

"I guess."

"So how can Mama say it's not such a big deal?"

"I dunno."

She lifted the popsicle to her mouth again. Red syrup dribbled down her chin and stained her yellow blouse.

"Do you believe in God?" she asked after several minutes. "Oh, Hannah, tell me you do."

At ten, I had never thought much about it. I knew Dani and her family went to church. I knew that at school, there was a moment of silence after the pledge so people could pray if they wanted. I knew my mother had a leather Bible with her name inscribed on the front in a fancy gold font, but the only time she said Jesus was when she was mad.

"I guess." I didn't know what else to say. I could tell by the way she was looking at me that she wanted a more confident assurance, but I couldn't give it to her. I couldn't even lie.

Her brow wrinkled like she was deep in thought. She stared at the melting popsicle for a few minutes, then threw it into the damp dirt.

"Let's go bounce on the trampoline," she said, smiling. Even her teeth were stained red.

When we were seniors in high school, Dani went on a mission trip to Spain. My mother thought this was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard.

"Spain?" she said when I told her. I was sitting on a bar stool in the kitchen, and she was shucking corn. The wispy silk was all over the counter and floor. "They got churches there, right?"

I was jealous. I had never been out of the state. I had hardly even been outside of little Bluff Hill.

When Dani got back, she couldn't stop talking about how great her trip was.

"The people there are so nice, Hannah," she told me, clapping her hands together. She told me about how the church there was trying to start a campus ministry at a local

university. Every day she'd gone to the campus and had lunch in the cafeteria, talking in her limited Spanish to the students there.

"The pastor and his wife, they said I could come back any time," Dani said. "Oh, Hannah, I think this is what I could do, you know? Travel. Be a missionary."

"That's great," I said. I didn't see what she found so appealing, but at least it would get her out of Bluff Hill.

Two months after we graduated, Dani showed up at my house, her face pink and bloated, and told me she was pregnant.

My last semester in college, I had the opportunity to study abroad at a university in Pamplona. Even though it meant going further into debt, I went, grateful for the opportunity to go somewhere. Finally, it was my turn to get out of Florida.

The first thing that I noticed about Spain was the cold. It was not the same cold that could be felt during the occasional front that swept through Bluff Hill. This was a biting cold, one that made my jeans feel heavy and damp, that stung my eyes and burned inside my chest with each breath. Gloves and thick socks were no defense. The cold seeped through my thin skin, through muscle, sinew, and blood, right done to my bones, so there was nothing I could do to get warm.

This was how it was almost the entire four months I was there. I quickly grew disillusioned and wondered why I had been so eager to go in the first place. I did not find Spain beautiful like Dani had, nor did I find the people there friendly. The streets were crowded with tiny cars and statues of bulls. Dull gray and washed-out pink apartment buildings lined the cobblestone streets in the older part of Pamplona. Each apartment had

a tiny balcony encased by a black iron railing. Some people decorated their balconies with potted plants or hung their sweaters out to dry, but other than that the buildings were still, silent, colorless and lifeless like the overcast sky.

I made few friends the entire time I was there. The students at La Universidad Publica de Navarra were cordial but distant. The first day of classes, I met a student in the cafeteria who seemed friendly. He had dark, short-cropped hair and light blue eyes. His name was Alex. He sat across from me at one of the long blue tables. He spoke very little English, but we managed to make small talk. He ended up inviting me to church that night. I had no desire to go to church, but I also didn't find the prospect of sitting alone in my cramped apartment appealing, either.

The church was in a small, rented room in the newer section of Pamplona. It was drastically different from Dani's church, which was the only church I could compare it to. This church was in a room with barred windows. There were no pews, only folding chairs. There was no organ, only an electric keyboard. The women were given the plastic folding chairs lined neatly along the tile, but they stood most of the time anyway. I felt uncomfortable, so I stayed in the back with the men, with Alex, my hands in my pockets, playing with a crumpled receipt and a worn penny.

The pastor was at the head of the room, pacing in front of a painted sign that read "Jesucristo: Dios y Señor" in dark crimson letters. He spoke enthusiastically, his deep voice filling the crowded room. I couldn't understand much of what he said, but I began to recognize certain phrases that he repeated over and over. His favorite phrase seemed to be "Espìritu Santo." When he said this, he raised his outstretched hands, his fingers trembling. He looked like Dani did the night that I went with her to church. Her face, so

pale and round, had been flushed from the close warmth of the bodies crowding the pews. She had smiled and lifted her hands, stretched and stretched until the muscles strained in her thin arms, stretched as if trying to touch something she couldn't see.

After the service, Alex and I left together. Outside, the air was cold, damp, and still. Our breath instantaneously crystallized in front of us, hanging like rain-heavy clouds. My clothes felt stiff, heavy, and within minutes the cold seeped all the way through me. We walked quickly, studying the tufts of grass pushing through the cracked sidewalk. The buildings lining the sidewalk were covered in bright green and blue and yellow graffiti, mostly threats in Basque.

"Hannah."

I realized Alex had stopped. I stopped too and faced him. He stood with his hands deep in his pockets, his shoulders hunched so that his face was partially hidden inside his coat.

He stepped closer to me and smiled. His ears were pinched pink from the cold. I knew what he wanted. His face was partially in shadow, but in the cold moonlight I could see that his blue eyes never left my face. I suddenly wondered if he had a wife, a girlfriend.

"It's late," I said. "My apartment is far from here."

He turned and pointed at an apartment complex across the street. The balconies were still, decorated with potted flowers, clothes drying in the cold air.

"Mi casa," he said.

He turned and walked across the street, stopping when he reached the entrance to the apartment complex. He looked over his shoulder at me. Despite the cold, I felt a surge of heat creeping up my neck, my face. I licked my lips, pulled my jacket tight, and followed him.

His apartment was small, even smaller than mine. The kitchen was bare except for a bowl of oranges, an espresso machine, and half a bottle of red wine. In the living room, a plaid couch was pressed against the white wall. An exercise bicycle was to the right of the couch, facing the balcony. The bedroom was separate, but had no door. A cotton sheet hung from the doorframe.

Alex slid out of his coat and tossed it onto the counter. "Café?" he asked, motioning toward the espresso machine.

"No, thank you."

That was it. There was no pretense, not even the attempt at romance that American men offered.

He pulled back the curtain and entered the bedroom. I followed. I felt warm, uncomfortably so, although the apartment wasn't much warmer than outside. My hands trembled. Alex's bedroom was as sparse as the rest of the apartment. A twin mattress sat beneath the window, a wool blanket bunched on top of thin cotton sheets.

Alex stopped by the bed. He pulled his shirt over his head, then unbuttoned his pants. I couldn't look. I focused on the wall, the shadows cast from the flickering lamp, the dirty socks and corduroy pants crumbled on the polished wood floor. The Bible on the bedstand.

I thought of Dani suddenly, of the last time I'd seen her. Bile rose in my throat. I backed up, bumping into the wall.

"I'm sorry," I said, then remembered how to say it in Spanish. "Lo siento." Alex began to laugh. I pushed aside the cotton sheet and ran out of the apartment.

After we graduated from high school, I did not see or hear anything about Dani until I came home for Thanksgiving the year I turned twenty-five. It was the first time I had been home in years. Not many people came to my grandmother's house for Thanksgiving that year: just me, my mother, and Aunt Wanda. Corey was living in Alabama at that time, and was just beginning his third marriage. He said he didn't have the money to come down.

I was surprised to see that Dani wasn't there. All day I kept expecting her to show up. I spent most of the day out by the lake, dangling my legs over the end of the concrete dock. In the murky water, minnows swarmed by the slick, algae-covered steps. The grass on the lake bottom stirred as waves from a passing boat slapped against the dock. I thought about all the times that Corey and I had swum here when we were children. We loved digging through the sand with our toes and finding slippery mussels. I used to give my mussels to Dani because she was too afraid to come in. She said there were gators and water moccasins. We never saw either, and eventually I stopped finding mussels for Dani.

After dinner, Aunt Wanda came over and gave me a hug. She smelled like peppermint and cigarette smoke, and I wondered if she'd gone back to smoking. Her features were sharp, and her tired smile didn't soften her face.

"I'm so glad you could make it," she said. "Dani would have wanted to see you."

I knew that I should ask about Dani, that I should be polite—she was my cousin, after all—but I stared out at the lake, at the sailboat rocking on the yellow waves, at the line of dark oaks spread against the red sky. When I didn't say anything, Aunt Wanda continued.

"She's living in Wauchula, now. She has two kids, a boy and a girl. They're so cute."

She pulled out a glossy picture from her wallet. The kids were cute. The girl had fair, wispy curls and pink cheeks, and the boy had Dani's round eyes. Dani was in the picture, too, standing behind her children, and she was changed. She was softer, fuller, her hair darker and ragged at the ends. Her clothes were faded and worn, and the purple skin under her eyes sagged.

"You should give her a call sometime," Aunt Wanda said as she slipped the picture back into her wallet. "I think she gets lonely sometimes, you know?"

That night, walking back from Alex's apartment, I couldn't get warm. I walked past the Plaza de Toros, its red doors gleaming in the lamplight. I walked past bus stops with their posters of President Bush holding a dollar bill beside his face: "Lo que pasa en el mundo…no se vende." I walked past the closed clothing shops and bars where people sat smoking and sipping café. I stopped in one when I was close to my apartment and ordered cola cao. It was blander than hot chocolate in the United States, not nearly as sweet, but it was hot and I liked it. I drank it as fast as I could without spitting it out. It

burned my tongue and throat and I could feel it coursing through my veins, but I still couldn't get warm.

When I got back to my apartment, I climbed into bed without even taking my shoes off. I pulled the covers up over my head and tucked my knees to my chest. I tried to go to sleep, but all I could think about was Dani. I had a calling card tucked in my purse, an international card good for three hours.

I thought about calling Dani, but then decided that she wouldn't be interested in hearing from me. I was sure she was busy with her baby, her boyfriend. I remembered the way she had looked at me that muggy summer day. Her eyes were swollen and her lips bright red, and she wrung her hands in front of her as she stood on the front porch.

"Hannah, please help me," she said. "Tell me what to do."

I stared at her. My tongue felt heavy, swollen. Later, I realized that even if I had known what to say, I doubt I could have spoken one word.

EIGHTY-SIX

Nelson was sleeping when the phone call came. In the murky, pre-dawn darkness, he reached over and slapped the alarm clock before realizing it was the telephone's shrill ring that woke him. He grabbed the receiver and mumbled a groggy hello, not even awake enough to wonder who could be calling at such an hour. A soft, lilted voice greeted him.

"This is Dr. Reynolds at Florida Hospital."

There was a pause, and Nelson felt he should respond. "Okay. Hi."

"I'm calling to inform you that there has been a slip. We accidentally nicked a major artery during your father's surgery. Would you like us to try and stop the bleeding?"

Nelson sat up and ran a hand over his face. He hadn't been aware that his father was even having surgery. He had hardly thought about his father since he was in middle school, when his father walked out on the family.

Nelson hesitated, his tongue heavy and dry. The sheets were damp with sweat, and as he threw off the comforter, the cool air from the overhead fan made him shiver. Headlights from a passing car crept through the blinds and slid across the wall. They paused above the dresser and quivered. The intrusion of the white light in the otherwise shadowy room made his eyes ache.

In Nelson's silence, the doctor said, "Well, he is eighty-six."

Nelson finally found his voice. "Please, do what you can," he said.

He would later tell himself that he hesitated because he was half-asleep, because he was trying to make sense of the doctor's question.

Nelson reached the hospital two and a half hours after Dr. Reynold's call. Everything was over by then. He sat in the small waiting room on an uncomfortable green chair, studying the scuff marks on his shoes, the layer of dust on the silk plant next to him. The smell of bleach and antiseptic made him nauseous. Outside, a light mist drifted down like snow flurries. Bright green rope lights, leftover from Christmas two months ago, gleamed faintly from where they were coiled around the concrete columns.

After a while, Nelson realized he should probably make some phone calls. He wiped his hands on his jeans, pulled his cell phone out of his jacket pocket, and stepped outside. His breath hung in a damp, heavy cloud in front of his face.

The first person he called was his daughter, Jillian. It was the first time he'd spoken to her in almost a month. As soon as his ex-wife put Jillian on the phone, he told her everything: how his father had been scheduled to have knee surgery, how his father had listed him as the emergency contact person, as the person to sign the paperwork, to decide what to do. He even told her what the doctor said,

Jillian didn't respond immediately. After a while, she coughed and said, "Well, what's so bad about that? The man was old."

Her words, her short, flat tone, surprised him. She hadn't seen her grandfather since the Thanksgiving she was five, which was right before Nelson and his ex-wife divorced, but he still expected some kind of solemn, compassionate consolation.

Nelson quickly got over her reaction. He cleared his throat, ran a hand over his face, tried to apologize. "I know you're supposed to spend the weekends with me, but I didn't think you'd want to come. We're just going to be making funeral arrangements. It's not going to be fun, you know?"

"I know, Nelson."

"I'll be by next weekend." The words were so routine he said them without thinking.

"Okay. See you then." The dial tone echoed in his ear.

Next, he called his sister, Rena. She was still asleep, and he didn't get much in response except for a long, raspy sigh and a muddled invitation to come down so they could "work out the details."

Rena's house was on the outskirts of Wauchula, bordering the Peace River. When he got there, late in the afternoon, Rena was out back, sitting at a splintered picnic table close to the river's edge, filleting fish. Her son, Bryan, was sitting next to her. Rena waved when Nelson walked up.

"It's about time," she said. "I thought maybe you were lost."

He offered to help her with the fish. She paused to wipe her hands on her jeans, smearing dark fish blood along the threadbare denim, then handed him the utensils. They worked in silence for several minutes, using dull spoons and old knifes to scrape and saw and peel away the thick layers of skin. Slippery scales flew everywhere and clung to the mold-streaked wood of the table, glittering in the late afternoon sun.

After a while, Rena asked him to explain what happened with their father. He'd told her everything when he called earlier that morning; he'd described the whole visit while he stood and watched the pale gray and white of dawn splay across the sky, but Rena didn't seem to remember any of this, so he told her again.

"I just can't believe it," Rena said, sawing so hard that the spoon slipped out of her hand, and the fish she was working on dropped into the dirt. She picked it up and tossed it into the river. "I mean, that's got to be malpractice. How much do you think that's worth?"

Nelson studied her face. "I have no idea. I haven't thought about it."

Rena's cheeks were red, and she kept brushing her untrimmed bangs out of her eyes. She reminded him of their mother, of the flushed look their mother had when she tucked them in on the sweltering nights his father came home late. On those nights she stayed up late, the windows open and the fans churning the heavy air, waiting for the telltale grind of tires on concrete, the blinding glare of the headlights reflected on the bare living room wall.

"I knew a woman, a woman from work, who sued for malpractice once. Won, too. A lot of money." Rena was talking faster, slurring her sentences together. Next to her, Bryan used one of the old knives to poke at one of the fish's eyeballs. He poked until the knife penetrated the membrane and a clear, thick liquid seeped out.

After a while, Rena took a break from filleting, said she needed a jacket. "I can't stand this weather," she said. She told Nelson the forecasters were predicting record lows for Florida that night. "Unusual for February," she said. "Unusual for anytime, I guess." She dropped the knife onto the table and headed across the dry grass toward the house.

Bryan seemed to quickly grow bored poking at the fish eyeballs. He bent over and picked at the bright green stickers that clung to his shoelaces.

When Rena came back, she was wearing a heavy suede jacket that rained fringe along the arms. It was the color of her hair, a sun-burnt brown. When she reached the table, she pulled an old receipt and a dull-tipped pencil from her pocket.

"Now, tell me again what that doctor said. Want to make sure I get it right."

When he was done, Rena folded the paper and put it back in her pocket. "I'm calling my lawyer in the morning," she said.

Bryan snorted. He was done picking the stickers off his shoelaces, and now they sat beside him in a lopsided pile on the bench.

"Well, we're almost done here," Rena said. She picked up her knife and resumed filleting. "How do you like your fish? I got some good southern batter if you want to fry them."

Blackened, Nelson thought. He liked everything blackened. A couple of months ago, the last time he went out to dinner with Jillian, he'd tried to get her to order the blackened mahi-mahi and instead she'd ordered chicken fingers. He didn't remember what they talked about that night, but he remembered how the smudged eyeliner made her eyes look small and white, how she kept looking at the family sitting in the next booth or the bartender moving behind the wine glasses that hung upside down like drying flowers. He remembered how she called him Nelson instead of Dad and how he asked the waiter for red pepper—flakes, not ground—so he could pour it over the blackened fish until it was covered and all he could taste was the burning.

