

One Fish, Two Fish
and other stories

by

Paula Guro

A thesis presented for the B.A. degree

with honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Spring, 2013

Readers: Keith Taylor and Patricia O'Dowd

for DeeDee, Mary Anne, and Mom

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I must thank my mother and father for their constant love and unconditional support of my endeavors. Many thanks to the other members of the subconcentration for their invaluable feedback and for inspiring me through their dedication to their own work. In alphabetical order, thank you Andrea, Kelly, Roni, and Steph for your perspectives and your friendship. Amanda, Lee, and Suzanne, words can't describe how far I've come with your help. Finally, to my thesis readers, Keith Taylor and Tish O'Dowd, my endless gratitude for your guidance. Thank you for everything—reading my drafts, challenging me, believing in me, and supporting me. Without you, this thesis would not have been possible.

Abstract

This thesis presents a collection of five independent stories all dealing with motherhood. The mother figure plays a prominent role in some stories. Others are told from the perspectives of daughters, and one story leaves the mother out entirely. Each considers the importance of understanding origins, the transfer of ideals from parent to child, and the ways in which intentions may be interpreted.

CONTENTS

One Fish, Two Fish.....	1
Passage.....	11
Eye of the Storm.....	34
My Own Eccentric Orbit.....	38
I Want You to Make Me Cry.....	56

One Fish, Two Fish

It all happened because of the fish. I woke up late today—slapped at the alarm clock without opening my eyes and overslept half an hour. I couldn't fall asleep last night. Every time I came close to dozing off, I'd find myself back at the fish hatchery, my stomach turning at the sight of those roiling masses of fish. Normally, I don't have an issue with popping right up in the morning. The buzzer sounds, and I'm instantly awake, groping around in the dark, fumbling with my bathrobe, checking on Robbie, starting breakfast. Making the bed the way Aaron likes it, though he won't be home for another few months, with one sheet and two blankets tucked in so tight. The process's more like shrink-wrapping a present than smoothing out bedclothes. I prefer to have plenty of room so I can kick around. I hate feeling as if I'm sleeping in a hermetically sealed food storage bag. But these nights, squeezing myself in between the layers of covers, I feel a little less alone. The morning Aaron was deployed, we stayed in bed for an hour just looking at each other with the blankets wrapped around us like a cocoon.

I overslept on Robbie's first day of second grade and woke up to the smell of smoke. Panicked, I nearly strangled myself in the sheets and tripped over Cleo, who hissed at me and stalked away to a patch of sun in front of the corner window. That cat's never liked me, but if Aaron stepped on her, she'd still purr and rub up against his legs. It was such a pain getting the cat hairs off his pants. I cursed at the cat and took the stairs two at a time, picturing the living room in flames, fire trucks careening through the morning traffic, and thought, I need to save the photo albums... pictured Aaron coming back, leaving the rubble-strewn streets of Kandahar, only to return to an incinerated house. I stubbed my toe on the way into the kitchen, where I discovered Robbie had

burned his breakfast. He'd charred his toaster waffles and managed to get syrup on the insides of the cabinets next to the fridge.

Apparently, having already arranged his backpack, having dressed himself in his favorite dark green shorts and navy blue polo, and not knowing what else to do with an unsupervised half-hour, Robbie had decided to practice his knot-tying skills. Standing on a chair by the cabinets, he clutched the ends of long pieces of white rope in each hand. Rope crisscrossed the kitchen. Somehow he'd connected all the handles of the drawers and cabinets—he'd strung them together at strange angles like threads of a giant spiderweb. Robbie's grin shrank and his blonde eyebrows furrowed deeply when I stared him down, hands on my hips. But I had to smile. Robbie looked so concerned when he realized he might've done something wrong. He looked like a trapped fly, sticky and frozen on that chair in the middle of the tangle of ropes, his big blue eyes bugging out.

"I wanted to tie the ropes so that you pull on this one"—he jerked on the cord in his right hand—"and all the drawers open, and you pull this one"—he yanked the cord in his left—"and they all shut." He continued on, explaining the process he'd gone through, arranging the whole system. I stood there wondering what could've inspired such an experiment, until Robbie added that this sort of project wasn't actually part of the knot-tying merit badge test. He just wants to make sure he can tell his Scoutmaster he's been thinking of ways to use these skills, "because you never know when you might need knots."

Robbie wants desperately to earn that merit badge to show his dad when he comes home. He's never earned a badge without Aaron's help. I have absolutely nothing to do with the Scout scene; I couldn't make sense of those checkered handkerchiefs if my life

depended upon me fastening one around my son's neck. Aaron takes care of the uniform. He even sews on all the badges. I squirm at my son's affiliation with an organization that forbids, God help us, gay kids, but Aaron was an Eagle Scout, and Rob insists on doing whatever Aaron's done.

When Rob turned four, we bought him a yellow plastic lawnmower. When you pushed it, little green balls popped up and down inside the clear container at its base. Every time Aaron cut the grass, Robbie would change into a pair of jeans, struggle to pull on his boots, wheel out his lawnmower, then follow Aaron back and forth across the yard. He'd even tug at an invisible starting cord, making revving noises in the back of his throat, yelling in frustration when his lawnmower 'wouldn't start'. And he'd pretend to sneeze the whole time, since Aaron's allergic to cut grass.

I wish Aaron'd been able to see his son's project this morning. Also, I could've used his help untangling the kitchen. Robbie's knots—"taut-line hitches," I was informed—were so tight, I struggled for fifteen damned minutes and couldn't loosen even one enough to untie it. I surrendered, realizing I'd have to tackle the snarls after Robbie caught his bus. Without time to get dressed or pack his lunch, I gave him some money and a granola bar and walked him to the bus stop in my pajamas and robe. It really was a perfect morning, which somehow irritated me more than anything, that despite my having overslept while my seven-year-old booby-trapped my kitchen, despite the fact I was parading down Buttonball Lane in faded pink cut-off long-johns, the sky was cloudless and soft to look at in that pale-blue, late-summer morning kind of way. Everything was bright and clean and new—new sneakers, first day of school outfits, new

backpacks and new pencil cases, kids laughing and showing off their new Disney-Pixar-character lunchboxes.

Robbie let me hold his hand until he spotted his classmate Dale. Then he pulled away and ran ahead a few steps, sneaking an apologetic look back at me before greeting his friend. Cute guys, they are—Robbie with his bleach-blond buzz cut, tiny and compact next to Dale, who looks tall enough to be a fifth-grader and wears his dark hair long like his skateboarding hero Bucky Lasek. Robbie begged us to let him grow his hair out, too, but Aaron wouldn't have it. I trailed behind the pair, watching Rob admire Dale's Bucky Lasek T-shirt, and reached the street corner where a dozen other children and their parents stood in clusters. Someone tapped my shoulder. Dreading the onslaught of small talk, I pulled my robe tighter across my chest, feeling exposed in my sleepwear, and stared back into a face I vaguely recognized from three houses down. Pale skin, sleek black bob, long nose, red lips. My heart pounded with the moment's panic of forgetting whose mother, again? Jackie Newhard's? Yes, that was it.

Our exchange began like most quasi-friendly suburban interactions. She asked me to confirm with her that yes, it *is* such a lovely day. With a polite, mildly curious laugh, I told her no, I hadn't changed my hair, and I had no idea why it looked blonder. The conversation progressed from my hair to my son. She'd noticed Robbie and Jackie riding their bikes together the other day. Her red smile stretched wider. I thought it might split her face. "Robbie's seemed a little blue lately, though, hasn't he?"

She proceeded to inform me that Robbie told Jackie, who told her, that he wants to be in the Army when he grows up, just like his dad. I turned back around. The woman

was eyeing me, hungrily, almost, as if she were waiting for me to break down, just waiting for me to make a spectacle of myself. I didn't know what she wanted me to say.

I knew I'd have to give her something to go on before she abandoned me for some other neighbor. So I told her the two of us've been doing a lot of the things Robbie loves to do with Aaron. I told her we went to the fish hatchery yesterday, since the regular season's about to end. That propelled Red-lips into a soliloquy on how Jackie just loved the hatchery, but personally, she feels Jackie's a bit old for that now, although her younger kids are crazy about feeding those fish. Red-lips continued on and on...“Jackie's hoping to make straight As again...Don't you find the new lunch prices just ridiculous?...Have you noticed Eva's lost weight—I think she's doing the diet where you drink two tablespoons of apple cider vinegar before each meal...”

--- --- ---

Yesterday, I'd announced to Robbie he could pick anything he wanted to do since it was the last day of summer, and we'd do it and have a good time together. LIL LEHI TROUT NURSEY, he'd shouted. I felt jealous of Aaron; then ashamed for feeling jealous. I'd hoped Rob would pick something like a hike in the woods, or a matinee, or dinner at his favorite Mexican restaurant. But he picked the trout nursery, which has always been his thing with his dad—a mysterious ritual I'd never been part of. How many times the pair of them had come home as I was putting dinner on the table, laughing about ‘that big fat one’ as they tramped into the bathroom to scrub the smell of fish food from their palms. But Robbie asked me so sweetly to wait a moment so he could run upstairs and fetch his change sock from his dresser, my resentment melted. Robbie insisted he use his allowance money to buy the fish food. Realizing I'd forgotten

to pay him the last two weeks, I brought my wallet along just in case he needed some extra money. He's a good kid. Even when I forget to give him the change he's earned, he doesn't complain.

On our drive to the hatchery, Robbie told me that, every time he takes out the trash, he thinks about saving enough to feed the trout—all of them, that is, not just the little guys. Rob explained that the big ones need more to eat. He talked endlessly about the types of trout in the raceways and how much faster the little ones move than the big ones, and how there's a secret pond of granddaddy trout behind the visitor's center. He didn't seem to notice I got a bit lost. When I asked why he liked to visit the hatchery so much, he paused and rubbed his eyes before answering.

“Dad says feeding them's like keeping a promise. We feed them so they can grow. Then we can come back to the river and know we helped raise the fish we catch.”

At the hatchery, we pulled into a gravel parking lot stippled with weeds. Rob slid open the van door and jumped out before the tires had stopped turning. He dumped his change sock right onto the gravel, and counted out the quarters and inspected their backs to make sure he wasn't using a State he hadn't yet collected. He's forever on the hunt for Idaho and Wyoming. Straightening, swinging the tube sock over his shoulder, he asked me solemnly to follow him since I'd never been to the trout hatchery. We walked across a field into a small gray-shingled building. The pimply volunteer behind the desk in the visitor's center welcomed me, as she flicked dead skin off her nose, to “Lil-Le-Hi Trout Nursery—the oldest operational trout hatchery in the country.”

“But where do they all go?” I asked.

“They're raised until they're two, then stocked in the Lehigh River for sport.”

I joined my son, standing behind him at the lip of the first cement raceway. We were the only visitors. Robbie looked so small in front of vat after vat of churning black water. The complex stretched before us for about a quarter mile. I tried to breathe through my mouth. The air smelled musky, somehow oily. I stepped to the edge of the tank and looked in. From far away, the water had looked black, but I realized that was because it was teeming with hundreds and hundreds of little baby trout, no longer than my ring finger. Pellet by pellet, Robbie flicked the food into the water. Big blue cartoon signs attached to the fence surrounding the complex indicated the size and age of the fish in each raceway. I felt irrationally angry at the happy smiling fish on the signs. We moved from frys to fingerlings to subcatchables, the trout becoming more violent as they grew. Robbie's supply of fish food ran out at the subcatchables. I waited while Rob sprinted back across the field towards the food dispenser. Halfway there, he turned around, dashed back to my side to ask for some more quarters, since he'd used all of his. I watched him run away for the second time. For a little kid, he runs gracefully. I like to think he got that from me; Aaron runs with a clunky stride, hardly lifting his feet.

Robbie emptied most of the second food bag into the last raceway, the one with the two-year-olds ready for release. He discharged the food in a spray of pellets, almost like rice thrown at a wedding. The fish leapt, scales flashing in the sunlight. Lake trout, brook trout, rainbow, tails smacking the water. The raceways boiled with fish, fish exploding in plumes of white splashes, little fish wriggling, hatched without consent, born into a life of being measured over metal grates, shunted from raceway to raceway, narrow passages to fling themselves across. Two years of swimming and swimming and bumping blindly into cement walls, into one another. So many. I tried to follow one, a

fat brook trout, but they all looked the same, and I couldn't keep track. They poked their heads up, their gills red streaks. Mouth after mouth after mouth, gaping and gasping, sucking air, sucking pellets. I wondered if they could even taste the food, or if the flavor of the fish food would be indistinguishable from the metal of a hook.

That's where they were all headed. The Little Lehigh River and then hooks—raised for release and once they're deemed large enough, set free into the river, just to snag their lips one day. I started feeling dizzy, watching all those fish thrashing around. Their eyes looked so wild. A million glossy marbles, stone cold and unblinking. I swallowed hard, tried taking deep breaths, tried telling myself they were just fish, that they barely had brains. They'd all die eventually. And how was the fish hatchery any different from cattle ranches or chicken farms, places where animals were raised for slaughter? But these fish were raised from birth and cared for by volunteer fishing enthusiasts the whole year round, fed by scores of visitors. It takes a village, I guess. They're encouraged, cheered on as they move up in the ranks, but they're given just a brief moment of freedom—a month or two, maybe weeks, maybe just days—before they're snagged. People say fishing is so relaxing. It can't be so peaceful for the fish.

Robbie tugged at my sleeve and asked me if I wanted to feed the trout. He'd saved some pellets for me. I didn't know how to tell him I felt sick about becoming complicit in this feeding frenzy, so I took the plastic bag. It was moist and warm from Robbie's palm. I reached inside and pulled out a handful of the brown spheres. They smelled sweet and foul, like honey mixed with old seafood mixed with dirt. I tossed food into the raceway and turned, headed back for the van.

“Wait,” Robbie cried, “wait for me.”

I couldn't wait, though. I ran to the car and threw up all over the gravel next to the front tire.

--- --- ---

"Marge. Marge."

Someone was calling my name. I couldn't believe it, but I was actually tearing up, just thinking about those fish. I shook my head. Red-lips was pointing towards the street corner. The bus had arrived, and all the neighborhood kids were crossing the road. I scanned the bus and saw a row of kids pressed up against the windows, laughing. I followed their gazes, but what I saw didn't register at first. There was a small boy in green shorts and a polo at the corner, struggling to run, getting nowhere. The straps of his backpack were knotted around the post of the stop-sign. Then I realized the kid was Robbie. My kid was tied to the stop-sign, and the bus was about to leave. He was straining against the straps, wide-eyed. I ran to him.

"I was just trying to get the double-sheet bend down," he sputtered. "You use it to tie two ends of rope together."

My fingers felt leaden as I tried to undo the knot. Pulling so hard against his handiwork had made the black strips of fabric impossibly stiff. I couldn't get my nails in the gaps. Mr. Fowler, who lives on the corner, ended up retrieving a pair of scissors from his house. I had to cut the straps off of Robbie's backpack. When Mr. Fowler handed me the scissors, I wanted to hurl them down the sewer grate at my feet, take my son by the shoulders, hug him, have him understand why I couldn't let him go. But I snipped the loop and gave Robbie a peck on his cheek, whispered for him to have a good day at

school, unsure whether he even heard me. As the bus pulled away and rumbled off down the road, the other parents from the block stood silently.

Then I started to laugh, and everyone else laughed, too, and I told them all to have a good day and that I'd love to chat, but I had to get to the bank, had to get to work. And while laughing, I turned my back to them, but as I walked home my laughter turned to crying, and soon I couldn't breathe. I sat on the floor in the middle of my kitchen. The ropes dangled above me. After a while, I called the bank, left a message on Sheri's machine saying I was going to be late. I lay with my cheek pressed against the cold linoleum floor. The sunlight illuminated a patch of syrup I'd have to clean. I wanted nothing more than to sleep there for a while.

Passage

Bridget Miller emerges from the woods at the edge of the pipeline and stumbles over a rotting log into an open field, a scrubby expanse of grass dried brown in the July heat. The straw-like blades poke at her sandaled feet and make her ankles itch. She scratches at her calf. Turning around, Bridget lifts her rust-colored hair off her sweaty neck and gazes down the pipeline. At the end of the path, she can just make out the back of her house; a blurry white ranch topped with a smudge of black roof. Bridget shudders. She hates walking down the pipeline. It looks so fake, so out of place in the middle of the forest, as if some barber had taken an electric razor and sheared a rectangular corridor through the trees. The trees that line the sides of the path feel sinister to Bridget. The shadows of their waving branches are the movements of animals ready to pounce, to drag her back among the dark trunks in retribution, revenge against those who carved the unnatural path into the woods and drove a quarter-mile of petroleum-transporting tube into the earth.

A cloud of gnats circles closer and closer in front of Bridget's face. The small tan wings look translucent against the sun, like flakes of gold falling from the sky. Standing as still as possible, scarcely breathing out her mouth, Bridget allows the insects to flit around her forehead. She's reminded of late-summer soccer practices, when her teammates would shriek and run from the gnats, extending one finger over their heads with the absurd conviction that bugs were attracted to the highest point on an object. While her friends swatted away, Bridget'd see how long she could remain calm, letting them fly around. Eventually, they always drifted away. Fighting wasn't always the best answer.