"However you want to fix the fish is fine," Nelson said in response to Rena's question. The sun was slowly slipping behind the jagged line of pine tree and oak, and long shadows slid out over the brown water of the river.

In the fading light, the floating carcass of the fish Rena tossed in the river moved south and bobbed on the unsettled surface of the water. It looked like the fish he'd thrown back the time his father took him fishing. That was back when he was young, six or seven, before his mother's feverish cheeks and silent assurances and the beam of headlights beating the sunlight through the blinds. His father had taken him out to the river and they'd stood in the mud on the bank among snapped twigs and shards of broken glass and waited until the bright orange bobber had disappeared.

The first fish Nelson had caught was small, blue and silver. It was so slick it almost slid out of his trembling hands, and the fins pierced his palms as he tried to hold on. He couldn't get the hook out, and by the time his father finally intervened, the fish had gone limp. Nelson threw it back in and waited for it to disappear under the water, but it didn't. It floated and drifted along in the direction of the ripples.

"Don't worry," his father had said. "It's just in shock. It'll be fine."

So long ago, Nelson thought. Back when he used to tell everyone that he wanted to be just like his father when he grew up.

The temperatures dropped quickly as the pale gray light of dusk faded. Rena gathered up the filmy knife and spoon and the plate layered with pink and white fillets, and they headed over the dry grass into the stale warmth of the house.

After dinner, the pungent smell of the fried fish still clinging to the air, they sat in the shadowy living room watching some reality show Rena liked, the only light coming from the muted glare of the television screen. Nelson was on the couch, an old comforter drawn over his bare feet, his head propped up on a stiff pillow. Rena sat on the old brown recliner, her legs tucked up under her, taking long draws from a cigarette. The glowing tip quivered in the dark as she moved the cigarette toward her lips.

"What do you think we can get?" Rena asked after a few minutes. "I mean, realistically."

Muffled music floated down the hall from the closed door of the guest room, where Bryan had been since dinner. The walls vibrated ever so slightly, causing the pictures hung in the hallway to rattle.

"I saw him," Nelson said. "Dad. Last year." His voice sounded small, hollow, in the wake of the hysterical crying coming from the television.

"Oh, yeah?" She lifted the cigarette to her lips, took a long draw, dropped it into the ashtray beside her. "What'd he have to say?"

Nelson wasn't really sure. His father had shown up at his apartment in Fort Lauderdale last year, his hair and stomach gone, his pale skin saggy and mottled with dark red moles. He hadn't said much, except that he wanted to see Nelson, hadn't seen him in a while. It was the first time Nelson had seen him in almost eight years.

They hadn't stayed in the apartment. They'd walked down the street, past the French restaurant advertising specials in dusty chalk, past the real estate office with advertisements for million-dollar homes plastered on the window and a closed sign on the door, past the bridal shop where consultants sat by the desk, sipping bottled water and

talking. They went to where the sidewalk met the small patch of beach and people lay stretched out on brightly colored towels. They stood among the long stalks of grass that covered the dunes and watched the bulky barges that sat like dark whales against the blue and white horizon. On the way back, they picked up a bag of hot boiled peanuts from a small grocery store. They spent the rest of the afternoon on Nelson's balcony, looking out at the winking taillights on the street below. For the most part, they sat in silence, sipping warm sodas and letting the sticky juice from the peanuts slide along their fingers and down their wrists. Before he left, his father had said they should do it again sometime.

Rena laughed when Nelson told her this, a dry, choked laugh.

"He came to see me, too. Last July."

Nelson tilted his head, tried to see her face. Her eyes were locked on the television.

"I told him I wasn't interested."

Her voice grew quieter as she said this. Nelson tried to imagine her standing in the doorway facing their withered father, her cheeks ruddy and her hair frizzy in the summer humidity, refusing to let him come in.

"Why?"

Rena reached over to the coffee table where her pack of cigarettes sat. She flicked the lighter and a tiny orange flame appeared and hovered, trembling. She held her cigarette over it until it lit, and then the flame was gone.

"Do you remember the last time we saw him? While we were kids, I mean. Right after he left."

He did. It was late Christmas morning, the year before he started high school. Their mother had dropped them off for a few hours with their grandmother, their father's mother. They were in the living room, sitting on the cold wooden floor among dry needles from the tree and stray pieces of tinsel, when they heard the back door open and someone stumble into the kitchen. Nelson recognized the voice, the gritty cough, the slurred words. He recognized the smell, too, as his father entered the room: alcohol and dried sweat and the cheap cologne his father had doused himself in before coming over. His father smiled when he saw them, his face red and oily and covered with the dark beginning of a beard. He said he hadn't known they would be there, that's why he didn't have their presents. He'd go straight home and get them, he said.

Rena reached over and tapped the cigarette against the ashtray. "Eighty-six. Didn't even recognize him." She lifted the cigarette to her lips but didn't inhale. "You don't just do that. You know?" She paused. "I mean, by then what's the point?"

Nelson didn't answer, just sat staring at the television, watching the actors move and the colors shift, listening to the soft vibration of Bryan's music. He wasn't sure how much time passed, but eventually another show came on, some late-night talk show, and the vibration stopped.

Rena got up, put out her last cigarette, and went into the kitchen. The faucets squeaked as she turned the water on.

"So the water won't freeze in the pipes," she said as she headed towards the hallway. "Supposed to be that cold, they say."

A few minutes after she was gone, he turned off the television, pulled the worn comforter up, closed his eyes. In the dark, he heard the ticking of the clock on the

mantle. The constant plink of the dripping water against the ceramic echoed between the small rooms. And it was cold. He hadn't realized how cold it was getting. He pulled the comforter tighter around him, the frayed material scratching his arms and neck, but the cold seemed to be seeping in right through the hard tile floors and creeping up the legs of the couch, through his skin.

A little after one, he got up and searched for his jacket in the dark. He slipped it on. He walked through the kitchen to the sliding glass door. The few trees in the backyard were still, their branches stiff against the coal-black sky, their gnarled shadows reflected on the empty picnic table that sat underneath. The entire back yard was covered in a thin sheet of white frost, the early morning dew clinging to the grass turned to tiny crystals of ice. It looked as if a light layer of snow had fallen. He opened the door and stepped out onto the concrete porch floor.

Right after he and Linda divorced, he traveled up north, spent a few years in Chicago. He thought of the Chicago cold, the way the snow felt so wet and heavy, the way he had to learn to walk on the icy sidewalks. He had been in cold weather, but this Florida cold felt different to him, sharper than the biting white cold of Chicago. As he stood on the concrete in his baggy sweatpants and a cotton t-shirt, the cold sunk into his skin, quickly moving past burning numbness, past aching, into a dull throbbing. He watched his breath crystallize into a cloud of vapor, hovering for several seconds before slowly dissipating.

The porch was clean and sparsely furnished: there were only a couple of saggy, mold-spotted lawn chairs and Rena's brown-tipped hanging plants. It reminded him of the porch at their old house, how it looked after their father left. Before it had always

been cluttered: his father's grime-streaked lawnmower had sat broken down in the corner, tainting the air with its dripping gasoline. Next to it, his father's fishing poles leaned against the wall, most with lines frayed and snapped, throwing skinny shadows over the dusty bait box lying half-open on the floor underneath. On the old porch, Rena and Nelson used to sit in sagging lawn chairs, sucking on popsicles to stay cool in the damp afternoon heat.

After their father left, their mother cleaned the porch. Nelson came home one day from school and found her there, her pale face red and splotchy and covered in sweat, her hair frizzy and clinging to her moist neck and cheeks, every muscle in her small body straining as she tried to push the lawnmower off the porch. His mother left the lawn chairs, but they didn't see much use after that. Months after his father left, when his mother cleaned out the freezer, she left the sheets of frostbitten popsicles in the sink to melt and drain before she threw them away.

Tonight, standing on Rena's porch, the freezing air burning his lungs, Nelson took the cell phone out of his pocket and stared down at the glowing screen. He pressed in the numbers on the keypad.

He remembered how, when she was little, he would sit out in the backyard with Jillian during the summers and eat popsicles. He had whatever flavor he grabbed first out of the freezer, but she always had to have cherry. They would sit with their legs stretched out in the grass, letting the cold colors seep into their lips and tongues. Jillian could never finish hers fast enough. It always ended up melting and flowing onto her tiny hands, staining her skin a sticky red.

He wondered if cherry was still her favorite flavor, whether she ever had popsicles during the summer. He pressed the call button.

His ex-wife answered on the second ring. Her voice was hushed and quick like she was scared.

"Is Jillian still awake?"

"Nelson?"

He looked out at the river, saw the silver reflection of the partial moon on the still surface and remembered how late it was.

"I'm sorry."

His ex-wife didn't respond right away, and the silence was so long Nelson wondered if she'd hung up.

"Is everything okay?"

A few houses over, dogs barked. It sounded like two large dogs, their throaty barks slow and long, and a small dog, its quick bark sharp. Their barks rang through the neighborhood for several long seconds before ending abruptly.

"I wanted to talk to Jillian."

"Now?"

"Please. Is she awake?"

There was another voice in the background, a deep voice, and Nelson remembered that she had a husband now. His ex-wife responded, although her voice was muffled like she was covering the receiver with her hand.

"She's asleep, Nelson," she said. In the background, the mattress squeaked.

Something stirred under the surface of the river, sending ripples flowing outward in perfect synchronicity, catching his attention.

"Can I come by, then? On Monday. Pick her up from school?"

She cleared her throat. "On a weekday?"

"Yes. Monday."

After a long pause, his ex-wife agreed and reminded him that Jillian got out of school at three. "Make sure you get there early. You'll be stuck in traffic forever if you aren't early."

He stood on the porch for several minutes after he hung up. The shadows of the bare tree limbs quivered over the glistening white frost and the reflection of the moon glimmered on the still, dark river. Something stirred beneath the surface again and disrupted the quiet of the river, breaking up the glassy surface and sending ripples through the reflection of the moon until it was nothing more than disjointed silver shards of light quivering under the thin vapor that hovered over the water in early morning darkness.

On Monday morning, Nelson left early, right after breakfast.

"I'll be in touch," Rena said, even though he would be seeing her in a few days. He slid into the front seat and started the engine. "I'll let you know as soon as I find out some more information."

"Right." He pulled his jacket tighter around him, the damp cold from the seat making his skin break into goosebumps. The sky was covered with wavy clouds that

looked like ripples on a gray lake. As he pulled out of the driveway, the windows fogged up and he turned on the defroster, which blasted cold air.

He drove quickly through town, past the antique shops and family-owned delis, past the old brick churches. He accelerated even more as the scenery opened up to pastures enclosed with rusted barbwire, and soon the dry weeds and mud-covered cows skimmed by in flashes of brown and white and yellow. By the time he reached the interstate, a light mist of rain had begun to fall, beading and trickling down the windshield.

Jillian's school was on the opposite side of Fort Lauderdale from where he lived, and he reached it by two o'clock. He parked in the parent pick-up area, rolled down the windows of the car. The air was warmer than in Wauchula. He studied the concrete block school. Everything was a pale gray: the faded painting of the mascot on the side, the benches, the sidewalks lined by wilted hibiscus plants. They must have re-painted, he realized. The last time he was here, everything was red and black.

After a while, more parents showed up and lined the black asphalt. He wondered if he should go inside to the front office and check Jillian out early. He thought she might like that, like getting to leave class. He got out of the car, clutching the keys in his hand.

The inside of the school was cold, stuffy, and smelled of bleach and urine. He followed the dirty carpet hallways, looking for signs pointing to the office. Students passed by him wearing uniforms of maroon polo shirts and khakis. They looked at him as if wondering why he was there.

"Hey, man, you lost?" one of them asked.

Maybe they could tell he didn't belong, that he wasn't like the other parents. Nelson decided he should probably wait in the car after all.

The bell rang at two after three, and students filed out of the school. He kept the windows rolled down, his arm hanging out of the driver's side. He searched the crowd for Jillian.

A few minutes later she came out, her long hair pulled back in a ponytail that swayed as she walked. He lifted his hand and waved, calling her name.

She looked around, apparently surprised to see him. Maybe his ex-wife had forgotten to tell her he was coming. She hesitated, then walked over to the car.

"What are you doing here?" she asked as soon as she was within hearing distance.

"I'm here to pick you up. Thought we could go out to eat, maybe to The Fish House. They have some great mahi-mahi. We could walk down to the beach, too." He paused. "Didn't your mother tell you I was coming?"

"I don't remember." She made a face. "And I hate fish." She lifted a hand to tug at her hair. "Besides, I already agreed to go over to a friend's house today. We're having a study group."

"Well, tomorrow, then. Or Wednesday. I'm free every day but Friday. That's when the funeral is."

She reached in her backpack, pulled out a piece of gum, unwrapped the flimsy foil. "Whatever."

She seemed careful not to look at him. His tongue felt thick, heavy. This time he forced it to move.

"I'm forty-five," he said.

She glanced at him, gave him a strange look. “And I’m fifteen. So?”

“Only forty-five,” he said. “Not eighty-six.”

She stared at him for a second, opened her mouth as if she was about to speak, but then someone caught her eye. “I have to go. My friend is waiting.”

She gave him a wave over her shoulder as she crossed the grassy meridian and wove through the parked cars toward her friend.

He sat there in his car for several minutes after she left, his arm hanging limply out the window. He didn’t realize how long he’d been there until there was a sharp rap on the door. A woman stood there, eyes narrowed, frowning at him, her round face pink from the cold.

“Are you waiting for someone?” she asked in a clipped voice.

Nelson drew his arm back inside the car. The SUV behind him honked, and the driver flicked him off.

“No,” Nelson said.

The woman crossed her arms. “Then don’t you think it’s time to leave?”

He put the car in drive and sped out of the parking lot. He left the window down so the cold air whipped through the car, whistling in his ears, burning his eyes until they were so dry it hurt to blink.

MOONFLOWERS

A thousand dollars is missing from their bank account, taken out in cash. Shari notices it right away as she unfolds the bank statement. She leaves the paper unfolded and face down on the counter, the corner sitting in a small puddle of spilt orange juice from Keith's breakfast.

Last month, Keith had finally taken her ring-shopping. They had been planning on getting engaged around the time of their three-year anniversary, but then she'd gotten pregnant and marriage talk abruptly ceased. Last month she'd finally convinced Keith to go with her to the mall, where they spent several hours leaning over the different glass cases and examining the polished diamonds underneath. She'd been sized at three different stores just to make sure she could wear the ring right away after he proposed. Her favorite ring was a one-carat solitaire, round cut, nearly flawless. Keith said it was too expensive, so she'd decided the half-carat ring was pretty, too. They didn't have it in white gold, but Keith said that he could get it rhodium-plated. "You'll never be able to tell it's not real white gold," he said.

This morning, Shari walks out to the living room, which is littered with cardboard boxes, loose Styrofoam, and gnarled remnants of packing tape. The overhead fans churn the stifling air; she's had them on all day with the windows open, hoping to air out the house and get rid of the fresh paint smell. She spent all day yesterday painting. The previous owner of the house had painted each room a different color: the kitchen was bright blue, the master bedroom was lime green, the guest bathroom was cherry red.

Keith had told her after he bought the house that they didn't have the money to do a lot of decorating, and he wanted to put in a sprinkler system before she did any painting. Shari cried when she saw the glossy fuchsia walls in the living room, though, so Keith relented and let her buy the cheapest brand of eggshell-colored paint at Wal-Mart.

The walls are pretty much dry now, but there hasn't been much of a breeze outside, and even with the fans on, all she's been able to do is circulate the smell of drying paint mixed with the smell of sulfur drifting in from outside. Over the fans' rhythmic squeaks, she hears Shawn's shrill cry as he wakes from his nap. She maneuvers around the unpacked boxes in the living room and heads down the hallway to his room.

She looks at the tiny fragment of cubic zirconium on her left ring finger as she rubs Shawn's back. The cubic zirconium is dim and grimy, and the thin silver band has warped and molded to her ring finger over the months she's worn it. She bought it when she became pregnant, to pacify her mother when she broke the news.

Her mother has never liked Keith. Shari isn't surprised. Her mother has never liked any of her boyfriends. Her mother always had a different reason: "He's doesn't seem very bright" or "He's a little immature, don't you think?" The criticism became harsher after Shari's dad left. When Shari was asked to her senior prom by a football player, her mother accused her of being a slut.

The first time Shari brought Keith over, her mother reached out to shake his hand and stopped before they touched. "My God, how old are you?" she asked.