A gnat flies too close to Bridget's nose and she snorts, starts, realizes she'll be late if she keeps reminiscing about bugs and soccer. She'd give anything to be on the team again this summer, but she needs to work on game days. Her sandals slap at her heels as she jogs across the field, approaching the back of a large brick house. Shriveled weeds give way to a manicured lawn. Bridget longs to kick off her shoes, but she doesn't want to stain the soles of her feet. Panting, she hurries along the side of the house, ducking beneath the window, hoping no one's spotted her coming from the pipeline. She only takes the pipeline when she's really running late. For some reason coming into the house from the back makes Bridget feel dishonest, creepy.

Rounding the corner, she leaps over a bed of flowers towards a cement walkway that leads up to a tall oak door. Her back foot scuffs up mulch when she lands a bit short. With the balls of her feet, she sweeps the wood pieces back into the flowerbed before trotting up the stairs to the door. Sweat plasters her T-shirt to her back. She tugs at the faded pink fabric and smooths her denim shorts before ringing the doorbell. Silence. For a moment the house seems to hold its breath, but soon Bridget senses someone advancing towards the door from inside the house. The staccato punctuations of a child's excited steps. The door swings open into a dark, cool living room. A small head with blonde pigtails pokes out and darts back inside.

"Bridget's here," the girl calls into the depths of the house. "Hi, Bridget."

"Hi, Gwen," Bridget responds. "How're you doing?"

"Super great. Mommy and I baked a cake this morning, and she said we can eat a piece for snack today if we want." Gwen backs up so Bridget can enter.

"Ooh, what flavor is it?"

“Funfetti, with white frosting!”

Gwen seizes Bridget’s hand and drags her through the foyer into a kitchen glowing with pink granite counters, stained walnut paneling, natural lighting from a huge wall-sized window. A short blonde woman rinses bottles at the sink with a brown-haired baby perched on her hip while a small tow-headed boy with glasses stands with one arm circled around her thigh.

“Hello, Mrs. Bishop.”

“Hello, Mrs. Bishop,” echoes Gwen, smirking. Her mother frowns. “Why don’t you start your reading homework, Gwen.” It’s not a suggestion. Gwen runs off to a corner in the living room, finding a basket filled with paperbacks. She paws through the neat stacks before dumping the contents onto the floor, fanning out the title covers before making her selection. Mrs. Bishop sighs.

“Hey, Bridget. Thanks so much for coming over so last minute. You’re really a lifesaver. This window of opportunity just popped up. I hope you didn’t have to cancel any plans.”

“Oh, I didn’t have anything going on.” Lie; Bridget’s bailed on some friends who were going to spend the day sunning themselves at the town pool. “I’m glad I was available. And I love spending time with Gwen and Thomas.” Another lie. Secretly, Bridget’s terrified that parents entrust their children to her care for hours at a time. Her heart stops every time Julia Bishop walks out the door and leaves her alone with a baby, an energetic seven-year-old, and a reluctant four-year-old. Bridget’s babysat for the Bishops for a few months now, though she’s seen the family at Mass every Sunday since she can remember. This Friday afternoon, Mrs. Bishop is preoccupied with her bottle-

washing. Bridget zones out, hoping the dishes will keep Mrs. Bishop at the house a little longer.

In March, when Bridget'd been stumped on how to accumulate enough service hours for her Confirmation, her mother suggested placing a babysitting ad in the St. Agnes bulletin. Bridget hadn't fared too well volunteering for the church caterer. When serving spaghetti to the members of the Altar and Rosary Society, Bridget dropped a meatball into one woman's lap. Babysitting felt more doable, though she doubted she'd have much luck. Most families she knew from St. Agnes' already had babysitters. The past year at St. Agnes Junior High, Bridget's best friend Kaila had talked endlessly during lunch about how great it was to nanny for Deacon Gill's twin boys on school-day afternoons. "It's like training for when we've got our own kids, Bee. And they're so cute."

Bridget hesitated to ask some couple to let her make mistakes on their children just so she could pick up enough hours to receive a Sacrament she didn't much understand to begin with. But Bridget knew her mother was right; she did need the hours, so when she received her first phone call two weeks after placing the ad, she found herself a regular babysitter. Mrs. Bishop had explained how every Saturday, she runs errands and works at the food pantry. Her husband Dale sleeps during the days since he works nights as a security guard at a chemical plant, so she needs someone to watch her kids.

In all the times Bridget's watched Gwen and Thomas and Sophie, she's never once caught sight of Mr. Bishop. She'd almost doubt his existence if she didn't see him every Sunday morning at 11:00 Mass. Exemplary keepers of the Sabbath, the Bishops

line up in the front right pew ten minutes before the service begins, the children sandwiched between their parents. Every other Sunday, the Bishops act as a Catholic Mass couple, Dale as the commentator, Julia delivering the readings. Julia's long shapeless skirts somehow only make her look shorter as she pontificates dramatically. She approaches the lectern as if she's aware of every gesture—the deep bow of her head when she genuflects, the silent gaze up to the crucifix above the altar as she ascends the carpeted steps, the pause as she clasps her hands in front of her chest, eyes closed, before lifting the place-holding ribbon and announcing the Book and Chapter. The rise and fall of her voice make the opening statement sound like a challenge, as if she's daring the congregation to listen to the passages with the same devout focus. Her cadence annoys Bridget. She'd prefer the readings to go twice as fast. Finally, there's the awful breathless silence once she concludes the reading. Bridget's mother loves to imitate the way Julia stares down the congregation before proclaiming, with each syllable elongated and emphasized, "The Word of the Lord."

Bridget remembers having felt intimidated the first time Julia asked for her help with the kids—also, a strange sort of pride, that this woman had, for some reason, found her worthy. Conveniently, Bridget learned, their houses were connected by an easy walk—not by road, but by the pipeline. The field behind Bridget's house led to the pipeline, and at the other end through another field, the back of the Bishops'. Julia'd observed how Bridget played with Gwen and Thomas while watching Sophie, first starting a puzzle, then pretending to cook dinner with a mini-kitchen set, rubber fruits and vegetables stuck together with Velcro that pulled apart into pretend slices, and a plastic grill that sizzled and puffed smoke smell when a red ignition button was pushed. Gwen

showed Bridget how to refill the small basin underneath the grill with liquid smoke if the scent was running out. At the end of the afternoon, Mrs. Bishop told Bridget how impressed she was, seeing Bridget convince Gwen and Thomas to actually pick up their toys and pretend to clean their make-believe dishes. Bridget had passed the test. The following weekend, Bridget was on her own.

Sophie's cries bring Bridget back to the kitchen. Mrs. Bishop bounces the baby on her hip, her round face becoming rosier. "She's been fussy all day, Bridget. You're probably lucky I'm taking her with me today."

"Oh, I wouldn't have minded. I just hope the visit goes well."

"It should, God willing. Right, Sophie?" Mrs. Bishop nuzzles the crying baby's cheek with her own. "My sweet Sophie. You're going to be just fine." Mrs. Bishop examines her youngest child with an uncomfortable expression Bridget can't decipher—are her brows furrowed, mouth pursed, in doubt? Discontent?

"So, Gwen told me about a cake she made? Just want to confirm you did agree to let them have some for snack."

"What? No, no, goodness. That child. No, the cake's for after dinner. Honestly, I don't know what to do with your sister, Thomas." Mrs. Bishop bends awkwardly at the waist and kisses her son's head. "Such a good honest boy, you are."

Thomas adjusts his glasses and releases his mother's leg. "Bridget," he murmurs, "let's look at my fishies."

"OK, Thomas."

"Right, then, Tommy, you behave for Bridget. Mommy'll be back soon. Now, kiss your sister goodbye and say a prayer for her."

Thomas obliges. Mrs. Bishop fastens Sophie into her car seat and slings a purse over her shoulder. “Bye, Gwen. Be good. Keep it down while your father’s sleeping. And no cake until after dinner.”

“Bye, Mom.”

Mrs. Bishop leaves through a side door off the kitchen that opens into the garage. Thomas and Bridget remain standing by the sink until the minivan starts up and the garage door thuds to the ground.

Bridget stares at Thomas. He stares back. Her palms start to sweat. “Well, Thomas, what do you want to do?”

“I want you to see my fishies.” Thomas describes how that morning at Vacation Bible School, the theme of which is “Go Fish! Jesus Did”, his class colored fish shapes with white crayon, then used watercolors to cover the paper. Bridget follows Thomas upstairs into his bedroom, a bright green room decorated with jungle decals. A long plush snake wraps around the floor lamp in the corner. Thomas runs over to his window, where he’s taped three pieces of blue-painted paper, each displaying an obscurely-shaped white wax blob. He turns around and beams at Bridget, who examines the paintings, trying to figure out what to say.

“Wow, Thomas. They’re really great.” She walks forward and reaches out to touch the pictures. They’ve dried stiff and slightly twisted. “I’ll bet you worked really hard on these.”

“Yeah.”

Bridget stares once more at Thomas. What does he want? Multi-syllable answers would be helpful. As an only child, Bridget had gotten used to entertaining herself. Books and puzzles, coloring...maybe he'd like to do that...

“So, buddy, want to do some more coloring? We could get out your paints downstairs in the playroom.”

Thomas shakes his head. He goes back to the window and traces his wax fish.

“Want to play with your drums?” Bridget points at the kid-sized trap set at the foot of his trundle bed.

Thomas shakes his head and brings a finger to his lips. “No, ‘cause Daddy’s sleeping, and we need to be quiet.”

“Oh, right. Your parents’ room’s right next door, isn’t it?”

Nodding, Thomas states, “Daddy loves me. He tells me every night when I’m getting ready for bed and he’s getting ready for work. He tucks me in.”

“Yeah, he sure loves you, Thomas,” Bridget babbles. “I bet you love Sundays when you get to see him.”

“Daddy doesn’t talk in church and then he goes back to sleep after he has lunch with us.” Thomas turns his back on Bridget and resumes examining his fish.

Bridget fiddles with the hair tie around her wrist, twisting it around and around, pulling it up and releasing it to let it snap back down on her skin. ‘Daddy loves me,’ he’d said. A pit forms in Bridget’s stomach. Sad, that the Bishop kids only saw their father in passing, that so often, they’re only one room over, one flight of stairs away from him, and yet they can’t spend more time together. Bridget thinks of her own father, how when she was little, he’d play the piano for her while she staged weddings with her stuffed animals,

pushing them down their house's hallway. Over and over, he'd play the wedding march. He'd read the same books again and again before Bridget said goodnight. Now, every afternoon, Bridget's father leaves her a voicemail from his work, hoping she 'has a good day,' telling her he'll see her at dinner. Bridget frowns, realizing perhaps the pit in her stomach signifies jealousy more than pity. Then she jumps, finding Thomas staring at her in silence.

“Uh, OK, Thomas, want to play outside on the swingset? It's a really nice day.”

Thomas assents, so Bridget begins the longer-than-should-be-necessary tasks of tying shoes, finding a baseball cap, applying sunscreen. As Bridget rubs the lotion onto Thomas's smooth cheeks, he stands stoically, his eyes shut tight. He only flinches when her fingers near his mouth. Bridget's fascinated. If only she could know what's going through his brain.

“Did you get all the spots?”

“Yep, Thomas. I was extra careful. Now let's find Gwen and see if she wants to come out, too.”

Gwen's not in the living room anymore, though the books remain strewn over the floor.

“Gwen?” Bridget calls. “Gwen, let's go out to play.” No answer. Bridget's heart stops. She pictures Gwen having choked on a piece of candy she'd hidden from her mother, Gwen stuck in the laundry chute, Gwen unconscious after falling out of her loft head-first...

A distant wet sound burbles from the back of the house.

“Bridget?” Gwen’s reedy voice comes from the bathroom. Bridget knocks on the door. “Can I come in, Gwen?”

The door cracks open. “I didn’t mean to do it, Bridget, but I clogged the toilet.” The bowl is filled to the brim with soggy paper.

Bridget groans. “That’s ok, Gwen. How about you go to the upstairs bathroom and wash up. And then, while I take care of this, you read to Thomas.”

Gwen trots off. Bridget rifles through the cabinets and closet until she spots the plunger standing obviously next to the toilet. Thomas steps slowly into the bathroom, suspiciously eyeing the plunger-armed Bridget. Bridget’s never before tried to unclog a toilet. She grimaces, thrusts the plunger into the water and pushes down. Grunting, she yanks up. Nothing. She repeats the process, pushing and pulling more vigorously, while Thomas watches. She fights the urge to yell. She washes her hands, retrieves her cell phone from the kitchen counter, and after ensuring that Thomas and Gwen are reading together, walks back to the bathroom.

Bridget calls her father first, but his phone’s turned off. She next tries her mother, who answers on the third ring.

“Mom, help. How do you unclog a toilet?”

“Oh Jesus, Bridgie, why’d you go and do that?”

“It wasn’t me, Mom. Can you just tell me how to fix it?”

“Well, your father’s usually the one who does that here...but let me see...I think you just sort of push down and pull up. And the plunger has to make a sucking sound.”

“A sucking sound, Mom? That’s the best you’ve got?”

“You could ask Mr. Bishop.”

“Absolutely not. He’s sleeping. I’ve never seen him outside of Mass and even there, I haven’t said a word to him besides ‘Peace be with you’.”

“I’m sorry, honey. Just do your best, and if you can’t figure it out, Mrs. Bishop can deal with it when she comes home. When’ll that be, by the way? You think you’ll be home for dinner?”

“Yeah, I should be. She didn’t say I’d have to cook anything for the kids.”

“OK then. See you soon. It can’t take that long for nuns to pray over a baby, anyway, right?”

“I don’t know, Mom. Jeez. See you later.”

Seizing the plunger, Bridget takes a deep breath. “Mother Mary, help me fix this mess before Mrs. Bishop comes home.” She attacks with vigor, ignoring the spray of water. Nothing. Cursing herself, she sits back on her heels. If only her father were there, she thinks. Then she berates herself for always having to rely on her father, always needing him to bail her out, help her with calculus, fix a flat tire, give her directions. And he never expects anything in return. It seems too good to be true. It must not be true. Holly looks at the clogged toilet through tears. Her parents will love her even if she can’t clear the blockage. They want her to be happy. They’re proud of who she’s becoming.

Her father loves to tell his favorite old story about Bridget. He always finds a way to bring it up at dinner parties. When Bridget was in second grade, her class was assigned to write a one page story about their favorite summer day. Then, they were instructed to correct all their mistakes with red pencil, to circle the periods, put little carrots in where commas were missing. Bridget had looked down at her paper. She’d read it again and again, but could find nothing wrong. All the capital letters were done

right; all sentences ended with the correct punctuation. But she panicked; started over and rewrote her story, being sure to leave out a comma here and a period there, so she could complete the assignment and turn in a paper with red editor's marks.

Bridget picks up the plunger and resumes her struggle. Finally, the bowl drains. Finding a bucket under the sink, Bridget takes the plunger upstairs and douses it with bleach and hot water in the tub.

She decides to slide down the banister, as she always does when her parents aren't home. To her dismay, Gwen and Thomas stand waiting at the bottom of the stairs. Gwen giggles and jumps up and down, clapping her hands.

"Me next, me next," she shouts. Thomas imitates her and together they scramble up the stairs on all fours.

"Hey, hey, that's—that's not safe, guys," Bridget calls desperately after the kids. She catches up with Thomas and wraps an arm around his stomach, hoisting him off the stairs. She seizes Gwen's arm just as she swings a leg over the railing.

"But YOU did it, Bridget," Gwen whines as Bridget drags them back down to the foyer.

"Well, um, you know, once you get old enough, you can slide down the banister like I did."

"How old?" asks Thomas.

"Um, fourteen, just like me. You...you have to have received your Confirmation at church. That's what I did last March...it means you're an adult in the church. One day, Thomas, you and Gwen will get to do that, too. Isn't that exciting?"

Thomas nods.

“My friend Val’s brother got confirmation, and Val said it was super boring. You just get oil rubbed on your face.”

“Well, a lot of other important things happen, too, Gwen.”

“Like what?”

Bridget’s at a loss for words. She can only remember a few of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and she’s certain she didn’t receive any of them, anyway. Wisdom? Nope. Reverence? Well, she tries. Understanding? Definitely not. Bridget doesn’t understand what it really meant, why her parents and grandparents were so happy when she knelt down with her sponsor’s hand on her shoulder, when she received her blessing. She remembers staring at the red plush carpet on the kneeler, remembers feeling the strange moist smear of the chrism on her forehead, and thinking—this is it?

“I’m gonna tell Mommy I want to get confirmed right now,” Thomas declares. Gwen grins at Bridget, who panics and opts for a complete change of subject.

“Who wants cake?”

Cheering, the siblings race into the kitchen. Only until Bridget poises a knife over the rectangular cake does Thomas speak.