Keith gave her a tight smile and left his hand extended even as Shari's mother withdrew hers. "I'm thirty-nine." Shari was twenty-four at the time.

Shari didn't tell her mother she was pregnant until she started to show. When she finally decided it was only a matter of time before her mother noticed anyway, she bought the fake ring and some flowers and drove down to her mother's condo in Key Largo. Her mother was out on the back porch in her bathing suit and a pair of dark round sunglasses, painting her toenails bright pink. She looked up and smiled when Shari walked in.

"What did you do?" she asked as Shari handed her the flowers.

"I'm pregnant."

Her mother set the polish down and leaned back in the chair. Across the channel, a brown and green iguana stretched on the hot concrete wall, half-hidden in the shade of a bougainvillea bush.

"Well." Her mother lifted her sunglasses. She hadn't put any make-up on that morning, and her eyes looked small and sunken underneath her pale, downy eyebrows.

"We're getting married." Shari stretched out her hand and spread her fingers.

"What's this?" her mother said. She grabbed Shari's hand and yanked it toward her so hard that Shari's knuckles cracked. "Who proposes with a fake diamond? It looks like it's from Wal-Mart."

Shari finally had to admit that Keith hadn't really proposed.

"We're going to wait until after the baby is born," she told her mother. "I don't want to be pregnant in my wedding pictures."

Her mother smirked, not looking at her, and began pulling the petals from one of the flowers. "Sharlene, he's not going to marry you." She said it simply, not accusingly. She lifted a hand to pull the sunglasses off her head.

That was the first time her mother had called Shari by her full name in almost a decade. Everyone had called her Shari since she was a little girl—everyone except for her father. She was always his little Sharlene, up until the day he left.

"We've been talking about it," Shari said. "A lot, actually."

Her mother set the flowers on the table. One of the flowers landed in a puddle of condensation, the petals slowly curling as they soaked in the moisture.

"He's already been married once, right?" her mother said. She picked up the nail polish and twisted the top. "So he's been to hell. Why would he want to go again?"

Before Shari introduced Keith to her mother, she had visited her mother for dinner every week, every Thursday, something she'd done since she moved out after high school. They always had the same thing: grilled mahi mahi with citrus butter sauce, rice, a salad. Mostly due to Keith's urging, Shari stopped going to her mother's house for dinner every week after she told her mother about the pregnancy. Instead, she spent most Thursdays fixing limp pasta with watery marinara sauce, the only thing she knew how to cook, and trying not to think about her mother sitting at the round plastic table on the deck, sipping warm beer and playing with the flaky mahi-mahi on her plate.

Not too long after she told her mother about the pregnancy, her fingers became too swollen to wear the fake engagement ring. But as soon as Shawn was born, she put the ring back on, hoping other people wouldn't ask questions. Today, as she coos to her son and rubs his back, breathes in his scent of lavender baby oil and banana baby food, she watches the way the light slides over the dull cubic zirconium and imagines how the diamond that Keith has bought her will sparkle.

Shawn is still fussy when Keith gets home that night at nine-thirty. Shawn hasn't been sleeping well for the past couple of days. The doctor says he has a cold. He cries almost constantly and doesn't eat much. Last night she stayed up until three rocking him, wiping his nose, rubbing his back, singing, doing anything she could think of to lull him to sleep. When Keith came in to check on her, she mentioned her concern.

"You've already taken him to the doctor," Keith said, his voice thick and slow with sleep. "It's just a cold. People get them all the time."

Shari didn't say anything, tried to convince herself that he was right. Keith went back to bed after a muddled request for her to do the same. She ended up falling asleep in the rocker, her head tilted back against the wall.

Tonight, when Keith gets home, his round face is flushed and shiny. Tiny beads of sweat trace his receding hairline, and his chin is covered in dark stubble. It scratches her cheek as he bends down to give her a kiss. He smells like the restaurant where he works: onion and garlic and fish. She hates how he smells, how tired he looks when he gets home from his job.

When they first began dating, he owned his own company down in Pinecrest. He used to wear a suit and tie and shave every day. She liked to sit in the lobby of his office building while she waited for him to come down, watching her reflection in the gleaming black floors and mirrored walls. When his company failed a year ago, they both thought it was just a phase, that business would pick back up.

The night after Keith decided to sell, he and Shari went to a party in Key Largo. She was five months pregnant at the time. She told him he shouldn't sell, that he was giving up too easily. She made the mistake of asking "What else are you going to do?"

She meant to imply that she knew how much Keith loved the business; how could he want to do anything else? He didn't take it that way, though. He left her at the party, swollen and uncomfortable in her strapless dress. Shari ended up taking off her high-heeled sandals and walking a mile to the marina where her friend Aimee was helping her husband fillet the day's catch.

When Shari asked for a ride back to Keith's house, Aimee sighed and shook her head, mumbling something about having to clean the fish. Shari offered to help, and finally Aimee relented, still shaking her head. When they were done, Shari went inside to clean up. She ended up sitting for several minutes on the edge of the pale green bathtub, her bruised feet soaking in lukewarm water. She had seriously contemplated staying at Aimee's that night and just not going back to him. But then she'd remembered her swollen stomach, the baby growing more every day.

"I thought you were going to finish unpacking today," Keith says. He looks out at the living room, where the boxes and unpacked items lay strewn across the floor where she left them this afternoon. The windows are still open, the fans churning, although the air is cooler now and smells sweet from the blooming moonflowers in the front yard.

"Shawn has been fussy," Shari tells him. "He still doesn't feel good." She presses a hand to her forehead. "I think I might be coming down with something, too."

"You mean he didn't sleep at all? You didn't have any time to unpack?" Keith maneuvers around the boxes in the living room and closes the windows. "God, I hate the smell of those flowers. Do you mind if I just pull them up?"

Shari shifts Shawn onto her lap and bounces him on her knee. "I think they're pretty. I like looking at them at night."

Keith sighs. “Roses are pretty. How about I buy you some roses?” He walks back out to the kitchen and pulls two carryout boxes out of a paper bag. “I brought home dinner. You hungry?”

She shrugs. He empties the contents—what looks like pasta, salmon and wilted broccoli—onto two paper plates and puts them in the microwave. Soon the whole kitchen smells like burnt fish. Shawn’s whimpering escalates to a shrill, broken cry.

Shari touches her son’s warm cheeks and runs her hand over his feathery soft hair. “Do you mind holding him while I eat?” she asks Keith. “I’m so tired.”

Keith is bent over the counter, jabbing with a fork at the steaming broccoli on his plate with one hand, leafing through the mail with the other. He pauses as he comes across the opened bank statement. He lifts the envelope and examines the torn top, his fork poised in the air.

“Did you open my mail?”

Shari stands and paces the length of the dining room, holding Shawn over her shoulder. “It’s my account, too.”

Keith sighs and tosses the paper onto the counter. It slides across the dark marble surface and floats to the floor.

“I wish you hadn’t done that.” His voice is low, uninflected. She can barely hear him over Shawn’s wailing.

“It’s not a big deal,” she says. She unlocks the sliding glass door and braces herself against it to slide it open. She steps out into the slightly cooler night air. Sometimes being outside soothes Shawn. “I expected it soon. I’m excited.”

Keith stands in the open doorway. His bulky frame blocks the light coming from the kitchen. "I wanted it to be a surprise."

In the distance, car horns blare and tires squeal. The pale moonlight shows their backyard, the high wooden fence, the dry grass and bare dirt spots. She has plans to turn it into a tropical garden like her mother's yard: she'll plant angel trumpets and bougainvillea, morning glories and geraniums. Keith says she has to wait, though. He let her plant the moonflowers in front to "pacify" her, but he wants to put in the sprinkler system before she goes tearing up the rest of the yard.

Shawn's crying has quieted. Shari continues pacing the porch, bouncing him on her shoulder.

"Don't worry. I'll still act surprised," she tells Keith.

Keith is silent, his face dark against the backlight from the kitchen. She moves closer to give him a kiss. He's staring past her, in the direction of the neighbor's yard.

"Well, do you think you could at least get the rest of the boxes in the living room unpacked by tomorrow afternoon?" he asks as she slides past him back into the kitchen. Shawn has finally quieted down, and she's hoping that he might fall asleep. "I really need the living room to be cleaned up."

She presses her face into Shawn's shoulder. The fuzz of his pajamas tickles her nose, and his skin is smooth against her cheek. "I'll try," she says. "It's not like I've been sitting around doing nothing."

Keith moves away from the door and wraps his arms around her. She jumps at the feel of his skin, so rough and prickly against her cheek as he kisses her ear. She wonders if Shawn will be rough like his father when he gets older. She imagines an older

Shawn, his feathery blonde hair replaced by coarse dark hair that creeps down the sides of his face. Will he smell like fish and garlic, will he kiss her cheek in that abrupt, conciliatory way when he comes home from college, when he comes to visit for the holidays?

"I'm sorry," Keith says. "I know you've had your hands full. Why don't you take a break and eat some dinner?" He reaches out and lifts Shawn out of her arms. There's a moment of silence as Shawn stirs, and then his shrill wail pierces the air again.

The next morning, while she's unpacking, Shari imagines how Keith will propose. Her head is still pounding, and she works slowly, the fans on again and the air conditioning lowered to seventy-two, even though she knows Keith hates having the air on during the day. "Just turn the fans on," he tells her every time she mentions that she's hot. "We're trying to save money, remember?"

As she dusts off their silk plants and looks for places to hang their pictures above the fireplace, she imagines Keith proposing on a beach. They live only half an hour away from Sand Key, one of her favorite beaches in Florida. It's one of the reasons she agreed to move north, up the peninsula. When Keith first mentioned moving, she was reluctant to leave south Florida, the streets lined with palm trees, the Cuban cafés where she could get a cup of frothy café con leche, the proximity to the Keys, her friends, and her family. Keith was finally able to convince her to move when he reminded her how close they would be to the Gulf coast beaches.

Before they moved, he promised to take her to the beach every weekend. So far he's kept his promise: last weekend he got one of the waitresses from the restaurant to

babysit Shawn and took Shari down to Sand Key. It was the middle of love-bug season, and the black insects were everywhere: swarming over the water, crawling among the sandspurs and old cigarette butts in the sand, covering the picnic tables, vending machines, and showers. Shari kept swatting them away and tried to ignore them as they wiggled in her hair, but Keith couldn't handle it. They ended up staying only half an hour.

This morning she imagines he'll take her there again—to the western side of the island, around sunset—and this time there won't be any love bugs. They'll take off their shoes and stroll barefoot along the beach, stopping occasionally to collect the smooth blue and pink shells half-buried in the sand, or admire the lopsided sandcastles that will soon melt into indistinguishable lumps as the foam-flecked waves wash over them. Then, just as the sun is poised over the horizon and the windows of the tall pink and white condominiums gleam gold, he'll get down on one knee and pull the diamond ring out of his pocket, where the nearly flawless diamond will sparkle as he slides it onto her finger.

Shari imagines the way her mother's gaunt cheeks will flush when she sees the real ring. Her mother will probably grab her hand again, inspect the diamond, remind her that marriage is hell. This time, Shari will be prepared with an answer. She'll say, "Mine will be different."

Her mother will probably remind her about her father, about Meredith, about the screaming and the way the walls rattled when he left. Shari will have to admit, yes, that was hell.

She was fifteen when it happened, old enough to notice that he didn't come home until her mother was asleep, to know that it was alcohol she smelled instead of the usual vanilla cigars when he docked the boat at Robbie's Marina. She was old enough to yell at Aimee when Aimee said she saw Shari's father talking to some dark-haired woman outside of The Fish House. She was also old enough to walk barefoot along US 1 the night her father said he wouldn't be home until late, just so she could stand outside The Fish House, digging her toes into the gravel, waiting to see if her father came out.

The night her father left, her mother was grilling mahi mahi out back by the channel. Her father was there, standing beside the grill, a bottle of coconut rum in his hand, making gestures toward the dark water. He hadn't shaved in days, and his shirt was wrinkled and stained with sweat. Her mother was in a tank top that was too tight; the straps cut into her fleshy red shoulders. They were screaming—Shari could tell by the way they flung their hands and never looked at each other. All she could hear, though, was the Jimmy Buffet CD her mother had left playing in the living room.

Her father left just as dusk set in. He threw back the screen door and walked straight through the house. He didn't pack anything. He didn't say anything. He slammed the front door so hard two pictures fell off the wall.

Shari waited a while, stirring the citrus butter, stirring, watching it simmer, waiting for him to come back. When he didn't, she went out to the porch. Her mother was sitting on the concrete wall, dangling her feet above the dark water. She didn't turn around when Shari came out. The grill was still on, the mahi mahi fillets black, the air thick with the smell of burnt fish.

Tonight Keith arrives home even later than usual. Shawn is asleep, and Shari is in the living room, curled up on the couch underneath the chenille afghan, a cold, damp rag pressed against her forehead and over her eyes. The windows are open and the fans are on low. Next door, their neighbors are playing Elvis on a scratchy record player and grilling hamburgers out by the pool. Children laugh and water splashes. The blinding glare of headlights slides over the bare living room wall as Keith pulls into the driveway.

He doesn't have any bags of leftover food in his hands as he walks into the kitchen. He takes off his thick-soled boots and leaves them by the door. His t-shirt is wrinkled and stained, and his dark, silver-flecked hair is tousled and greasy; it looks like he forgot to wash it this morning. He drops his keys onto the counter and walks into the living room. Shari doesn't move from the couch.

"Hey, hon," he says as he bends down to give her a kiss. He pauses as he hovers over her, looking at something on the other side of the couch. "I thought you said you were going to finish unpacking today."

Shari closes her eyes and presses her head into the scratchy pillow, the only one they have for the couch. There was a matching one that went at the other end, but right before they moved, Keith spilt red wine on it. Shari tried everything—stain stick, baking soda, even bleach—but it wouldn't come out, and she had to throw the pillow away.

"Shari?" Keith asks, leaning over the couch.

Shari doesn't open her eyes. "What did you spend a thousand dollars on?"

The cushions on the opposite end of the couch sink as Keith sits down. He pushes the afghan back and picks up her right foot, massaging the heel with his fingers. "Your birthday present. I can't tell you what it is."

Shari sits up and pulls her foot out of his grasp, tucking it back under the afghan. "Is it a ring?"

Keith smiles at her and reaches for her foot again. "I can't tell you that. Then it won't be a surprise."

Shari jerks her foot out of his grasp and gets up from the couch, dragging the afghan behind her. "So don't surprise me. I want to see it."

Keith sighs and rubs his temples. "God, Shari. Why the hell are you so obsessed about this?"

Shari stops in front of the fireplace, clenching the afghan to her chest so it covers her body like a shield. "Where is it?"

Keith gets up and heads to the kitchen. "It's not a ring, okay?" He disappears behind the wall separating the kitchen from the living room. There's a sucking noise as the refrigerator door opens. "It's a necklace."

Shari lets go of the afghan, and it collapses into a pile at her feet. "I don't believe you."

Keith sighs. "Fine." He reappears with a cold plate of leftover pizza from a few nights ago and a glass full of dark purple wine. He places the pizza in the microwave and sets the wine on the edge of the counter, then heads down the hallway.

When he comes back, a gold necklace dangles from his index finger. He holds it out to her. It swings gently, a delicate chain with a heart pendant and tiny diamonds. In the light, the chain looks deep yellow, almost orange. It looks fake.

"Happy birthday," Keith says.

Shari takes the necklace from him and examines the chain. She rubs her fingers over the pendant. "This isn't even real."

Keith takes it back and points a tiny inscription on the clasp. "Yes, it is. It's 24 karat. That's even better than 14 karat." He holds it out to her, but Shari doesn't take it.

"I don't wear yellow gold," she says. Her hands are shaking. She presses her right palm to her forehead. "I like white gold."

Keith shrugs. "Sorry." He drops the necklace onto the coffee table. "So what did you do today?"

The microwave beeps.

Shari walks into the kitchen and sits down on one of the lopsided stools at the breakfast bar. "Let's just get married."

Keith pauses just as he's reaching to open the microwave. "What?"

"Forget the ring. I don't need a ring. Let's just go to the courthouse tomorrow and do it."

The smell of pepperoni and sausage and garlic lingers in the air. Keith straightens up and runs a hand through his hair. His head is bent so she can't see his expression.

"Come on, Shari. You don't really want to elope."

The microwave beeps to remind them the pizza is done. Keith doesn't move.

"Yes, I do." Shari traces the edge of the countertop with her fingertips. Her hand bumps the glass of wine and some spills over the side, sliding down the glass and pooling on the countertop. "I want to have the same last name as my son."