“But didn’t Mommy say ‘not until dinner’?”

“Well, I know a trick,” replies Bridget, “but you have to promise to keep it a secret. Mommy won’t find out unless you tell her.” Bridget cuts a thin slice out of the width of the cake. She lifts it from the center and divides it into three portions. “All you have to do is push the halves back together and smooth out the frosting. See?” The kids help Bridget smush the cake back together and erase the line with extra frosting from the can in the cupboard. Gwen and Thomas devour their snack. Bridget takes one bite of the

sugary boxed-mix cake and gives the rest away. She's never been able to stomach store-bought frosting. Or 'funfetti'-flavored cake, which tastes like mildly sweet spongy cardboard and artificial dye.

"Our secret, right?"

"Right," shouts Gwen, between licks of her plate.

"Thomas?"

"Right, Bridget."

Bridget washes the plates and knife, dries them, and replaces them exactly where they were found to eliminate all incriminating evidence. She decides to check the kids' mouths to see if they should brush their teeth. They've disappeared from the kitchen, though, and they sound far too quiet. Bridget finds them in their playroom.

Thomas stands next to the plastic toy grill. He's the perfect height so that if he tilts his head to one side, his cheek rests comfortably on the fake range. As Gwen holds his head down with one palm and presses the smoke button vigorously with the other, Thomas calmly stays put, blinking up at Bridget.

"Gwen! What are you doing? Let him go, now," Bridget demands. Gwen releases her hand but Thomas remains with his head atop the grill.

"He doesn't mind, Bridget," pouts Gwen.

"I like the way it smells," adds Thomas.

"You can't smoke each other's heads, guys! That's just not allowed. OK. OK. Um, how about we go outside now and color with chalk?"

For the rest of the afternoon, the threesome colors away on the hot asphalt driveway. Gwen copies whatever Bridget draws; Bridget, not the most confident artist,

doodles hearts and stars and a slightly more ambitious flower. Thomas writes his name again and again. Bridget tries to persuade herself she's not enjoying this as much as she is. This is for kids. Chalk is for kids.

The crunch of tire on gravel alerts Bridget to Mrs. Bishop's return. Gwen and Thomas leap up and run alongside the van. Mrs. Bishop parks and steps onto the driveway. She throws an arm around each child before sliding open the side door and lifting Sophie out of her seat. Sophie kicks and gurgles.

"Hi, Mrs. Bishop. How'd it go?"

Mrs. Bishop locks the car before answering. "Well, it was a little concerning...the sisters spent a much longer time on Sophie than they did on Gwen or Thomas."

Bridget frowns. "If you don't mind me asking, Mrs. Bishop...why do you take your kids there?"

"The prayer of the Carmelite sisters is powerful, Bridget. We're so lucky the retired nuns from Philly live right here in Lanark. I take my babies to them so they'll stay healthy, develop normally. So they'll stay close to their Father all their lives."

"What sorts of prayers do they say?"

"Oh, they don't pray out loud. They only greet you and ask why you've come. And of course, you know that, as cloistered sisters, they don't show themselves, either. Inside their chapel, there's a little room like a confessional, except instead of a screen, there's a door and a Lazy Susan. So I just made an appointment and put Sophie on the turn-around and spun her through. When they sent her back out, we all recited a Hail Mary together. I was so embarrassed, though. Sophie cried nearly the whole time."

“I suppose that must mean she’s got healthy lungs,” says Bridget, offering her finger to the baby. Sophie’s hand curls around Bridget’s finger.

“Lucky us,” laughs Mrs. Bishop. “Let’s see. So how long was I gone? My goodness, four hours? Here you go. Oh, I feel so much better now that you’re allowed to take payment.” Handing Bridget some folded bills, she stares absentmindedly at Gwen and Thomas. “How were they?”

Bridget’s heart races and she hopes Mrs. Bishop doesn’t notice the rise in her voice. “Oh, they were fine. Let’s see...we, we read together, and Thomas showed me his paintings, and we played kitchen with the toy grill.”

“That’s great.”

Bridget leans forward and presses her lips to Sophie’s miniature ear. “There’s nothing wrong with you, Sophie.” She almost thinks this rather than says it. Sophie ducks her head when Bridget’s breath tickles her neck. Bridget spins around to Gwen and Thomas.

“Hey, you guys, I’m heading home now, ok? Thanks for letting me play. Give me a hug, then go pick up your chalk and help Mommy get dinner ready.”

Gwen charges Bridget and slams into her gut, wrapping her arms around Bridget’s waist. Thomas walks over and plants a kiss on Bridget’s hip. She squeezes Thomas’s shoulder and scuffs across the yard to the side of the house, dragging her heels. She pauses and peers into the playroom window. The grill sits tacitly in the corner. Shaking her head, Bridget continues on through the back yard. The sun stings the back of her neck and she realizes she forgot to put sunscreen on herself. Hearing Gwen’s yells and Thomas’s laughter, Bridget turns around to face the house. She sees Thomas’s

window with the three pieces of paper taped to the glass. Next to his, what must be the Bishops' bedroom window. She wonders if Mr. Bishop ever hears his children and goes to that window to watch them play.

Distant church bells vibrate in the humid air. Bridget realizes she's hungry. Sometimes she sneaks food from the Bishops. She always feels guilty, but then again, Mrs. Bishop does tell her to help herself. Still, Bridget isn't sure Mrs. Bishop means she's allowed to stuff her pockets with the rice crackers and hard candies that stock the shelves of the Bishop pantry. Bridget keeps a stash of the strawberry suckers in a shoebox underneath her bed. Today, she hasn't gathered any to add to her collection.

At the edge of the pipeline, Bridget stops. The sun's beginning its descent, though it's still early in the evening—about seven, Bridget guesses. The bright yellow of the afternoon's starting to blur into the softer orange-pink tones of summer nights and the trees that line the path seem to cast shadows darker than usual. Bridget shuts her eyes and sprints forward, praying as she runs. She trips and falls, opens her eyes. She's made it almost out of the path, but then she realizes, she's not sure she wants to.

Propping herself up on her elbows, she positions herself to face the direction of the Bishops, though their house has disappeared from view. The grass is longer at her end of the pipeline. Long blades twitch beneath her. She reaches into her back pocket, takes out her phone, nestles it on a patch of clover. Checking for bugs first, Bridget lowers herself to the earth, stretches out on her back, palms facing upwards. She uses a pile of fallen leaves for a pillow and looks straight above, not allowing the trees on either side to creep into her vision. She can only see the clouds. As she watches, they turn from orange-pink to dusky purple. Bridget shuts her eyes and tries to doze off. She

knows she should go home, but she just wants to turn off her brain, and she can't shake her mind of the images of Gwen's face, Thomas's face, their father's closed bedroom door. Breathing harder, she worries that Mr. and Mrs. Bishop have conspired to watch her every move with their children. Mr. Bishop's hidden cameras all around the house and sits in his room with a wall of surveillance TVs, making sure Bridget's taking care of the kids, feeding them, playing, setting a good example. What if Mrs. Bishop's reviewing the tapes right now? She'll see it all—the grill, and the bathroom, the cake...cake. Bridget's stomach rumbles.

She's hungry enough to eat two meals, but she remains on the ground. The hunger pangs bring welcome pain, not terrible pain, but uncomfortable pain, what she feels she deserves. Bridget thinks of her last Confession, given a day before her Confirmation. She'd opted to sit behind a screen rather than speak face to face with the priest. She'd ended up confessing her guilt about that decision. The priest had laughed at that, told her she needed to reconsider what really was a sin. But Bridget couldn't stop talking. She couldn't stop herself from spewing about her guilt. The priest pressed her, asked her what she'd done, but she couldn't think of anything other than the time she cheated off of Kaila on a pop quiz in Biology.

Then it hit her all at once, and Bridget had cried that she didn't think she loved well enough, didn't do enough, didn't say the right things, didn't know what she believed, didn't even want free will, and mustn't that be a sin? The priest had seemed bored. Bridget swore she heard him yawn. He coughed once, deemed her worries groundless, and told her to read Psalm 139. "*For you created my inmost being; you knit*

me together in my mother's womb; I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made," he'd quoted.

A bat swoops over Bridget's head. The clouds have changed from purple to a smooth dark blueish-black. The moon has risen and the sky's punctuated with the winking of hundreds and hundreds of fireflies. Sitting up, Bridget massages her temples, thinking again of Thomas and Gwen, the funfetti cake, the granite counters. The pit in her stomach returns and Bridget realizes what is wrong has been inside of her all along. She gropes around for her phone, finds it easily since the moon's so bright, flips the phone open. The light from the display blinds her momentarily. She's missed many, many calls. She dials home.