Keith runs his hands through his hair again and rubs the back of his neck. "Well, go to the courthouse, then. Change your name."

The microwave beeps.

"For God's sake, take the pizza out." Shari stands up and reaches for the microwave.

Keith intercepts her and yanks the door open. He pulls out the plate of pizza and tosses it onto the counter with such force that it slides several inches across the marble and knocks the glass of wine over. It rolls for a second, the dark liquid splashing onto the floor and trailing down the sides of the counter, before falling and shattering against the tile.

They stand there staring at the mess for several seconds. In the bedroom, Shawn begins to whimper.

"I'm sorry," Keith says finally. "We can get married, if that's what you really want. Tomorrow. We'll just go to the courthouse and do it."

Shari lifts a trembling hand to her head again. Her forehead is damp. She wipes her palm against her t-shirt. Shawn's crying escalates.

"Don't worry about the glass. I'll clean it up." Keith steps around the mess and sits down at the kitchen table.

Shari turns and heads back to Shawn's room. He's pulled himself up onto his hands and knees. She picks him up and sits down in the rocking chair, murmuring in his ear.

When Shawn finally falls sleep, Shari goes back out to the kitchen. The lights are off. She feels her way around the boxes and furniture in the living room and flips on the kitchen light. Keith is asleep on the couch, the afghan rumpled at his feet. The small shards of glass and plum droplets gleam on the floor.

Shari goes into the laundry room and gets the broom and dustpan. She sweeps the glass into a pile, then kneels with a paper towel and mops all the wine up. Even when it's all cleaned up, a faint bluish red shadow remains on the tile.

"I said I would take care of that." Keith stands in the doorway, rubbing his forehead.

"It needs to get cleaned up now," Shari says. "We can't have broken glass lying around."

Keith yawns and stretches out his hand. "Just come to bed."

Shawn wakes up crying at four in the morning. Shari lies in bed for several minutes, listening to her son's steady wail, staring at the blurry red numbers on the digital clock by the T.V. Keith lies with his back to her, the sheets tangled at his feet. Every couple of minutes he shifts slightly and grinds his teeth. The sound makes her shudder.

After almost ten minutes of listening to Shawn cry, she slips out from under the covers and heads down the hallway to his room, her bare feet sticking to the cold floor. Shawn has pulled himself up and stares out at her from between the bars of the crib, his mouth open, his pink cheeks moist.

She tries rocking him, feeding him, rubbing his back, singing to him. After an hour, she fills his diaper bag, carries him out to the car and tucks him into his car seat.

Traffic is light this early in the morning. She puts the window down and lets the balmy air whip through her hair, which she didn't bother to tie back. It whips around her face, stinging her eyes and clinging to her lips. It smells like gas fumes, car exhaust, and the dead love-bugs that have dried on the windshield that Keith hasn't cleaned off yet.

Stopped at a red light, she closes her eyes and tries to detect the salty smell of the bay. The light turns green while her eyes are closed, and the driver behind her honks.

She drives past the courthouse around five-thirty. The street is empty. The lamps cast obscure shadows on the ground, and the American flag dangles limply from the top of the flagpole.

The Interstate isn't busy at this hour. She leaves the windows down as she merges onto I-75, lets the wind, cool and damp, whip against her skin until it burns. In the back seat, Shawn sleeps, stirring occasionally. She hopes he doesn't wake, doesn't cry, doesn't want to be fed. She doesn't want to stop.

As the hours pass, the sky lightens enough to illuminate a thin layer of stratocumulus clouds. Around six-thirty her cell phone rings. She knows that it must be Keith, awake now and wondering where she is. She doesn't move, just listens to the escalating ring.

Around ten, she reaches the Keys. She drives between the walls of mangroves, over Lake Surprise and the blue-green water, past people pulled off the road, jeans rolled up to their knees, fishing as the waves froth the rocks. She opens her mouth, tastes the salty air.

Her mother's old SUV is in the gravel driveway, covered in white dust, when Shari arrives. Shari sits in the car for a moment, stares at the SUV, the white stones leading to the house, the peeling screen door. After a while, she gets out, unbuckles Shawn and hoists him onto her hip. She grabs his diaper bag and walks unevenly over the gravel, past cracked clay pots with purple bougainvillea pushing through dry soil.

The air smells like angel trumpets, not dried love-bugs or sulfur from the neighbors' sprinklers.

Her mother opens the door after one knock. She's wearing a bathing suit and drawstring shorts, her hair piled on top of her head. The house is just as Shari remembers it: cluttered with strings of seahorse-shaped lights, plastic cacti, and brightly painted ceramic frogs.

"I'm supposed to be getting married today," Shari says.

Her mother doesn't say anything, doesn't smile. Her eyes are focused on the diaper bag, on the tiny shoes that stick out the top. Without even looking at Shari's face, she steps out of the way and motions for Shari to come in.

WIND CHIMES

The police say her daughter is a felon.

Not her daughter, not Alyssa. No way.

Her husband, Gregg, arrived home with Alyssa an hour ago. Their eighteen-year-old, normally so vibrant, talkative, always moving and smiling, was pale, unsteady. Her dark hair, which she ironed straight and shiny every morning, frizzed in the morning humidity. Her smudged mascara formed ashy semi-circles under her eyes. Marie almost didn't recognize her.

Alyssa went straight to the bathroom to clean up, and Marie has been sitting on the cold leather couch ever since, staring out the sliding glass door at the pool. Gregg is out by the pool, pacing back and forth between the banana tree and the grill, dragging his feet on the dusty peach concrete. He's on the portable phone, talking to someone, maybe the police, maybe the superintendent, maybe another parent. He stops every once in a while and absentmindedly spins the wind chime dangling from the ceiling.

Marie first heard about the vandalism on the morning news. She was fixing breakfast—wheat toast with honey, scrambled eggs with pepper, a glass of orange juice, no pulp—when she heard the reporter's voice say something about stranded kids. She turned off the burner and went into the living room so she could hear better. The news station was showing clips of the buses—forty of them—all with flat right front tires. The reporter stated that some of the bus drivers had taken their own cars to pick up the students.

"The police are currently following leads to discover who is responsible for puncturing the tires," she said.

"Some stupid senior prank," Marie muttered at the time. Less than an hour after she saw the news clip, the police called. They arrested Alyssa in front of all her friends, took her and five other students straight from graduation breakfast to jail.

The bathroom door squeaks and Alyssa comes out, cheeks pink from the heat of the shower, her dark hair wrapped in a towel. She stands in the entrance to the living room, her arms crossed.

"It's not my fault," she says. "I tried to stop them."

"I know," Marie tells her. She tries to sound reassuring, forces her lips into a smile. Of course it's not Alyssa's fault. Alyssa is a straight A student. Alyssa goes to youth group and volunteers at the homeless shelter. Alyssa has been accepted to the University of Miami. She's a good kid, not a felon.

Alyssa sits on the couch beside Marie, leans her damp, toweled head on Marie's shoulder.

"Dad's mad at me," she says.

Marie wraps her arm around Alyssa, rubs her back. "Did you tell him what happened?"

Alyssa coughs and rubs her temples. "Yeah. He didn't say anything the whole way home." She sits up and pulls the towel off her head. Her tangled hair falls, drips water onto her shirt. "I just hate it when he's so quiet, you know?"

Out by the pool, Gregg waves his arms, yells something into the phone. Sweat dots his shirt and his unshaven face.

Marie doesn't really want to know, but she has her suspicions, so she asks. "Was Danny with you?"

Alyssa slumps back against the couch. Marie taps the leather, reminds Alyssa about her wet hair.

"There were a lot of us." Alyssa sighs. "It's not like we were alone, you know?"

"Oh, I know, honey," Marie assures her. Of course she trusts Alyssa, but she worries about Gregg's reaction.

One day last summer, Gregg came home from work early and found Alyssa on the couch with a skinny boy who later identified himself as Danny. Gregg claims she was half-naked, although Alyssa told Marie that they were only kissing.

"We weren't even tongue kissing," she told Marie. "I wouldn't do that. You know that, right, Mom?"

Marie believed her, but Gregg was so angry. He told Alyssa he wouldn't have his daughter "screwing some redneck boy," and then refused to talk to her for almost a month. Alyssa tried everything—crying, pleading, pouting—but Gregg acted like she didn't even exist.

Marie confronted him about it one night. They were lying in bed, watching some late night show. Alyssa was in her room crying, upset because her own father didn't trust her. Marie rolled over, checked to make sure he was still awake, and accused him of being too hard on Alyssa because she was a girl.

"You wouldn't be this hard on a boy," Marie said. "You expect Alyssa to be perfect."

"That's ridiculous," Gregg said. "I don't expect her to be perfect. But you weren't there. You didn't see what she was doing with this boy."

"They were just kissing," Marie said, throwing her hands in the air. "For goodness sakes. I kissed boys when I was seventeen."

"How many times do I have to tell you?" Gregg snapped. "They weren't just kissing. Why do you always take Alyssa's word over mine?"

"Because you're so hard on her," Marie told him. "You have unrealistic expectations."

Gregg had always been that way, ever since Alyssa was born. Marie and Gregg tried for so long—five years—to get pregnant. They were saving up for in vitro when Marie found out they were finally going to have a baby.

Gregg was ecstatic and wanted to start decorating right away. He knew for certain it was going to be a boy. He painted the spare room a pale blue and hired a local art student to paint fire trucks and racecars speeding along the wall.

"We're going to name him Jeremy," Gregg told everyone. "After my father."

Marie always knew Gregg was going to be a good father. She was less certain of her own parenting abilities. She'd never played with dolls as a child, never babysat as a teenager. She didn't even know how to change a diaper. She spent hours, the closer her due date got, sitting in the rocker in the baby's room, staring at the bright red fire trucks gleaming in the fading afternoon light, or out the open window at the hedge of flowering hibiscus.

"I'm sure he's just worried," Marie tells Alyssa today. "It sounds worse than it is, you know?"

Alyssa sits up, runs her hands through her hair. "I need some Advil. My head is killing me."

Marie goes to the kitchen, pours her daughter a glass of cold water, and grabs the Advil bottle from the shelf above the refrigerator. How strange, she thinks. Alyssa never gets headaches. It must be the stress.

When she walks back out to the living room, Alyssa is on her cell phone. She's by the sliding glass door, her back to Marie, talking quietly.

"I don't understand what the big deal is," she says. "I mean, it was just a prank. They did it on MTV."

"Honey," Marie says. She puts the water and pills on the coffee table. Alyssa turns, waves her off. Marie steps around her and pulls open the sliding glass door.

Gregg is by the banana tree, kicking the trunk absentmindedly while he stares at the pool. "I don't know what he's going to say to the police," Gregg says. "The man can't even speak proper English."

Their neighbor, Helen, a small, slightly stooped-over retired teacher, is out on the porch, smoking and drinking Diet Coke. Her husband, Rick, is burning trash. The air smells like smoke—sweet sap sizzling and plastic melting—and paper-thin ashes float down like snow flurries, quivering on the still grass. Every once in a while something cracks, pops, and red embers rain down on the surrounding grass. Marie hates it when Rick burns trash. One of these days he's going to burn down the whole neighborhood. She's tried telling Helen that, but Helen just laughs and shakes her head.

This morning, Helen watches intently while Gregg paces around the pool. Gregg isn't yelling, but his voice is naturally loud, rough, and Marie knows that Helen can hear.

"Honey." She reaches out and taps his arm. "Try and keep it down, okay?"

"Hold on." Gregg puts his hand over the receiver. "They're talking jail time. Did you know that?"

That's ridiculous, Marie thinks. It was just a senior prank.

"Not for Alyssa, right?" she asks. "It wasn't her fault." But Gregg is already back on the phone, talking just as loudly as before.

Jail time. Not her daughter. Alyssa is a role model, a leader. She's Senior Class President. She's in the Honor Society. She sings carols at the local nursing home every Christmas. It's all just a big misunderstanding.

Alyssa is in the bathroom drying her hair when Marie taps on the door to tell her lunch is ready. Alyssa sighs, tilts her head to the side as she studies her reflection in the mirror.

"I guess it doesn't really matter," she says. "I'll have a cap on, anyway." She picks up a comb and gently runs it through her hair. "Danny says we might not get to walk. You don't think they'll do that to us, do you?"

"Of course not, Sweetie." Marie smiles at her daughter's reflection. Alyssa is so beautiful. She takes after Gregg—dark hair, naturally tan skin. Marie is grateful Alyssa didn't get her own fine, strawberry-blonde hair and freckled arms.

For lunch, Marie has fixed turkey sandwiches with apple slices and cheese squares on the side. She and Alyssa have just sat down at the table when Gregg comes in and slams the phone down on the table.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" he asks Marie.

Alyssa stares down at her food, picking at an apple slice with her fingernail. Marie follows Gregg out back to the porch, pausing to put on a pair of slippers. The concrete is so dirty.

"Did you know they're going to press charges?" he asks.

Helen is still out on her porch. She takes a sip from her can of Diet Coke and props her feet up on a plastic table.

"Keep your voice down," Marie warns.

"She's eighteen, Marie," Gregg says. "She's legally an adult. Vandalizing government property has consequences."

Marie shrugs. She reaches out to touch the wind chime. The green glass spirals shift and clink against each other.

"They just punctured a few tires," she says. "How much could that cost?"

"Fourteen thousand dollars."

"Really? For tires?"

Gregg's cheeks, ears, neck are red. "Yes, Marie. Bus tires are expensive."

"But Alyssa shouldn't be responsible for that. She tried to stop them."

Gregg runs a hand through his hair, reaches out to pull one of the curved green bananas from the tree.

"That's not ripe yet," Marie says.

Gregg twists the top absentmindedly. "Alyssa drove them to the bus yard. The cameras photographed her car."

No. That's not how it was.

"She drove there to stop them," Marie reminds him.

Gregg scoffs. “Wake up, Marie. You know what happened. You were here last night.”

Marie looks him in the eyes. She doesn’t want to look past him, past the pool and the angel trumpet bush, past the mildew-streaked hammock. She doesn’t want to look at the shed and the beer cans littered around, the ashy remains of a bonfire. She doesn’t want to think about last night, watching TV in the blue-black dark, the volume up to drown out the shrieks, the laughter. She doesn’t want to remember the headlights blinking through the blinds at four in the morning, the sound of Alyssa stumbling through the hall, the smell of alcohol and grease on her clothes when Marie collected the laundry this morning. They were just having a good time, probably went to Wal-Mart to get a snack. They were about to graduate. They were just good kids celebrating.

“Just because they were here doesn’t mean it’s Alyssa’s fault,” Marie says. Her voice is strained, painfully high-pitched. She swallows, tries to calm down. “Alyssa is not a felon.”

“Of course not,” Gregg says dryly. “Alyssa can’t do anything wrong. She doesn’t drink, doesn’t pull expensive senior pranks, doesn’t screw skinny rednecks in our own home. She doesn’t sell drugs.”

“Stop it,” Marie says. She’s never seen him look so angry. The veins in his neck are throbbing.

One night, when Alyssa was fifteen, the police brought her home in a squad car. Alyssa was shaking and went straight to her room. Marie was the only parent home, so the police asked to speak with her outside.

They proceeded to explain that earlier that day, they pulled over an eighteen-year-old girl for speeding and found marijuana in the car. Apparently, Alyssa was riding in the front seat.

"Oh, I'm sure Alyssa didn't know that girl had drugs," Marie said. "She would have never gotten in the car."

Alyssa later claimed to have known nothing of the marijuana, and the police didn't pursue it any further. Marie was certain that Alyssa really was innocent, but Gregg had always had his doubts.

"Let's ask her about the tires, shall we?" Gregg says today. He pulls open the sliding glass door. "Alyssa, come here."

Their daughter walks out, twisting a strand of hair between her fingers. She doesn't meet Gregg's stare.

"Tell us what happened last night," Gregg says. He turns away from her, walks to the angel trumpet bush, pulls one of the pink, bell-shaped flowers off and watches the final wisps of smoke from Rick's burn pile drift in the breeze.

Alyssa sighs and studies her split ends.

"I already told you," she says. "We were hanging out by the bonfire, and then Kacie suggested we pull a senior prank. She'd seen this thing on MTV, this prank with school buses. She thought it would be funny."

Of course, Kacie Peterson. Marie knows her parents. Kacie came to Alyssa's sixth birthday party and threw a tantrum when she had to have chocolate ice cream because the vanilla was all gone. Kacie's mother had tried to calm her down, but Kacie had continued screaming at the top of her lungs, so her mother ended up promising to get

her vanilla ice cream on the way home. Marie had known at that moment that Mrs. Peterson was a terrible mother. That's probably why her daughter was now a prankster and a felon.

Marie is a much better mother than Mrs. Peterson. She stopped working as soon as Alyssa was born. She always held Alyssa when she was a fussy infant, sang to her and read her stories, braided her hair with white ribbons when she was in elementary school.

She's always been a good mother. Gregg says so. Once, when Alyssa was in kindergarten, she got in trouble for hitting another child with the play mop. Marie was inconsolable. She sat up the whole night, hugging her knees and rocking back and forth.

"It's all my fault," she said over and over.

Gregg finally rolled over, half-asleep, and rubbed her back.

"It's not your fault," he mumbled. "You're a good mother. Kids just do these things."

Today, Gregg crumbles the angel trumpet in his hand. "And what did you think?" he asks Alyssa.

Alyssa shrugs. "I said it was wrong, that we shouldn't do it. But Kacie didn't care. She made Danny go get his dad's drill bit."

Gregg's jaw tightens, muscles clench. "So you stayed here, then, while they left to pull their prank."

Marie doesn't like the look on Gregg's face. His veins are throbbing in his neck, blue-purple snakes slinking beneath his skin.

Alyssa drops her hair, studies her nails. "Yeah. At first. Then I decided I should go up there and stop them."

Of course. Of course Alyssa would do that. She cares about people. Marie has taught her to care about others. Alyssa knew it was wrong, and she didn't want her friends to get in trouble.

"What time did you go up there?" Gregg wants to know.

Alyssa lifts a hand to her mouth and chews on her thumbnail. "Two, maybe?"

"How sure are you?"

Alyssa looks nervous. She drops her hand, straightens in the chair. "Pretty sure. Yeah. They left at one-thirty, and I waited for a while, then left around two."

Why is Gregg pushing this? Alyssa already explained what happened. It's like he thinks she's responsible.

Gregg turns around to face her. "The camera? The security camera at the bus depot? It photographed your car parked outside at three-fifteen."

Alyssa's face pales. "It must be wrong."

Gregg runs a weathered hand over his face, and suddenly Marie notices every crease, every gray hair pushing through leathery skin. He doesn't look angry anymore. He just looks tired.

"What were you thinking?" he asks. His voice isn't loud or rough. He sounds drained.

"How can you ask her that?" Marie snaps. She lifts a trembling hand to her forehead. Wasn't he even listening to their daughter? "She was trying to get them to stop."

Alyssa is crying now. She wipes her eyes, hiccups.

"I'm sorry," she said. "We were drunk. It sounded like fun at the time." She hiccups again. "We didn't hurt anybody."

Marie sighs. Now Gregg has Alyssa thinking she did something wrong.

"Stop it," she tells Alyssa. "You were just trying to help. You're a good kid."

Alyssa hiccup again. "Are we going to get to walk, Dad?"

Marie's really mad now. She walks over to Gregg, grabs his arm. "Stop this. Look what you did to her."

Gregg shakes her off.

"Don't you think that not walking is the least of your worries?" he asks Alyssa. Alyssa starts crying harder.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing," Marie tells her. She means to sound stern, but her voice falters. "You're a good kid. I'm a good mother."

Alyssa looks up at her. Her eyes are puffy, red-rimmed.

"I'm sorry, Mom. We thought it sounded like fun."

"No." Marie backs up until her back is pressed against the sliding glass door. She hears the murmur of the television from inside. The news is covering the latest developments in the bus vandalism story.

Gregg sighs, moves closer, reaches for Marie.

"Honey, relax," he says. "I'm sure she won't go to jail. I mean, she could, but hopefully all she'll have to do is pay for the tires, do community service or something."

Marie shakes her head. Her daughter is not a felon. She didn't spend all night drinking and jabbing bus tires with drill bits. Alyssa was asleep, asleep in her room with

the pale green walls and lace curtains. She was asleep under the fluffy comforter, her dark hair splayed around her face, her eyelids twitching as she dreamt.

Marie pulls open the sliding glass door, stumbles onto the cold tile. She goes into the bedroom, locks the door, sinks onto the bed. She lies on her back staring at the popcorn ceiling, imagining Alyssa as a pink-skinned baby, as a chubby five-year-old with pigtails.

She lies there for the next few hours, watching the way the shadows slide over the ceiling as the sun moves across the sky. Gregg checks on her once, mentions that he's going to talk to a friend of his, a lawyer. He asks if she wants to come, but she shakes her head.

By the time she finally gets out of bed, the sky has faded from pale yellow to pink to the deep blue of early evening. Marie makes her way through the house, trying to be quiet so Alyssa won't hear her. She opens the sliding glass door and slips onto the porch, collapsing in one of the plastic lawn chairs.

The evening air is thick with humidity and surprisingly cool for May. The wind chime twirls in the breeze, gleaming in the soft moonlight. Next door, the remainder of Rick's burn pile shimmers hot red against the dark dirt.

After a moment, the sliding glass door opens, and Gregg steps out onto the porch. He sits down next to her. Marie doesn't want to look at him, doesn't want to see the tired, defeated look on his face. She focuses on the dead leafs spinning on the pool surface.

"Don't you want to know how it went?" Gregg asks after a few minutes.

Marie shrugs. "Is our daughter really a felon?"

Gregg sighs and leans back in the chair. "Marie, I hate to be a jerk, but, frankly, I'm glad she got caught."

Bile rises in her throat. "God, how can you say that?"

Gregg shakes his head. "I just can't believe you haven't realized it before."

"Realized what?"

Gregg laughs, which strikes Marie as inappropriate, considering the situation.

"She's not perfect," he says. "You're not perfect."

Marie sighs and closes her eyes. "How many other incidents have there been?" she asks. "That time the cops brought Alyssa home. Do you think she…"

Gregg interrupts. "I don't know." Marie realizes that even he doesn't want to consider the possibility that their daughter was involved in drugs.

Marie's throat tightens. "I'm a bad mother."

Gregg reaches over and rubs her arm. "You're not a bad mother."

She jerks her arm away. The wind picks up, stirring the spiraled glass pieces of the wind chime. In the distance, tires squeal and people shout, probably kids on their way to graduation. Marie tries to drown out those sounds and focus on the soft tinkle. She's always found the sound so relaxing, so comforting. Maybe she'll get more of them—metal, plastic, glass—and hang them in a row along the ceiling so that all day, every day she can hear them ringing. Every day she can drown out all the other sounds in her life.

A car speeds past the house. It sounds like someone—a young man, maybe—shouts Alyssa's name.

FATTY WALSH

The day that Alucia dyed her hair blond I knew she was going to get Fatty Walsh to take her up the elevator.

I saw her at the park, smoking a cigarette she probably got from her brother. She leaned against the smooth, near-white trunk of a royal Poinciana, twirling one of the bright red flowers in between her thumb and forefinger. She was wearing a tank top and a pair of white shorts. She was talking to Rafael, a senior at Killian High School who had long arms and wavy hair that fell over his eyes. He played baseball, or so I'd heard. Alucia always went after the athletes.

She smiled when she saw me and tossed her hair over her shoulder. As I got closer, I saw that it wasn't really blond but a streaky yellow with orange tips.

"It's not going to look natural, amiga," Alucia said as if she read my mind. "When your hair is dark like mine, they have to bleach it like twenty times."

"My mama did that once. Got a bald spot right here." Rafael touched the crown of his head. "Better hope it don't fall out." He grinned. Alucia slapped him on the arm.

"Papi is taking us to the Biltmore on Sunday for brunch," she said, turning to face me. She reached up to touch her hair as if to reassure herself that it was still there. The gold bangles on her wrist gleamed in the sunlight that filtered through the flat canopy of the royal Poinciana. "What do you say? There's a place by my house, a salòn, where you can get your hair dyed real cheap. Or I can do it for you."

"I don't like blondes," Rafael said. He took the stub of the cigarette from Alucia's hand and lifted it to his lips. "Pelo amarillo. Why would she want that?"

Alucia snatched the cigarette from his fingers and dropped it into the dirt, stepping on it with her sandaled foot.

"So Fatty Walsh will take her to the thirteenth floor," she said. "He only likes chicas rubias."

"Who is Fatty Walsh?" Rafael wanted to know.

"A gangster," I said. "A dead one."

"His ghost haunts the thirteenth floor of the Biltmore," Alucia said, smiling and raising her eyebrows. "I hear he's hot."

"I don't believe in ghosts," Rafael said. I noticed that he was now leaning away from Alucia, staring at the dirt.

"What are you doing this Saturday?" Alucia touched the ends of her hair with her fingertips. "Don't worry. I will buy the bleach."

I had been to the Biltmore brunch a handful of times with Alucia and her parents. Her family was so clean, so normal. Her father always wore business suits and shoes so shiny I could see my reflection in them. Her mother had thin eyebrows and bright pink nails and offered me wine even though I was only sixteen. Their house was two stories and had a stone walkway and a black iron fence covered in white bougainvillea surrounding it. It had gleaming white tile throughout, whereas my apartment had dingy green carpet marked with irregular-shaped stains. Their house smelled of oranges and peppermint, whereas my apartment smelled of mildew and dog urine.

Although I felt out of place at the Biltmore, I looked forward to those Sundays when Alucia invited me along. I looked forward to escaping from my dark room with the black iron bars over the window, from my brother snoring in the next bed. Javier was thirteen, only three years younger than me, but he still spoke and acted like a child. There was a medical term for it, but I never bothered to remember it because I never wanted to have to explain it to my friends.

When I got home from the park that day, Javier was watching television in the den. The portable fan was on in the corner, humming and swiveling, churning the hot, damp air that filtered in through the open shutter windows. Javier turned to look at me, his dark eyes peering out from the mass of curls that fell over his eyes.

"Are you okay, Selina?" he asked. He climbed out of the old plaid recliner and wrapped him arms around me. "I missed you."

I pulled his arms off me and stepped away. "I'm fine."

I never really believed my mother that Javier and I were brother and sister. At least not full brother and sister. Javier's hair is dark and curls so tight that it frizzes if he brushes it. I have hair the color of honey or brown sugar, so thin and straight it won't hold a curl, even with a full can of hair spray. She said we both had the same father, a man she referred to as Eddie. I'd seen the pictures, the few that there were: he was a short man with thick shoulders and a small waist. He had dark hair and dark eyes and smooth, peach-colored skin. Our mother said he had left right after Javier was born, that he couldn't handle Javier's illness. That means I would have been two when he left. Sometimes I closed my eyes and tried to picture his face, the way he smelled, the feel of his skin or hair as he held me on his shoulders, but I couldn't come up with anything.

"Where have you been?" Javier tried to wrap his arms around me again, but I pushed him away and left the den, closing the door behind me.

My mother was in her room, on the bed, with the curtains drawn. In the gray light, I could just make out her thin figure curled on top of the comforter. Her back was to me. The room smelled of potpourri and cigarette smoke.

"Mom?" I asked, being careful not to step across the invisible line drawn at her doorway. She hated when we invaded her space. "I'm going over to Alucia's on Saturday. Okay?"

She turned to face me. She was in her cotton nightgown, the one with martinis all over it, which told me she hadn't been out of bed all day. Her stringy, whitish hair stuck to her forehead and neck.

"Saturday I have an interview," she said. "You have to watch your brother."

I did not want to know where she was interviewing. The last job she had required her to work until four in the morning and she came home reeking of alcohol and smoke, her face covered in such thick, bright make-up that I barely recognized her.

I tried to imagine taking Javier over to Alucia's. Alucia had never met any of my family, had never even been inside my apartment. I could not imagine her reaction to Javier.

"Okay," I said. "I'll call and tell her I can't make it."

I couldn't call, as it turned out, because our mother had not paid the phone bill. The next day at school I found Alucia leaning against the faded blue lockers, her arms wrapped around Rafael's thin waist, her hands stuffed into his back pockets.

"I can't come over on Saturday," I said. "I have to watch my brother."

Alucia shrugged. "No problema. Come with me after school today."

Her mother picked us up in her shiny black SUV and took us with her to Publix. She was having people over for dinner and needed to pick up some groceries. We followed along behind her as she walked down aisle after aisle, carefully selecting bags of small black beans and white rice, long green plantains, cubed steak, a bottle of mojo sauce. I looked at the prices as she stood trying to choose between flan or cheesecake for dessert. I wished we could afford to shop at Publix. We usually bought groceries at City-Reach Ministries, a store down in south Kendall. It was a small place nestled in the back of a warehouse where some organization sold food and name brand products donated by local stores for real cheap. It was a good distance from our apartment complex, but if it wasn't raining I just road my bike and looped the plastic bags full of supplies around the handlebars or carried them in my backpack.

I had seen Alucia and her mother there once when I was buying groceries. They were in the back, looking at perfume and tall, leather lace-up boots. I thought about trying to hide among the tall metal racks of canned goods, but Alucia saw me before I could move.

"Selina, amiga, what are you doing here?" She was holding a pair of strappy sandals with rhinestones around the buckles. The paper pricetag hung from a string and read $25 in slanted handwriting. "Mami and I are just looking for some shoes. I heard they had nice shoes for real cheap."

"Oh, yeah, I was here for shoes, too." I looked down at the cans of green beans and tomatoes that I held. "They have good prices on food here, too."

Alucia laughed and waved her hand in front of her face. "Girl, that's because this is the food they couldn't sell in Publix." She pointed at the sharp dents in the cans. "Who wants damaged goods, right?"

Her mother approached and tapped Alucia on the shoulder to show her some perfume she'd found. When Alucia turned, I hid the dented cans behind some boxes of lip gloss and grabbed a pair of clear rubber flip-flops infused with glitter.

When I got home that night with sparkly flip-flops and no food, my mother yelled, slapped me a few times and ended up throwing the flip-flops out into the street.

Now, as we stood in Publix looking at the different hair dyes and bleaches, I wondered what my mother would say when I came home with yellow hair. At least I could tell her that I didn't pay for it.

Alucia's mother wouldn't let us use the bleach in the house, so we went outside and laid an old towel over the coral-colored tile surrounding the pool. The sun was already slipping behind the blue-gray clouds, and in the falling dusk the tropical smells of Alucia's backyard filled the air. There was the sweet smell of jasmine, the soft scent of orange blossoms. There was also a sharp, pungent smell that I couldn't identify.

"That's the Angel's Trumpet," Alucia said when she saw me wrinkling my nose. "It stinks, no?"

The Angel's Trumpet bush was twice the size of any other bush or tree in their backyard. The bell-shaped yellow flowers made the branches sag, which I thought made the bush look like it was sad. I said as much to Alucia, and she laughed.

"How could it be sad?" she said. "It's probably the happiest plant out here. Its flowers, they make you see things. It's like being high."

I stared at the Angel's Trumpet as Alucia snapped on a pair of latex gloves. I knew that Alucia had been high before; she'd told me about the time that her brother gave her a joint. He'd done so begrudgingly. He said that one joint cost him a lot of money.

"Could we try it?"

Alucia mixed the bleach and began lathering it on my head. "Not unless you want to die," she said. She laughed. "My brother tried it once. Ground it into a tea. He started foaming at the mouth like some rabid perro or something. It was gross."

I thought of Alucia's brother, Carlos, a senior in high school, tall and slender, with his slick hair and thin mustache. I often wished, although I wouldn't admit it to myself then, that Carlos was my brother instead of Javier. I tried to picture Carlos with thick white foam trailing down his smooth brown face. All I could see was Javier in the morning, lines from the pillow running down the left side of his narrow face, his small mouth crusted with saliva. That was part of his condition; his saliva was thick and constantly gathering at the corners of his mouth. I couldn't imagine Carlos like that.

A light breeze swept through the yard, rustling the thick leaves of the banana tree and making the yellow flowers bob. The bleach made my scalp burn.

"Do you really think there's a ghost?" I said. The burning intensified. "Fatty Walsh's ghost?"

"Si," Alucia said with a brisk nod. "My amiga, Beatrice, she saw him once."

"Really?" My eyes watered.

Alucia stretched out on the towel beside me and closed her eyes. "He wouldn't let her leave the thirteenth floor for like an hour. The concierge had to climb the stairs because the elevator wouldn't come."

Finally the burning was so bad I couldn't stand it anymore. I jumped up and ran over to the pool. I bent over and dipped my head in and shook and shook, trying to block out the image of my hair falling out in brittle yellow patches.