"Hey, Mom."

"Bridget Miller, where are you? I called Mrs. Bishop, and she told me that you left hours ago."

"Oh, yeah, I left a while ago and walked to Kaila's house. We were supposed to hang out at the pool today, and I felt bad about bailing at the last second. Guess I forgot to call."

"You forgot to call? I've tried your phone a dozen times."

"I'm sorry, Mom. It won't happen again. I'm walking home now."

Her mother sighs. "Oh, Bridget. It's ok. Now that we know you're alive, your father and I are headed to bed. If you haven't had dinner, there's a plate for you in the refrigerator."

“Mom?” Bridget blinks through tears. The fireflies become blurry dots of light going in and out of focus.

“Yes?”

“I don’t think I want to babysit for the Bishops anymore.” Bridget listens to her mother exhale.

“Honey, what happened?”

“Nothing, Mom. I’m ok.”

“Well, if it can wait, we’ll talk in the morning. You’ll have to let yourself in— Dad and I are tired. But I will say that you know you do need a job if you want to save up money.”

“I know, Mom. I’ll just...go back to catering. And everything’s fine. I just don’t want to do it anymore. ‘Night.” Bridget hangs up without waiting for her mother’s response. She takes it as a sign that no animals have dragged her away. Left to the mercy of the wild, she’s been spared. Bridget imagines what the puncture of fangs would feel like, or the piercing slash of claws. Brushing grass off her shoulder, she walks down the pipeline, across the field, over to her house. A small ranch, but the perfect size, she thinks, for three people.

She retrieves the spare key from underneath the ceramic rooster on the porch and lets herself in, shutting the squeaky front door as softly as possible. The hallway into the kitchen stretches before her, doors to the bedrooms on either side. The walls shine strangely in the moonlight. Kicking off her sandals, Bridget inches forward on her tiptoes. She stops at her door and leans against the paisley wallpaper. Fourteen framed photographs line the opposite side of the hallway, forming a progression of portraits. A

squashed newborn morphs into a one-year-old with birthday cake smeared all over her fuzzy head, into a wailing toddler trying to escape Santa's lap, to a kindergartener proudly twirling in her first plaid Catholic school-girl uniform. Then follow various stages of the same pale face, same green eyes, same orange-brown hair, same wide smile, plus or minus a few teeth. To visitors, her parents introduce this display as the "Wall of Life," the central corridor of the Miller residence, the heart of the house—the gawky but loveable evolution of their only daughter, Bridget.

Bridget takes a step forward down the hall, runs her finger underneath the picture frames, skipping over the fourth grade bowl cut disaster and the sixth grade braces-and-glasses monstrosity. She pauses at the picture of her Confirmation. She stands flanked by her parents and Father Quigley, smiling stiffly, her forehead still gleaming from the track of chrism oil. During the homily, Father had talked about becoming adults, about responsibility, about resisting the temptations of youth culture. He warned against the media, against materialism, sexuality, and teenage rebellion against Mother and Father. He spoke of the preservation of manliness and femininity, of the promise each Confirmand before him exemplified. They were the future, and if called to such a life, they would join a partner in Holy Matrimony and raise the next generation in the traditions of the Mother Church.

Bridget remembers the pressure of her mother's hand on her shoulder when the picture was taken. She'd sensed her father's happiness from the way he stood, rocking on his heels, legs apart, hands clasped behind his back, looking around and trying to contain the smile that told everyone how proud he was of his only daughter. Bridget walks back to the picture of herself as a newborn. Her face is red and scrunched, and just

a few wisps of coppery hair stick out from underneath her pink hat. Bridget attempts to picture herself swaddled in a crocheted blanket, sent spinning through a door on a Lazy Susan like the pile of dirty plates a waiter might push through to the dishwashers.

Rubbing her eyes, she studies a close-up photo from her fourth birthday party, a petting-zoo themed affair. Her father holds her atop of a sullen gray donkey with one hand at the small of her back. Caught in the midst of a belly laugh, Bridget's head is thrown back. Her mouth gapes open, displaying a neat row of lower teeth. Looking at the picture, Bridget fights the urge to punch the wall. She doesn't mind her goofy laugh or her tight pink stirrup pants. It's her father's smile. He's not looking at the camera. He only has eyes for Bridget. The donkey glares at the dirt, its head hunched down.

Bridget remembers the donkey's tail. She can practically feel it, feel the coarse matted fur that twitched back and forth. At four years old, Bridget's parents had already taught her to be nice to animals. Still, she couldn't resist that tail, which hung at the perfect height, just above her face. When no one was looking she yanked down as hard as she could. Frightened by the donkey's bray, she ran to her mother, who picked her up, hugged her, and fit a cone-shaped hat on her head.

Because the wood was hard, Bridget slept on the floor that night. She remembers crying into the plush stomach of a stuffed Eeyore she'd received from an aunt. In the morning, she'd found herself back on her bed. Believing God responsible, considering this miracle a sign of His forgiveness, Bridget breathed easier. But after breakfast, she overheard her father telling her mother how he'd found Bridget sleeping with her Eeyore on the floor. How he'd used her quilt like a sling to lift her back onto her flowered mattress.

Bridget leaves the hallway, pads softly into her room, sinks onto the same mattress. Reaching to the nightstand to her left, she opens a drawer and pulls out a black bead rosary. “Mother,” she murmurs, “Why don’t they see? Why don’t they see I’m not worthy?”

In her head, there’s a time bomb ticking. Who knows how long she has? Soon, the illusions will fall away and her parents will realize she’s fooled them all. Bridget balls her fists and whacks her pillow. She rolls the rosary beads across her cheek, welcoming their cool touch. She’s been given a face and fingers; strong legs and lungs. This knowledge feels too heavy tonight. Most of the time the weight feels natural, like a familiar stone in her pocket pressing against her thigh, reminding her it’s there. Most of the time she doesn’t question the reason. But she can’t understand why she’s lying there the way she is tonight. She didn’t ask to be, and neither did her parents ask for her; they didn’t discuss with each other—let’s have a daughter, and let’s name her Bridget, and she’ll have auburn hair. She’ll love to play soccer, frequently misinterpret sarcasm, worry too much, adore nature, fear walking on ice. Her parents asked for none of these things. Bridget cannot see the good they find in what they’ve been given.

Eye of the Storm

The tree outside my window snagged a plastic bag during the thunderstorm last night. I thought it was a plastic bag at first. But when I crossed my room and looked closer, the bag turned out to be a balloon. Yellow and shriveled, it made me sad for some reason. I guess I was picturing a little kid, red-faced and crying because the balloon his mother'd warned him to tie to his wrist had blown away. Poor little guy, is what I thought—until I noticed the yellow ribbon tail and the piece of paper tied to its end, fluttering weakly against the green oak leaves.

The paper bore a message, a message written just for me, a message I'd been waiting to hear my whole life. I knew it. My gut warmed. I felt recognition and need blooming from my insides out, the hair on my toes and forearms stood straight up, and I grew breathless with the importance. Each step I took towards the window became part of a countdown—third-to-last step, second-to-last, last step before the revelation, before some change—to what, I wasn't sure. Close to crying, I pressed my forehead to the glass and watched a circle of condensation expand as I exhaled. Did I really want this? Was I ready? The message dangled mere centimeters from my fingertips.

Opening the window was tricky; the apartment I'm renting is really old, and the windows always get stuck. I'm lucky I live on the third floor, because the panes only lock with these janky pins and chains that would probably take two-thirds of a second for some burglar to bust in from the outside. Then again, with the oak right up against the window, a good burglar would most likely be able to climb up to the third floor anyway. I should talk to my landlord—see if he can get someone to hack off the lower limbs, just to be safe. Of course, it's not like I have much worth stealing.

I strained, wood digging into my palms. Aware of my spine contracting, coiling from the tension, I pushed and pushed, inching the glass up, until it slid suddenly, banging into the window's upper half. The summer air felt cool. The sun'd just risen, so the world outside was still misty. I shivered as I tugged the balloon free. I've always hated touching popped balloons. They feel so slippery and rubbery and wrinkled. All I could think was that that's how somebody's face would probably look, if they could shed it like a mask. I squealed, detaching the balloon from the branches, imagining my skin turning all shrunken from contact with the plastic. The folds of the scraps had created sort of a bowl that dumped cold rainwater on my bare feet as I tugged the balloon and the message into my room.

I examined the paper at the end of the ribbon. It'd held up surprisingly well, despite the rain. The ends were soggy and torn, but I could easily make out the printed words.

YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL. YES, I MEAN YOU! The paper read. I read it again, just to make sure.

YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL. YES, I MEAN YOU!

Stunned, I dropped the paper, which spiraled down to the floor, coming to rest on the coil of yellow ribbon. I joined the paper on the floor, lay on my back and stared at the ceiling. I concentrated on the feeling of my chest rising and falling, up and down, until my heart stopped racing. Perhaps this was all a practical joke. Someone cruel out there knew getting this message would seriously mess with me, and so they typed out the note—typed it, so I wouldn't recognize the handwriting—and sent it floating up to my window last night. Or maybe they'd actually climbed up the tree to plant the joke,

grinning with the balloon clenched in their teeth during their ascent, anticipating my humiliation. I thought—what if it's The Perfect People? I always feel like there's a convention of Perfect People in town, and these members, they walk around dressed perfectly, talking perfectly, flashing perfect toothy smiles, congratulating themselves on their perfection and pitying and ridiculing those not part of their guild.

I stopped myself then. I stopped myself—that was crazy talk, right? That was some serious paranoia. Sitting up, I scrutinized the paper once more. No. No. It had to be meant for me. This was a deliberate act. This note had been *hole-punched*, which indicated a definite agenda on the part of the message-bearer—and a benign agenda. Instead of simply taping the note to the end of the ribbon, or stapling it or using a paper clip, someone had taken the time to *punch a hole* in the center of the top edge of the paper. Someone had guided the slip of paper between the prongs of the hole-puncher, adjusting left and right, pressing the edge of the paper flush with the metal corner, had then applied just enough pressure to punch out a tiny circle. With a delicate touch, the yellow ribbon was then looped through the opening and tied with an immaculate tiny knot. It had all taken time, precision. What kindness. It all made sense—this person had known I'd second-guess the first part of the message. That's why the note continued—to dissuade me from my first response. *YES, I MEAN YOU!* They really meant it.

Maybe, I thought—maybe they...were right?

I blinked. Only one way to find out. Pushing myself to my elbows, I looked across the room at my closet door. I felt hyper-aware of the sensation of the carpet stroking my bare feet as I padded across to the far wall and reached for the door handle.

From the depths of my closet, I dragged out a full-length mirror and set it against the wall. Slowly, slowly, I raised my eyes. I started with my toes. I looked at them. I looked, and I didn't turn away. My toes, unpolished but nicely trimmed—hey, they were maybe a little bit cute. Blue-plaid-pajama-ed legs. I pulled one up to reveal a pale, smooth calf. Hm. Not so bad, either. Up a little farther, my torso, swathed in an extra-large black T-shirt. Pulling the shirt tighter around my abdomen, I smiled. A lovely shape. I extended my arms—actually, these were kind of shapely, too. Just the right proportions for my body, not muscular, perhaps a little flabby, but functional arms all the same, arms for reaching and waving and hugging. I held both palms in front of mirror, my fingers spread wide. How amazing, these ten digits, capable of so much. I considered my fingernails—how miraculous that they grow and grow, a testament to my body's regenerative powers. I kissed each one and giggled, nearly beside myself.

I traced my collarbone, that wonderfully elegant structure. I gazed at my neck, the trunk of my body, the anchor for my head. My face. My pointed chin, my small mouth, soft pink cheeks. My button nose, short and freckled, my brown brows, not delicately arched, but two strong lines. My long, long brown hair, somewhere between curly and straight, the perfect amount of waviness. My eyes, gray ringed with dark brown. I looked into the mirror, looked into my own eyes. I smiled and closed them.

My Own Eccentric Orbit

“Lee. Leanna. Leanna Claire Lapinski, you come out of there right now and take these tweezers, or so help me God, I will break down that door, pin you to the floor, and finish the job myself!”

I sit next to the sink with my back against the bathroom mirror. My legs dangle over the counter. I shut my eyes and envision myself at the summit of Mahanoy Mountain with my telescope, nothing around but bright stars and cold, clear air—the ideal viewing conditions. Maybe if I will it hard enough, I’ll actually be there. Or, better yet, at the edge of Salisbury township atop Pulpit Rock—the highest amateur observing site east of the Mississippi. The 40-inch mounted Cassegrain there puts my Celestron to shame. But I’m not complaining; I’m still in awe my parents actually got me my AstroMaster for my birthday. Finally, a telescope of my own, with an equatorial mount, and just in time to observe comet Pan-STARRS’ closest approach to the sun.

Mom didn’t understand why I was so excited to look at a streak of light. But I still get shivers when I think about how I got to trace the path of something that took millions of years just to travel into the planetary region from the Oort Cloud. The nights the comet was visible—they were incredible. I mean, whenever we look to the sky, we’re looking back in time, which is cool enough. But this was different—an almost tangible brush with something so old, so pure, an object formed at the very beginning of our solar system from the same molecules that now compose our planet. An icy planetesimal that condensed outside the frost line, only to face ejection into deep space because of gravitational encounters with the massive globes of the still-forming Jupiter, the ancient Neptune. And then, there’s something beautiful about the observable

phenomenon that no matter how eccentric their orbits, objects originating from the same source eventually return home. Even with a post-perihelion orbital period of 110,000 years, this comet was circling back to the site of its birth.

“What are you doing, Leanna? You’re going to be late.”

The pretend-I’m-observing technique isn’t working. I’m still in the bathroom. And Mom’s right: I do need to get going. I open my eyes, lift my arms, and bring my palms down against my thighs. The sting feels invigorating. I watch my muscles jiggle. Yes, I am here. I am solid. I can get through this night. As the pink handprints fade, I slide off the counter. While adjusting my bathrobe, I twist the lock and drag the door open. Mom glares down at me. She thrusts a pair of silver tweezers at my face. I go cross-eyed, focusing on the shiny metal finger holes. She might as well be handing me a sword, telling me to disembowel myself.

“Mom, I don’t give a damn about my eyebrows. Neither will Phong.” I wave the tweezers away.

“Fine, Lee. I’ll do it. I said it before, and I’ll say it again: I don’t have a caveman; I have a daughter.”

“Jesus, Mom, I’m only half a caveman now anyway. This is stupid. It’s unnecessary. I’ll just comb my hair over the right side of my face.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Nguyen do not expect to find their son’s been dating a Neanderthal. Honestly, Leanna. Every woman does this. You’re behaving like a child. I should’ve started you plucking two, three years ago.”

I’d spent the last fifteen minutes lying on my bed while my mother leaned over me and attacked the dark patches of hair above and below my left eyebrow. It wasn’t the

pain so much as the breath coming out of her nose that'd sent me flying for the bathroom. With her face that close to mine, it'd felt like water torture, but with metronomic nostril exhalations driving me to insanity instead of dripping water. I suppose it's my own damned fault I'd ended up straddled and poked and breathed on by my mother in the first place. She's been on my ass about plucking since I started high school. I made it through junior year without her knowing I'd been shaving the space between my eyebrows, pretending I'd been tweezing. She'd been really pleased.

One evening, I forgot to lock the door. In she barged, searching for a shampoo refill, apparently. She found me squatting over the sink, perched like a baboon on the counter (her words) with my razor in hand and a lather of shaving cream spread across my forehead. I'm still surprised she hadn't already guessed what I'd been doing. My eyebrows had been shrinking, growing farther apart each time I shaved. Mom hid my razor until the tufts of hair filled back in. Now she's determined to see that I begin a proper feminine regimen before I turn eighteen.

“Lee, it's not my fault you inherited your father's Polish genes.”

I instinctively cover my fuzzy upper lip.

“Oh, honey, no one'll notice that if the lighting's dim. You'll look fine. Just let me finish your right eyebrow. I'm trying to help you.”

I step back, allowing my mother to enter the bathroom. She slips and grabs onto my arm.

“Why can't you just dry off in the shower, Lee? Damn it, now my sock's wet. And for Christ's sake, how many times do I have to tell you not to leave that terrycloth robe in a heap? I can smell mildew.” She nudges me against the counter.

I apologize to my hairs as she pinches each follicle. They don't deserve this treatment. When she finishes, she spins me around to face the mirror. It amazes me how little we resemble each other. My slender mother, all arms and legs, elegant auburn hair, sleek and pin-straight. I *feel* like a Neanderthal next to her, stubby and dark-haired and broad. Where my mother has a perfectly delicate nose, mine curves like a parrot's beak. My eyebrows, however, now swoop up in austere arches, just like Mom's. "Your skin will toughen the more you do this, Lee. Soon, you won't feel anything."