Later, after it dried, I sat on Alucia's bed, running my fingers through my new hair. It was not golden, as I imagined the hair of the women Fatty Walsh kidnapped. It did not gleam in the light. It was stiff and dry and splotchy. Near my scalp the hair was nearly white, but above my shoulders the colors shifted, moving abruptly from pale yellow to burnt orange and back to white. Alucia assured me that it looked fine, but I couldn't stop touching it, couldn't stop thinking that there was no way Fatty Walsh would think I was pretty enough to bring up to his suite.

When I got home that night, my mother was sitting at the kitchen counter in a threadbare bathrobe, slumped over a steaming cup of chamomile tea.

"Where the hell have you been?" she asked when I walked in. "You were supposed to pick up your brother today."

I opened the refrigerator. A bottle of sour milk had tipped over and left a thick, eggshell-colored puddle on the bottom shelf. Black, fuzzy strawberries sat to the left of the puddle, and a plastic bag with three pieces of honey oat bread peeked out from the bottom drawer. I grabbed the bag of bread and undid the tie.

"You didn't tell me I had to pick Javier up."

My mother lifted a spoon and stirred her tea. I wondered what the point of that was. Our milk was sour, and, unless she'd gone shopping, which I highly doubted, there was nothing in the cupboards suitable for sweetening tea.

"Yes, I did. Last night." She took a long drink from the mug.

I opened the bag and pulled out two slices of bread. They were dry and soft spots of blue-gray mold sprouted along the crust. I threw them in the trash.

"I'm going to bed," I said.

My mother looked up as I brushed past. "What happened to your hair?"

Before leaving Alucia's, I had pulled my discolored hair back into a tight bun in the hopes that my mother wouldn't notice. I dreaded her reaction.

"Alucia dyed it for me. For the Biltmore on Sunday."

My mother took another sip of tea. "It looks terrible. Did your rich friend pay for it?"

She always referred to Alucia as my "rich friend." She'd never met Alucia, but she told me that only people with more money than they knew what to do with could afford to eat brunch at the Biltmore.

I rubbed my palms against my jeans. "Alucia dyed her hair, too. We're hoping that Fatty Walsh will take us up to his suite."

My mother laughed. She had a strange laugh, hoarse and choked, that sounded as if she was about to cry. I cringed.

"Fatty Walsh? That mobster who was shot in the early 1900's?" I nodded. She smirked. "Ain't no way he's going to want you. You know what he was doing in that hotel, right?"

I shrugged. “He was gambling.”

My mother lifted the cup to her lips. Honey-colored tea dribbled down her chin and dotted her faded pink bathrobe. The faint brown stains reminded me of dried blood.

“Not just gambling,” she said. “He ran his own casino. That man was all about the money.”

I scratched my still tingling scalp. “Well, I don’t really believe in ghosts. I just like the brunch, that’s all.”

My mother stood and dumped the rest of the tea in the sink. “You have to take Javier, if you’re going to go.”

I watched her face to see if she was joking. There were dark purple shadows under her eyes. Her pale lashes were crimped, and day-old eyeshadow creased on her eyelids.

“Why?”

“I can’t watch him.” She walked past me and down the hall. She didn’t give a reason, probably because she didn’t have one. I knew what my mother did on Sunday mornings—the same thing she did almost every other morning. She lay in bed, smoking, drinking tea, watching television, or staring at the wall. Always alone. Always in the dark.

Sunday morning came. I didn’t want Alucia to know where we lived, so I told her that Javier and I would meet her at an intersection almost a mile away from our apartment.

I got up early to make sure that I had time to get Javier ready. I washed my hair in the sink and dressed in the nicest thing that I owned: a cotton sundress with daisies scattered among black and white squares. It was too big: the sleeves kept sliding off my shoulders and the hem billowed around my knees. I braided my hair and slipped on the sparkly sandals that I'd retrieved from the street after my mother threw them out. I decided that I was not nearly as pretty as Alucia, but that maybe I was pretty enough for Fatty Walsh.

Javier didn't want to get out of bed. He mumbled and snatched the covers as I tried to pull them off. His lips were chapped and the corners of his mouth crusted with dry saliva. I finally got him out of bed by reminding him that where we were going there were going to be tables and tables full of food, hot food, sweet food, and that he could eat at much as he wanted.

In the bathroom, I made him bend over the sink so I could scrub his face.

"It burns," he whined, rubbing his eyes.

"Toughen up." I splashed the cold water onto his face and rubbed it with a towel.

"Is Mommy coming with us?" Javier said. "She's not up yet."

"No, she's not coming."

"Why?"

I grabbed a comb from the drawer beneath the sink and pulled the nest of brown hair from it, then attempted to rake it through Javier's thick curls.

"Mommy doesn't want to come."

"Why?"

"She's tired."

"Why?"

The comb hit a knot and I yanked it through. Javier cried out.

"Stop asking questions." I dropped the comb and pushed him through the door. "Go get dressed."

Even though it was only nine in the morning, the air outside was damp and warm, and I could feel sweat condensing along my brow and collecting in the small of my back. Javier attempted to grab my hand every time we crossed a street, and I consistently wrenched my hand free.

"You're thirteen, for goodness sakes," I told him.

We passed concrete block buildings with peeling pink paint where thin men stood outside drinking café con leche and smoking cigars. One of them whistled and said something in Spanish, but I told Javier not to look and we kept walking. We shuffled along cracked sidewalks lined with drooping palm trees and warped chain link fences covered in purple bougainvillea.

"I'm hot," Javier said.

"We're almost there."

"My side hurts."

"You're fine. Stop complaining."

As we waited for the walk signal at the final intersection before we reached our destination, Javier again reached for my hand. I could see Alucia's family's black SUV gleaming in the sunlight as it idled in the parking lot of a nearby convenience store. I slapped his hand away.

"Ouch," Javier said so loudly that an elderly woman sitting at the bus stop looked over. My face burned.

Finally, the glowing white pedestrian sign gave us permission to cross, and we hurried across the hot asphalt, weaving between men in sweaty t-shirts carrying individually wrapped roses. One man grabbed my arm as I passed.

"¿Un subiò?" he said, smiling, showing a mouth crowded with yellow teeth.

Javier reached for a pale pink rose wrapped in shiny plastic. "I want one," he said.

I yanked my arm away and told Javier to keep walking.

The inside of Alucia's family's car smelled like flowery perfume and aftershave. Alucia smiled at me as Javier and I slid into the back seat. She had definitely dressed for the occasion. She wore a strapless white dress and high-heeled sandals outlined in silver sequins. Her hair was curled and her eyes outlined in pale blue.

"Good God, Selina," she said. I buckled Javier in, and her father shifted the SUV into drive. "You never told me you lived in the ghetto."

The Biltmore was even more beautiful than I remembered it. The elegant tower with its long, gleaming windows and high arches rose above us as we drove along the Coral Gables streets lined with royal Poincianas and thin palm trees whose shiny fronds gleamed and dangled like golden-green fringe. My chest tightened as Alucia's father pulled into the parking lot. My neck ached as I strained to look up at the thirteenth floor, the suite where Fatty Walsh had been killed.

Alucia caught me looking and grinned. "You're scared," she said.

I straightened up. "I'm not."

Javier reached over and put his hand on my arm. "Scared of what?" he asked.

Alucia lowered her voice to a whisper. "A ghost."

"A ghost," Javier said too loudly. Alucia's parents looked back at us. I suddenly wished I had decided to stay home instead of bring Javier with me.

The buffet was as overwhelming as I remembered it being. The entire courtyard was lined with long tables overflowing with every kind of food: fresh cheese and fruits, carved roast beef, gleaming sausage, golden French toast, cold pink shrimp. There was even a dessert table with chocolate cake, key lime pie, carrot cake, lemon meringue pie, and a fountain flowing with chocolate so smooth it looked like dark silk.

I kept my hand on Javier's shoulder as we walked around and surveyed our choices. He cried out twice, once at the omelet station and once when he spotted the chocolate fountain. At the dessert table, he reached out and ran a thick finger through the curtain of chocolate. Before I could stop him, he brought it to his mouth, and liquid chocolate dripped all over his light blue shirt. The woman manning the dessert table frowned at us.

I ended up going back three times, piling my plate first with an omelet and bacon, then with shrimp, grapes, cheese, and fancy crackers, and finally with stuffed chicken, roast potatoes, and a piece of key lime pie. When I was done, I carefully avoided looking at any more food for fear that I would vomit. I knew for certain that I wouldn't be hungry for the rest of the day.

Javier was the last one to finish. He had trouble cutting his roast beef. He pressed the knife down and sawed as hard as he could. I reached over to help but before I

could he lost his grip on the knife and his arm shot forward, knocking over his glass of orange juice. The yellow liquid splashed over the side of the table and onto Alucia's white dress. She shrieked and jumped up.

"Idiota!" she snapped, glaring at Javier. Javier's round face crumbled like he was about to cry. "What's wrong with you?"

"Relax," Alucia's mother said nonchalantly. She put down the mimosa she had been sipping, picked up a napkin and dabbed at the stain. "It was just an accident."

Alucia brushed her hand away.

"Come on," she said, grabbing my arm. "Let's go now before your loco brother spills something else on me."

I glanced at Javier, who was hunched over his plate of roast beef, his eyes squeezed shut. I didn't want to bring him along, but I was afraid that if I left him alone with Alucia's parents, he would spill something else or, worse, break something and I would never be invited back.

"Come on," I said, tugging on his arm beneath the white tablecloth.

"I'm not finished," he said, opening his eyes and stuffing another bite into his mouth.

"We're going to see the ghost," I whispered.

"I don't want to," he whined. Alucia's mother looked over at us.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

"No," Alucia said. "We're just going to ride the elevators."

"If you come with me now, I will let you get some pie when we get back," I told him. He dropped the fork to the plate and stood up, crossing his arms over his chest.

There were three elevators in the lobby, but only the elevator on the far left had access to the thirteenth floor. It was in use when we arrived, so we stood there, staring at our reflections in the elevator door. Alucia took the opportunity to prep herself; she carefully separated two tangled strands of yellow curls and pinched her cheeks so they glowed pink. I suddenly realized that, if Fatty Walsh had to choose, he would certainly choose Alucia, with her stiff hair and low-cut dress, over me, with my messy yellow-white braid and wrinkled sundress.

The elevator door opened and a man in a polo shirt and khaki pants stepped out. He brushed past without looking at us, and the elevator stayed open, its gaping mouth revealing three mirrors, one on each wall, each surrounded by dark, carved wood. Alucia gripped my hand.

"Come on," she said, pulling me into the elevator, which smelled like cigars, jasmine-scented perfume, and furniture polish. Javier followed us, giggling when he saw his reflection in the mirrors.

"No, he can't come," Alucia hissed. "It won't work. Fatty Walsh only likes chicas."

The elevator doors closed, but we didn't go anywhere. There was no button for the thirteenth floor; it required a special card. According to the legend, if you didn't press any buttons, Fatty Walsh would signal the elevator to the thirteenth floor and it would rise on its own.

"I don't want to see the ghost," Javier said. He pressed his small hands against the elevator doors. I could hear the panic in his voice. "I don't want to see the ghost. I don't want to. I'm scared."

Alucia glanced at me. I could tell she was annoyed by the way her lips pinched together.

"He's got to get out."

A few seconds later, the doors opened again.

"Tell him to wait in the lobby," Alucia said.

"I can't. I can't leave him alone."

Alucia sighed and played with one of her curls. "Then, do what you have to do."

Javier and I stepped out. The doors closed, and at first nothing happened. Then the elevator began to rise. Above the door, the glowing red numbers showed the elevator moving up, passing each floor, until it stopped at the thirteenth floor.

"Oh my God," I said.

"The ghost has her!" Javier grabbed my arm and pointed at the elevator. His voice was inappropriately loud; several guests at the check-in counter turned to stare. My face burned.

"Be quiet," I said, trying to sound soothing. "Remember, inside voice."

Javier pulled on my arm. He was agitated; I could tell by the pink glow creeping up his neck and cheeks and the way his hand was trembling as his fingers dug into my arm. I knew what was coming, and I thought briefly about running out of the hotel, down the red-carpeted stairs and across the parking lot. I could just keep running and running, down the streets lined with palm trees and bougainvillea bushes, until I was far enough away not to hear the panic in his piercing voice, his words slurred together, almost indistinct, like a child learning to speak.

“We have to help her,” Javier said, his hand mashing the elevator button over and over again. “We have to help her, Selina.”

“Let’s go outside.” I pulled on his arm. I could tell by the way his lower lip quivered that he was about to cry.

“Let go!” he shouted. He sank to the floor and pounded his fists on the shiny marble. “We have to help her. We have to help Alucia.”

More guests were staring, and a concierge was headed toward us.

“Miss?” The concierge kept his distance from us. Drops of sweat glistened along his receding hairline. “Where are your parents?”

“The ghost.” Javier’s fists pounded the floor again and again, and his shoulders jumped as hiccups racked his body. “I’m scared.”

The concierge’s mouth tightened. “Are you guests, ma’m?”

“My friend,” I said. I pointed at the elevator. “She’s on the thirteenth floor. I think Fatty Walsh has her.”

Javier stopped pounding the floor and wailed, a low, mournful sound that sounded more like a grieving adult than a scared child.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” the concierge said in a hushed, clipped voice.

“But the ghost,” I said. “My friend is up there.”

The concierge lifted a hand and massaged his right temple.

“There are no ghosts at this hotel,” he said. “But there are disturbed guests. Please.”

My throat burned. I reached down and grabbed Javier's hand, pulling as hard as I could. His wails stopped and he stared at me with a confused expression on his face.

"We're going outside," I said. "Away from the ghost."

He stood clumsily. "You're hurting me," he said as I yanked on his arm.

"Why can't you act normal for just one day?" I said. "One day."

"Ouch," Javier said as I dragged him across the lobby and outside to the overhang where the guests turned their cars over to the valet. "Selina, why are you angry? What's wrong?"

"Shut up." I sat down on the deep red, carpeted stairs and put my head in my hands.

Javier came up behind me and put his warm hand on my shoulder.

"Selina, are you okay?"

I brushed his hand away.

"I'm glad we didn't go in the elevator." He sat down beside me.

He leaned over and, hesitantly, put his head in my lap. He breathed evenly, as if he was sleeping, his warm breath tickling my knee. I thought of my mother at home, curled on the bed in the dark, stale bedroom, staring at the wall. I thought of Javier, a little boy trapped in time. I thought of Alucia exploring the thirteenth floor, flirting with Fatty Walsh, his dark hair slicked behind his ears, cigar between his lips. I leaned over Javier and cried into his tangled hair.

Alucia didn't come down for another forty-five minutes. When she did, her face was flushed, and she couldn't stop smiling.

"I did it," she said. "I went to the thirteenth floor."

She didn't notice my puffy eyes, which burned every time I blinked.

"Did you see him?" I was careful not to say the word "ghost." I didn't want to set Javier off again.

Alucia played with one of her curls. "Sí, of course."

I waited for her to elaborate, but she stared past me at the golf course, appearing bored.

"Well?" I asked when I realized she wasn't going to volunteer more information. "What happened?"

Alucia shrugged. "I get to the thirteenth floor, and the door to the suite is unlocked. I think that's weird, you know? But I'm not scared, so I go inside, and I swear, the suite is bigger than my house. It's two stories. That's when I know it's true, that Fatty Walsh had dinero. Lots of it."

"So, what about Fatty?"

Alucia twirled her hair absentmindedly. "There was this man in a white suit, smoking a cigar, on the balcony. I know the legends say he is not a bad ghost, but I didn't want him to see me. I mean, what if he wanted to keep me locked up there, or something? So I ran out and called the concierge from the phone in the hallway."

The whole time she talked she avoided looking at Javier, who was standing next to me, holding my hand.

"I want to go," I said when she was done recounting the tale. "I want to see him for myself. My mother will never believe me if I don't."

For the first time since she'd stepped off the elevator, Alucia glanced at Javier. Her face hardened.

"I don't think it'll work for you," she said.

The way she averted her eyes, the cold tone of her voice, told me that she had realized the difference between us, and that it was not acceptable to her. I doubted she had really seen a ghost; more likely she wanted to keep the experience, the story, for herself and not have to share it with someone like me, someone with a brother like Javier. I glanced down at Javier, who was picking at a scab on his arm. I realized that even if Alucia had suggested I go up in the elevator, I wouldn't leave him behind.

I saw Alucia at school after that and we continued to talk, but it was never the same. She didn't ask me over for dinner or to join her family for brunch. If she laughed at something I said, her laugh was short and nervous, and she rarely looked me in the eye. We talked about neutral subjects like prom, who was dating whom, how disgusting the cafeteria food was. We talked about the SAT's and how much we hated algebra. We never mentioned Fatty Walsh again.

CONVERSATIONS IN ROOM 201

Saturday

That morning Violet's cell phone rang twice as she stood in the stark bedroom, watching in the mirror as the seamstress crouched on the floor, carefully slipping pins through the delicate organza. The dress was simple, strapless, so tight she could barely breathe. She took in a deep breath and felt her lungs fight against the stiff bra. Another two months, and the dress wouldn't fit at all. She thought about asking the seamstress to let out the sides, just a little, just in case, but she didn't want the questioning look, the confused "Are you expecting to gain weight?"

She stared at herself in the mirror as the seamstress worked. The glaringly white dress made her look washed out. Her face, lips, cheeks, hair even looked pale, lifeless against the brilliant fabric, and suddenly she wanted to tear it, to just take the thin organza between her fingers and pull until she heard the sharp rip and felt the fabric give way. She wanted to run outside, through the mud puddles left from yesterday's rain, run until mud splattered all over the hem, the train.

"I'm out of pins," the seamstress said, standing up. "I'll be right back."

It was while the seamstress was gone that Violet felt it. Her abdomen had been pinched with cramps all morning, but the doctor had said not to worry. When she saw the red drops gleaming on the white tile floor, though, she knew.

She didn't even think about calling her mother. Instead, she climbed into her old Taurus and drove north on I-75. She drove and drove, stopping only for gas and some stale cheddar popcorn from a convenience store. She drove until the sky was a deep, even purple, until her eyelids were so heavy she was afraid of falling asleep at the wheel. As she drifted along the interstate, she saw skyscrapers in the distance, walls of light outlined against a starless sky, and she decided to stop. She drove aimlessly along steeply sloped hills, through mazes of one-way streets until she found a hotel whose sign flickered in the harsh streetlights.

Sunday

She awoke to the sound of a man speaking. His voice—even, cheerful, with a light British accent—was so clear and distinct it sounded as if he was sitting right next to her bed. She bolted upright, her heart beating rapidly, then collapsed back onto the pillows when she realized it was coming from the next room.

"Just thought I'd check to see how Julie was feeling," the voice was saying. "How is she this morning? Does her back feel better?"

Violet closed her eyes. Next door, the man's coffee pot gurgled. She imagined him sitting there, probably in a dark business suit, tearing open packets of powdered creamer, the receiver cradled between his ear and shoulder. She wondered who Julie was. A friend? A colleague? Whoever she was, she was lucky. Lucky to have someone calling at eight in the morning to check on her, to make sure she was all right. Violet thought briefly about Peter, about her mother, and wondered if they were concerned about her, if they'd even realized she was gone. She thought about her students, backpacks slung over their shoulders and shoelaces untied, walking into the classroom—

the classroom she had taken the time to decorate with brightly-colored bulletin boards about multiplication—and seeing someone else standing at the front.

Outside, rain slapped the window intermittently. She pulled back the heavy green curtain and tried to make out where she was. All around the hotel skyscrapers loomed, disappearing into the thick fog that had settled overnight. Far below, people walked along the glistening streets, black umbrellas bobbing.

She was hungry, and she felt greasy. She had a sour taste in her mouth. Her gums were sore from imbedded popcorn kernels. She suddenly realized that she had no change of clothes. She had no toothbrush, no make-up, no clean underwear.

She slipped into the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face. Her eyelashes were crimped from sleeping on her stomach, and yesterday's carefully applied mascara formed ashy semi-circles below her eyes. She took a bottle of the hotel's fruity shampoo and lathered her hair in the sink. The suds slid down her forehead and stung her eyes. When it was all rinsed out, she pulled her hair back without bothering to comb it.

Out in the hallway, she waited for several minutes for the elevator to make its way down from the top floor. She stood studying her feet, the dirt crusted between her toes, the flaking pink polish on her toenails. Down the hall, a door swung open and clicked shut. A man emerged from the room next to hers, room 201. The British man who asked about Julie. He wasn't wearing a suit, but he was crisply dressed in a button down shirt and pressed black pants. A laptop bag was slung over his shoulder. He smiled at her as he joined her by the elevator. A short, polite smile, his eyes averted.

Violet wondered what was on his laptop. Probably important files, business letters, memos. Maybe Excel spreadsheets filled with complex data and formulas. Maybe pictures of his wife, his children, the places he wanted to visit.

After she found out she was pregnant, Violet had spent a lot of time on Peter's computer. She told him she was researching baby names and cheap wedding dresses. What she was really doing was checking his e-mails. She discovered his password—her name—and checked his e-mail constantly. She read everything that came through, even the junk mail from people trying to sell porn, hoping to find something, anything that suggested he was cheating on her. When she couldn't find anything, she considered creating a fake account and e-mailing him disguised as another woman. Or she could call his house and leave a breathy message on the machine. Anything so she could scream and cry and tell him she didn't want to marry him after all.

Later that day, as she stood in the bathroom trying to wash her shirt in the sink, her cell phone rang. She left the shirt floating among the flat suds and retrieved her cell phone from the bottom of her purse. It was her mother.

"Where the hell are you?" her mother asked as soon as Violet answered the phone. She didn't sound angry, or worried. Only tired.

"I had to get away for a while," Violet said. "I'm fine."

"Are you with another man?" her mother asked. "I won't tell Peter."

"No."

"Do you need money? I can see if Peter will send you some."

"I don't need money." Violet pressed a hand to her aching forehead. Soapy water trailed along her brow and into her eyes, making them burn.

"Look, could you just tell Peter that I'm fine? I don't know when I'll be back, but I'm okay."

"Sure." Her mother sounded distracted. In the background, the doorbell rang, and her mother's Chihuahua began barking. "I'll tell him."

Monday

The next morning was as gray and dreary as the previous. Violet lay in bed, listening to the rush of water from the roof, the splash of car tires in puddles, a distant siren. After a few minutes, she heard the distinct sound of a train calling out a warning.

In room 201, the door slammed. Sounds followed: heavy footsteps muffled by the thick carpet, keys clattering on the table, a faucet running. A woman's voice, high-pitched, piercing. The distress and anger almost palpable even through the wall.

"Oh my God, where have you been?" she said. Her voice was loud, forceful, but Violet thought she detected a tremor. She climbed out of bed and sat down on the cold wooden chair by the wall. She thought about pressing her ear to the wall, but then realized that would be too much.

"My God, you smell," the woman said after several long seconds. Violet imagined the man, probably in a rumpled shirt, jeans damp and smelling of the rain that floated down outside, walking over to the bed, maybe to give a conciliatory kiss, or to reach for the television remote. Maybe he had been out drinking. Maybe the woman smelled alcohol, sweat, vomit, all combined into one salty, sour, nauseating stench. The stench of loneliness, bitterness, escape.

"How many times must we go through this?" the woman asked. The quick sound of a zipper, the rustling of plastic. "It doesn't matter where we are. New York. Atlanta. The freaking Bahamas. You'll never change."

The man finally responded. His voice was soft, tired, barely discernible through the wall.

"This is who I am," he said. "You knew this about me when you married me."

Those words. Frustrating, familiar words. Violet pushed back from the wall. In the bathroom, she brushed her teeth and pulled her hair away from her face. She slipped on her shoes and left the room.

Outside, the damp, cold air made her lungs burn. Raindrops settled on her eyelashes and with every blink, the world around her grew blurry. People pushed past her, bent forward for balance as they hurried up the steep sidewalks. Beneath her, the sidewalk rushed by, gray concrete smeared with wet red clay and pink earthworms, some already dead.

You knew this about me. Peter's words to her last Christmas morning. They lay in bed, Peter with a cold cloth over his eyes, his hand on his stomach, Violet with her head propped up on a pillow, refusing to look at him.

The night before they'd been at a Christmas Eve party at her friend Margaret's house. Violet knew almost everyone there: friends from childhood, her mother's friends, even a few co-workers. She was so proud to show off Peter, the lawyer from Miami, who wore a suit and tie to work, who owned shoes that cost more than Violet's grocery bill for an entire month. Peter with his quick, dimpled smile and strong hands. There was no one like him in Homestead.

Peter who liked to drink. Peter who drank all of Margaret's expensive cherry liquor, who got quiet and sullen and wanted to leave at nine o'clock. Who threw up in Margaret's bougainvillea bush.

Violet had been so embarrassed. Her friends smiled and acted like it was no big deal, but she could see the judgment in the way they averted their eyes, the way their smiles faltered as they looked at each other. They were thinking that she did no better with her rich Miami man than she did with any of her high school boyfriends from Homestead. That she hadn't made much progress in her life after all.

Tuesday

The next morning Violet stayed in bed until almost noon. Her stomach twisted and ached, and she could barely move. She watched television for a couple of hours and then lay on her side to watch the rain stream down the foggy window.

Shortly after noon the door clicked open and shut in room 201. Feet shuffled on the carpet. Keys clattered on the table by the window. Someone turned the television to the weather channel.

"You know, I don't see why you're making such a big deal about it." A man's voice, guttural, emphasizing the 's' sounds. "I was only joking."

"Well, you just don't joke about something like that." A woman's voice, a thick southern accent. "You embarrassed me."

A mattress squeaked. Violet imagined the man sitting down next to the woman, maybe rubbing her back. Maybe she jerked away from him.

"You know I don't really think you'll need one," the man said. "I was only offering to pay for it if you did. Can't you take a joke?"

The woman muttered something that Violet couldn't understand. The volume on the television rose until all Violet could hear was the upbeat, instrumental music played when the weather channel displayed the ten-day forecast.

Violet rolled over and closed her eyes. The first time that she had brought Peter to meet her mother, he had embarrassed her. Violet wasn't sure why; she'd expected her mother to be the one to embarrass her.

They were sitting out back after dinner. Her mother was nursing a beer, Peter was finishing his second glass of wine, and Violet was playing with her watered-down daiquiri. The air was warm and salty. The banana tree, heavy with curved purple bundles, rustled in the breeze. The peach flowers of the angel trumpet bush bobbed, directing their silent music at the grass already glistening with late night dew. In the distance, the cars at the Homestead-Miami Speedway entered their final lap, their straining engines humming like bees.

Violet wasn't even sure how the topic came up. The conversation had been slow and awkward all night. Her mother, normally so loud and boisterous, got quiet when she drank. Peter, who could be very charismatic, seemed uncomfortable in her mother's house with its tie-dyed curtains and glow-in-the-dark peace signs. Somehow, though, along the course of the night, the topic came up.

Violet wasn't paying attention, really, until she heard her name. She had been studying the puddle of condensation on the dusty glass tabletop. Peter said her name, and when she looked up, he was tapping the bottom of his chin.

"Not now," he said. "But eventually. She's got that Harmon face, doesn't she?"

A facelift. He was telling her mother that Violet was going to need a facelift someday.

Her mother looked at Violet and brought what was left of her cigarette to her chapped lips. "Where the hell did you find this guy?" she wanted to know.

Wednesday

Violet woke to the sound of the train, a distant whistle. Below her, cars rushed by, grates clunked under heavy tires. What she did not hear was the sound of rain. She slipped out of bed and pulled back the heavy curtain. Gray sunlight fell over her. The sky was still overcast, but at least the rain had stopped. The streets looked dry. There were no more black umbrellas.

A few minutes later her cell phone rang. It had been beeping all night, signaling a low battery. She didn't have the charger. Once it died, she would be cut off from the rest of the world. Completely. Her mother could never find her. Peter could never find her.

She picked it up after checking the number on the screen.

"So are you ready yet?" Her mother sounded so nonchalant, as if she was asking Violet if they were still meeting for lunch.

Violet pictured her mother curled up on the pink couch covered with dog hair, tapping her cigarette against the top of her empty coffee mug. She was probably still in her nightgown, the same silky one she always answered the door in, the one that clung to her drooping breasts and bunched around her midsection. Her daughter had disappeared, and she was probably lounging around like any other morning.

"Am I ready for what?" Violet asked, wrapping the curtain cord around her finger.

"To come home." Her mother sighed, then lapsed into a coughing fit. "It's getting old, you know. Peter keeps calling, keeps knocking on my door at ungodly hours. He doesn't believe that you're okay."

"I don't know." It was the truth. Violet sank onto the bed and pulled her knees to her chest. The hair on her legs was soft. She needed to shave.

"You know, I did the same thing once," her mother said. "After I had you. Just left. Just got in my jeep and drove."

That didn't surprise Violet. Her mother had always been the only mother who didn't come to school plays, or softball games, or high school graduation. She liked to remind Violet that if she'd believed in birth control, Violet wouldn't be there.

"And then you know what?" her mother continued when Violet didn't speak. "It got old." She paused, coughed a few more times. "Well, it's a good thing I came back. A hell of a good thing. Do you know how you would have turned out if your dad had raised you?"

Violet studied the paint chipping on her toenails. That was one nice thing about dating someone like Peter. She could afford things like spa pedicures. She could afford to have someone scrape away dead skin and polish her toes so they looked brand new. It didn't matter how many pedicures she had, though. As soon as she stepped outside, a stray speck of dirt always found its way into the gleaming polish.

"There's no baby," Violet said. She hadn't planned on telling her mother. But it just came out, and suddenly she couldn't stop. "Tell Peter that. I had a miscarriage. I'm not pregnant anymore. See if he still wants to know where I am. See if he still wants to marry me."

Her mother laughed, which sounded completely inappropriate, yet Violet wasn't surprised.

"It's just as well," her mother said. "So, are you coming home, then?"

In room 201, the door slammed. There was a rustling sound, like a suitcase being dropped onto the bed. Or clothes being taken off. Someone giggled, a short, sharp, ragged noise. It could have been hiccups, or a sob.

"I don't know," Violet said. "Tell Peter I'm sorry." She hung up and turned the cell phone off.

Next door, the noise stopped. Not a rustle. Not a whisper. Violet stood and pressed her ear to the wall. She tried to drown out all of the other noise—the cars on the street below, the rattle of the housekeeper's cart, the hum of the vending machines—to focus on the life in the next room. Maybe, if she could hear something, she could join their lives for just a second. Maybe, for just a second, she could escape her own.

CANNON BEACH

On Saturday morning, Frieda wakes and lies for several minutes staring up at the tremulous shadows on the popcorn ceiling, trying to figure out why she has been dreaming about her husband with another woman.

Walter has been dead for almost five years now, but Frieda started having the dream only about a month ago. The man in it is clearly Walter, with his dark eyebrows and cleft chin and thick arms. He is always with a woman. Frieda knows it is a woman because of the wide hips and fleshy arms, although in the dream, she is never able to see the woman's face.

She rolls over and faces the window. Gray light filters through lacy white curtains that are so old the edges have turned yellow. Outside, waves slap against the concrete walls of the channel. Further out, boat engines hum in the Gulf.

The idea that Walter cheated on her strikes her as absurd. She and Walter had been married twenty-five years and lived in Key Largo the entire time. Less than two miles of land separates the Gulf from the Atlantic, so Frieda doubts that Walter could have managed an affair without her finding out. Still, she finds herself stumbling out of bed and stepping into the shower wearing her cotton nightgown. She turns the faucet all the way to the left, hoping the cold water will wake her up and wash away the image of Walter's smiling face, the way he looked at her—gray eyes shining, the dimple in his left cheek visible—as if he didn't know her at all.

Frieda met Walter on a blind date when she was eighteen. She was working as a waitress at a popular seafood restaurant on US 1, just a short ways from John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park. Her friend Bianca informed her one night that she had set Frieda up on a date.

"Oh, you'll like him," she said when Frieda began to object. "He's kind of short, but he's sweet. Opens doors and everything."

Walter was waiting for her as soon as she went on break. She wasn't feeling particularly attractive: a drunk customer had spilt his fourth glass of wine on her, leaving a stain the color of dried blood on her white tank top, and her hands, despite the fact that she'd scrubbed them three times with jasmine-scented soap, were still sticky and smelled like fish.

She knew who he was right away. He leaned against the doorframe, his dark hair strangely aglow under the string of bright blue seahorse lights. He was short, almost a full inch shorter than her, but he had broad shoulders and a thick neck that made him look strong. He smiled when he saw her but didn't extend his hand as she expected.

"You probably don't have time to go somewhere else," he said. She shrugged.

They walked outside so Walter could light a cigarette. Frieda had never found smoking appealing—the smell gave her a headache—but something about the way that Walter let the cigarette dangle from his fingers and the way he barely parted his lips as he exhaled made her want to reach out and touch his face. She resisted, instead trying to focus as he talked about how he was thinking of signing up for the Marine Corp. At the end of her break, she'd barely spoken two words. He asked for her phone number and said he would call the next day,

It was three days before she heard from him, and he didn't call. It was late, and she was in her room, sitting cross-legged on the old, starfish-shaped rug that partially covered the dusty tile floor. She was filling out an application for the local community college when she heard a hollow rapping on the front door.

Walter was standing there, his face shadowed in the moonlight. Frieda was glad her mother was still working; she wasn't sure what her mother would say if she knew Frieda was talking to a boy. Her mother seemed to think that boys were the cause of all of society's problems.

"Get involved with one of them, and you can kiss your future good-bye," she'd told Frieda on more than one occasion.

"Want to go to Pennekamp?" Walter asked as Frieda stood there, feeling safe behind the screen door.

"But it's closed." She thought he must just be confused about the time.

Walter smiled at her, a sympathetic smile, the way a father might smile at a naive child.

"Just come on," he said, opening the door and taking her hand. She shivered at the way his skin, cool and rough, felt against hers.

They walked along the dark street, led by the white moonlight. They walked briefly along US1, and had to wait, leaning against the wooden fence, until there were no cars in sight. Then Walter hopped over the fence and led her through the dense brush.

It was slow going, and several times Frieda thought about turning back. She tripped over twisted roots and brushed against the rough, salt-crusted leaves of the sea grape tree. Finally, they entered a clearing that she recognized as Cannon Beach.

Walter sat down on the broken white shells and took off his shoes and shirt.

"What are you doing?" Frieda said. He was so pale his skin seemed to glow. She looked away.

"Take off your shoes," Walter said. The water was black and oily against the night sky. Out in the distance, two bright blue lights quivered as they moved slowly over the water.

Finally, Frieda reached down and slipped her sandals off. It took her three times to undo the buckle on the first sandal.

Walter walked into the water, stopping only momentarily to gain his balance on the slippery rocks. Frieda followed, her arms outstretched, feeling carefully with her feet. The water was lit with moonlight, but she couldn't see anything below the surface. Beneath her feet she felt the rocks, sharp and slick, and she imagined she felt the slippery scales of the tropical fish as they brushed against her legs. She tried not to picture the long faces of the barracudas, their sharp teeth gleaming as they floated only feet away.

Before she knew it, she was several feet away from the shore. The ground slipped away beneath her, and she was floating, buoyed by the warm salt water. Her legs churned, keeping her afloat. Walter was beside her, a dark shadow. He reached out and took her arm, pulling her to him. His skin was smooth, cold compared to the warm water that held them up. She wondered if he could feel her quickened pulse.

Saturday afternoon, Frieda's daughter comes over for lunch. They see each other on a regular basis, even though they don't have much to talk about. Louise is the opposite of Frieda: she wears her hair short and spiky with bright red highlights, and she

has a tattoo of a spider on her lower back. She smokes just like her father did, only she smokes black-and-milds because she says they're more fashionable.

"All the kids in my dorm smoke them," she tells Frieda whenever Frieda waves the smoke away.

Louise is studying psychology and likes to inform Frieda that she's too old-fashioned, that she needs to stop being so domestic and embrace her womanhood. Frieda's never sure what her daughter means by this.

Today when Louise comes over, Frieda is cooking. She has been in the kitchen all morning, cooking everything she can think of in an attempt to stop replaying the dream in her head. So far she has cooked a variety of things, none of which really go together: shrimp omelets with salsa, fried green tomatoes, black beans and rice, and a key lime pie. The food sits haphazardly arranged on the peach-colored countertop, most of it already cold and soggy. When Louise walks in, Frieda is standing by the oven, searing blackened tuna in the frying pan. The aroma from the spices makes Frieda's eyes burn, and she doesn't look at Louise for fear that her daughter will think she's crying.

"Oh, God, here we go again," Louise says, dropping her bulky cloth purse on the floor and sitting down on one of the barstools. "Mom, stop being so conventional. Why can't we ever go out to eat like normal people?"

Frieda reaches into the refrigerator and takes out a chilled can of soda. She slides it across the counter without looking at her daughter. Louise gets up and walks over to the cabinet above the sink, selecting first a short glass and then a half-empty bottle of rum.

"You know, I wish you wouldn't." Frieda stands in front of the stove. She slides the spatula under one of the thick fillets and flips it over. A plume of spicy smoke rises and makes her cough.

"Oh, relax." Louise laughs. "You keep it here, so why not?"

Frieda wipes her eyes on her sleeve. "Just pick what you like. Some of it may need to be reheated."

Louise wanders around the small kitchen, selecting an omelet and a spoonful of plain white rice.

"No fish?" Frieda asks, balancing a fillet on the spatula.

Louise purses her lips and shakes her head. "I told you. I'm a vegetarian now."

They head out to the living room and sit on the couch, balancing the plates on their knees. They eat in silence for several minutes, Frieda picking at her food, Louise eating like she hasn't had a full meal in months.

"Louise, I've been having this dream lately," Frieda says, staring at the soggy tomatoes on her plate.

Louise sighs. "Mom, I'm not really in the mood to psychoanalyze, you know?"

"I think your father might have had an affair." Frieda turns to study Louise's face.

Her daughter doesn't look fazed by this information. She carefully balances a forkful of clumpy rice above her plate. "Yeah. So?"

Frieda sets her glass down a little too hard. Pulpy orange juice sloshes over the side and puddles on the coffeetable.

"So you think he did, then?"

Louise shrugs and picks the shrimp out of her omelet with her fingers. "I don't know. But most men do, don't they?"

Frieda's hands tighten around her plate. "Did you ever see him with another woman?"

Louise laughs. "Jeez, you don't have to sound so paranoid. No, I didn't. But what difference does it make now?"

Walter and Frieda married two weeks after they met. Frieda doesn't remember Walter proposing. All she remembers is Walter suggesting that they go on a road trip. She told her mother she was going with a friend up to the panhandle to visit a college.

Three days later, she came back with a cheap silver ring on her left ring finger and a piece of paper saying she was a wife.

Her mother was at work when Frieda called and told her. She came home right away, still wearing her scratched nametag, her white blouse splattered with grease so that it was nearly translucent. She let the screen door slam behind her, dropped her heavy purse on the couch, and stood with her hands on her hips, staring at the floor as if she couldn't bring herself to look at Frieda.

"Are you pregnant?" she finally asked.

"No."

"Then what on earth possessed you to do such a thing?" Her mother's voice was soft, tired, defeated.

Frieda tried to think of something to say, something romantic, like “There was something in his eyes” or “What’s the point of waiting when it’s the right one?” But nothing she thought of sounded right to her, so she shrugged.

Later that afternoon Frieda packed up her clothes and the dusty picture frames that lined her dresser and moved in with Walter. It was the first time she’d seen his place. He lived in a small house halfway between Key Largo and Islamorada. The main part of the house sat high off the ground above a dark garage cluttered with broken fishing poles and rusty car parts that smelled of oil and gasoline. The house had windows in every room and the walls were light-colored: peach in one room, coral in another, baby blue in the bathroom. There wasn’t much furniture: a pink and green couch that smelled like dog, a folding table with placemats covered in gaudy, bright-colored tropical fish, three plastic chairs and, in the bedroom, a mattress and a dresser with two drawers missing.

They quickly fell into a routine that didn’t change much as the years passed. Walter convinced her to quit her job.

“You don’t really want to work, do you?” he said as if he was doing her a favor. “I mean, most women don’t.”

After she stopped working, her days consisted of cooking and taking walks down the long gravel road to the water. She loved the way the road just ended, and nothing but a patch of sparse, tough grass and a rolling, rocky incline separated her from the blue-green water. Even though she had grown up in the Keys, she didn’t like swimming in the ocean. She feared the sharks, the stingrays, the jellyfish, the barracudas. But on days

when the apartment air was hot and hard to breathe, she liked to walk down to the water and watch distant boats churn up waves.

It was one of those days, five years into her marriage, that Frieda met Henry. He was standing at the incline when she walked up, his back to her, a fishing net spread out in front of him. She debated whether to walk back to the house, but then he turned and smiled at her, not seeming at all surprised to see her. He had a broad, tan face with deep creases and a receding hairline. When he smiled, his teeth looked shockingly white against his brown face.

"You're not here to fish," he said. She joined him at the edge of the incline. He smelled like soap and peppermint. She liked the smell.

After a few minutes of standing there in silence, Henry turned to her again. "Do you want to learn how?"

He spent the rest of the morning showing her how to cast a net to catch baitfish. Once he even stood behind her and reached around her to grasp the net, his thick arms brushing hers. She wondered if he was married. A man his age—he looked to be in his early thirties—probably was.

Shortly after noon, when the blinding sunlight bounced off the water and sweat trickled down the backs of their legs, Henry said he needed to go. "It's my only day off," he said. "Got stuff to take care of."

He stopped once to study her as he put his gear away. She tried to read his look—eyes squinted but steadily focused on her, lips slightly turned up at the edges—but she had never been good at reading men. She had the sudden urge to invite him back to the house. Walter wouldn't be home for several hours; he was getting home later and later it

seemed like, not showing up until the golden-pink glow of the sunset was beginning to fade. Henry smiled at her as if he was reading her mind. Her chest tightened. Without a word, she turned and half-walked, half-ran back to the house.

Sunday morning, Frieda wakes and stares at the ceiling again. The dream was so vivid. She could see the tiny blonde hairs on the woman's freckled arms, smell her scent: earthy, like wet mulch, and sweet like cinnamon. And yet she still couldn't see the woman's face. After almost half an hour, Frieda sits up in bed, picks up the phone, and calls her friend Bianca.

Bianca already has plans to go snorkeling with her husband at Pennekamp, and she invites Frieda along. The thought of being surrounded by miles of water, the sharks and jellyfish and barracudas floating below the surface, makes Frieda's chest tighten, but Bianca assures her she can just sit on the boat. "Work on your tan," she says and then laughs.

Bianca and Mauricio meet her at Pennekamp. They have rented a boat, and by the time Frieda walks up, they are already loading their things on board: a cooler filled with cheese sticks, beer, and fresh, fat cherries, their snorkeling gear, and a brightly colored bag that Frieda knows is stuffed with sunscreen and towels.

Bianca smiles at Frieda as she walks up. "A beautiful day, no?" she says. She is wearing a bright pink bathing suit covered in white flowers and a pair of denim shorts. Her burnt orange hair is pulled back by a plastic barrette.

"It's a little on the hot side."

The water is choppy, and the boat bounces mercilessly as they leave the channel and Mauricio speeds up. Frieda grips the side of the boat so hard her fingers ache. Bianca smiles at her, her hair slipping free of the barrette and whipping around her head.

Their first stop is Carey's Fort. As Mauricio ties the boat off, Bianca holds up a mask and a snorkel.

"Are you really going to sit here all day?" she says. "Look. The water is so clear." She pulls her own mask over her head and tightens the rubber straps on the sides.

Frieda peers over the edge of the boat. The water is a brilliant, electric blue, mottled sporadically with dark patches that she knows are coral heads. The boat rises and falls as waves lap at the side.

"I've been having this dream lately," she says. Water splashes at the other end of the boat as Mauricio jumps in.

Bianca pulls her mask off. Already, the rubber has left a light line across her dark forehead.

"It's about Walter," Frieda explains. "I keep seeing him with some other woman."

Bianca grins. "Another woman. Escandaloso."

Frieda pulls off her visor and rubs her forehead where it has begun to itch. "Don't you think it should mean something?"

Bianca spits into her mask and wipes the plastic with the edge of a towel. "It's just a dream, Frieda."

Frieda nudges the snorkel that Bianca tossed on the ground. "Do you think he cheated on me?"

Bianca laughs, a deep, hearty laugh that carries over the water. The couple in the neighboring boat looks over at them.

"Cheated on you?" she says when she stops laughing.

"I'm serious."

The smile fades from Bianca's face. "Okay. Let's say he did. Would you have really cared?"

Her question takes Frieda by surprise. For a moment she just stands there, curling her toes on the hot, wet deck. Behind Bianca, another boat drifts slowly by, dragging a balao through the reef.

"That's illegal," Frieda says.

Bianca doesn't turn around. "Well?"

"I don't know."

"So forget about it." Bianca pulls the mask back over her head. "It's just a dream." She positions the snorkel and jumps into the water.

Mauricio is already out by the rusted lighthouse, and Bianca heads toward him, her short hair billowing in an orange cloud around her snorkel. A handful of other snorkelers are out there as well. They bob among the turquoise waves, quick flashes of fluorescent yellow and cherry red.

Frieda picks up the mask and snorkel that Bianca left for her. She slips the mask over her head and adjusts it so that no water will seep in. She stands at the edge of the boat for a moment, watching the surface move; it's slick and smooth like liquid metal. Finally, she takes a breath, jumps in and lets the salt water buoy her.

She spreads her arms and legs out along the surface of the water and floats along, barely even kicking, away from the boat and the other snorkelers. Beneath her, blue and purple parrotfish swim along the sandy bottom. A stingray glides by, heading quickly out into the murky darkness.

Frieda wonders what it would be like to live here among the reefs, to move in and out of shadows soundlessly, to blend in with the purple darkness that falls with the cover of night. She wonders if fish ever dream.

When Bianca and Mauricio have enough of the sun and choppy sea, they bring the boat back to Cannon Beach. While Mauricio finishes the paperwork and smokes a cigar out on the dock, Bianca and Frieda spread a towel in the sparse shade of a grape tree and eat a fruit salad that Frieda prepared almost a week ago and is on the verge of going bad. The watermelon has already lost some of its sweetness, but Bianca doesn't complain.

The water teems with people, mostly children who scream and splash each other. Most of the people are out at the shipwreck site, clinging to the buoy and taking turns diving down. On the beach, wrinkled women lay out in bikinis, their stringy hair spread around them on the shells, dark sunglasses shielding their eyes. Men in baseball caps and faded t-shirts with torn sleeves sit at picnic tables, sipping beer and talking about fish they've caught.

Frieda has just found a soggy blueberry that looks edible and has it perched on her plastic fork when she sees him.

She's not sure what she recognizes about him, or why she is so sure it's him. Maybe it's the deeply tanned skin, the receding hairline, or the way he stands, slightly hunched over, staring out at the water.

She jumps up and immediately heads toward him. Bianca stands up and calls after her, but Frieda doesn't stop. He moves away as she nears, and suddenly his back is to her, moving away through the throng of people that populate the beach.

She finally catches up to him outside of the Visitor Center. She reaches out to touch him but withdraws her hand.

"Henry."

He turns, his arm brushing the shiny green leaves of the wild coffee bush that sprouts from the dirt beside the sidewalk. His hair is thinner, and tiny lines converge at the corners of his mouth, but it's him.

"Yes?" His voice is neither polite nor impatient. He stands, his spine stiff, his brow furrowed. Frieda suddenly realizes that he doesn't have any idea who she is.

She knows that she should just apologize and turn away, that she should be relieved, because if he doesn't remember her then it's as if they never met. If he doesn't remember her, then it's as if he never smiled knowingly at her, as if she never considered inviting him over while her husband was away. Still, she can't stop herself.

"Don't you remember me?" She steps forward, close enough to smell him: sunscreen, sweat, peppermint.

He leans away from her, an almost imperceptible movement. His lips part as if he's about to speak, and she knows he's going to confirm what she's already guessed. She reaches out and grabs his arm. His skin is cool and slick. He tenses at her touch.

"It's been years," she says, hating herself for the shrill desperation that clings to her words. "You taught me how to cast a net."

Three young children sit on the wooden bench by the door, wrapped in damp towels. Melted chocolate pools on the concrete beneath them from their melting ice cream bars. The oldest, a young girl with green-tinged blonde hair, nudges the boy to her right and giggles.

"I'm sorry," Henry says, stepping away and opening the door to the Visitor Center.

"I would never have done it," she says.

He hesitates for a second, as if deciding whether to question or ignore her.

"I'm married. Was married." Her throat burns. "I was a good wife."

"Ma'm, really," he says. "I don't know you." The door swings shut behind him. The blonde girl giggles again just before the rest of her ice cream bar hits the concrete, splattering Frieda's leg with sticky sugar and chocolate.

Bianca's cheeks are flushed when Frieda returns.

"Where did you go?" She has folded the towels and thrown away the remainder of their lunch. "I looked all over for you. I was afraid you fell in."

Frieda considers telling her the truth, but then wonders what good that would do. Henry doesn't remember her. The day they met all those years ago is now just like the days she spent standing at the incline alone, watching the sun shift in the cloudless sky, waiting for yet another day in her life to pass, waiting for the imminent fall of night, for purple darkness and dreams, her only escape.

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