Mom steers me into the hallway. I duck out from under her grasp and lock my bedroom door. Eyeing the clothes in my closet, I hesitate. What do people normally wear when they meet their boyfriend's parents? Phong hasn't told me how formal this dinner's going to be. I reach for a pair of khakis. There's a mustard stain on one of the front pockets. Plus, my first instinct's almost always wrong. I toss the khakis to the floor and yank a brown corduroy skirt off its hanger. The skirt's buttoned around my waist, and I'm tearing apart my underwear drawer looking for stockings when I realize I'm having second thoughts about displaying my calves tonight. The skirt's modest enough. It hits at the knees. But I'd rather not spend the next few hours feeling like my ham-hock-shaped legs were being strangled. Mom would probably approve of a skirt, though. I'll just have to suck it up and keep my legs crossed. I find a pair of gray wool leggings and tug them on under the skirt. After wrestling with a bra, I reject all my blouses twice before settling on my favorite lime-green sweater.

"Lee, I think Phong's here. I saw headlights go past. Sweet Mother Mary, you'd better hurry."

“No shit, Mom!” Jesus. She’s pacing. It’s as if she thinks she heard Santa on the roof, she’s so hyper. Mom was more excited when I told her I’d started dating Phong last month than when I got my acceptance letter from Columbia. Scholarship to a great astrophysics program in New York City? Congratulations, honey. Oh, but New York’s just so *liberal*. Scored a Vietnamese-American boyfriend from a neighboring high school with rich doctor-parents, at a youth group you were mutually forced to attend? Praise be to God, I knew my only daughter wasn’t a lesbian, mixed babies are just adorable, you’d be living right down in Pottsville; let me go call your grandmother...

The doorbell rings. Shit. I secure my curls with a gold clip at the back of my neck, slip into my maroon peacoat. I race down the stairs and trip into the foyer. Dad and Phong stand next to each other on the braided doormat, hands in pockets, legs apart. I’ve always wondered why guys stand like that all the time. Maybe they think it makes them look intimidating or more important or something. Or maybe it just gives their balls room to breathe. God, I’m glad I don’t have balls. Stupid things hanging there—that has to get annoying.

Mom rushes forward with my purse. “Have a good time, Lee. Phong, you tell your parents we say hello.” She drapes the bag over my shoulder and stoops down, wrapping her long arms around me. God, she smells nice, like apricot cuticle cream and perfume. “You look lovely,” she whispers.

Dad faces Phong. I try not to laugh. This looks like a showdown, and it happens every time if Dad’s home when Phong picks me up. Dad would no doubt win in an actual fight; he stands a head taller than Phong. Lately, I’ve been waiting outside on the

driveway just to save Phong from this dumbass ritual. “I’d like her back by 11:30. Take care, now.” Phong and Dad shake hands.

“I’ll take care of her, Mr. Lapinski.” As Phong pats my shoulder, my cheeks burn. As if I’m some neighbor’s pet he’s babysitting. He guides me to his car by the small of my back. I clench my teeth to keep myself from shrugging him off. Being touched there makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Although it’s late October, a shroud of mist has settled in for the night. I can’t remember the last time I saw fog this impenetrable, this far up Mahanoy Mountain. I squint, trying to locate the Shaheen’s house across the street. I can barely make out their front windows—four glowing smears of light. I walk straight into the passenger side of Phong’s car without even seeing it.

“Ouch, damn it.”

Phong snorts and opens the door for me. I climb in and grope around for the seatbelt. The door slams. I look out through the glass into grayish-white haze. I can’t even see my own house. I start to breathe fast and rub the inside of my window, hoping that I’ll somehow wipe away a patch of the fog, just enough to catch a glimpse of familiar brick, faded blue shutters, stunted little pine shrubs lining the path to our front door. Nothing but gray. We might as well be the only two people in the world, except the world has ceased to exist. We’re just floating here, floating in this plum-colored Honda, this junky car that needs a serious vacuuming. Clumped at our feet, the remains of late-night Burger King runs emit a sickly greasy odor. The smell’s saturated the Honda’s nubby seat covers—a fitting scent for the tan cushions, which are pale and lumpy like the fat that rises to the top of beef broth.

I also catch a whiff of pot. He's been smoking again. I've tried to tell him that smoking pot only kills brain cells. He tells me I should try it; says I've got enough to spare.

WHOMP.

Something crashes against my window, rocking the car. I start and clutch the arm rests. Silence. Then, very close, a chilling moan begins low and guttural, but it rises in pitch and intensity until it becomes a terrifying screeching. Next, my ears ring with the sounds of someone hammering, hammering, hammering the side door. Something wants in, and I don't think it's human. I picture Drake's equation, the tool for determining the probability of the hypothetical existence of other intelligent life forms, and pray the more optimistic predictions are false. I yell a battle-cry, twist around to fight—and face a squashed and very human nose pressed into a snout inches from my own face. It's just Phong. He's making these crazy wailing noises. I can see down his throat all the way to his tonsils. He slaps at the door, and his palms squeak as they trail down the window.

He's still laughing when he plunks himself down into the driver's seat. "You should've seen your face," he hoots. I cross my arms. He massages my neck with a chapped hand. "Aw, come on, Lee. It was just a joke." He starts the car, one hand still kneading my neckline, and drives down a block. As he stops the car, his hand tightens. I recognize this signal, so I turn to him and we kiss once, chastely. I pull away, but he reaches for the back of my head and tugs me closer. This time there's tongue involved. I hate this part. Whoever said kissing was fun was kidding themselves. What the hell's fun about shoving your tongue into someone else's mouth at the same time you're choking on theirs, and tasting whatever they last ate and whether they brushed their teeth,

and not being able to breathe and hyperventilating through your nose into someone else's nostrils?

The hand behind my head slips down to my thigh and the other snakes up over my chest, reaching inside the top two buttons of my coat. I push that hand away.

“Is this not okay?”

He's staring at me like I'm an alien beast, rubbing his short buzzed black hair, blinking a few times.

“No, it's fine. I'm sorry.” I kiss him again, harder, and the snake-hand slithers back up into my coat. I try to ignore the pressure on my chest, but I can't see anything through the damn windows. This is fine. People like this. This is what people do when they're dating.

I hadn't expected anyone to notice me at that damn youth group. I hadn't been trying to be noticed, even. I guess it just felt good that someone was interested, for once. Senior year of high school, and no boyfriend...I'd begun to think something really was wrong. So I said yes to a coffee date, and then to another. Yes to kissing and holding hands and feeling trapped when we slow-danced together at Homecoming. It's good, it's fine. It means I'm a woman. I'm becoming what I'm supposed to be.

After a few minutes, we settle back into our seats. Now the inside of the car's as foggy as the outside. Phong starts the car in silence. The engine sputters, dies twice before he gets it running. He's really not so bad. He does smoke pot. He did admit to throwing eggs in condoms against random houses on Halloween. But he's smart, smarter than he lets on, and he's interested in politics. He has ambitions. We inch along the road and turn left out of my neighborhood onto Main Street. The fog's so thick we can hardly

see the pavement feet in front of the car. I visualize the scenery—typical Pennsylvania coal town Main Street, lined with more row houses squashed together than should physically be possible, crammed next to one another up and down the mountain, tall and thin and wooden. I've always loved the way the colors of the split houses clash. Canary yellow next to dark orange next to lavender.

The incline down Main's so steep the buses have to drop us off a few blocks from school in the winter, since they'd slide backwards on the ice otherwise. Winters are nasty, especially when things begin to thaw. The hills seem to ooze rivers of murky slush, speckled with gravel and salt, unrecognizable from white snow. I read the word 'nebulous' for the first time in *The Great Gatsby*. F. Scott Fitzgerald used the word to describe pants "of a nebulous hue." I remember picturing a pair of baggy-legged 1920s-style trousers, somewhere between dark gray and khaki. I remember thinking—that's what our town looks like, late in February. Grayish-brown and smeary, like someone rubbed their arm across a charcoal sketch.

Ashland's beautiful in the fall, though. I wish we could see the trees tonight. I wish the moon were out. After the mine closes down for the season in early October, lots of tourists still come just to see the trees. When the mine's open for tours, Main's more often than not a bumper-to-bumper parking lot, both directions. Tourists looking for parking on the way up to the mine; townies driving down the mountain to work. There haven't been many jobs in Ashland since the mine closed in 1961. Dad's a chemical engineer. He drives forty-five minutes every day into Jim Thorpe to get to the hydrogen plants.

Phong and I take the same route my dad takes, down Mahanoy Mountain into the valley. As the Honda gathers speed, sliding around hairpin turns, Phong presses the brakes to the floor. God, I hate how they squeak.

“Sorry about the brakes. We won’t have to deal with them much longer, though. Dad bought Mom a blue Saab the other day, so I’m probably going to get the Lexus.”

“I thought they were all about teaching you to earn your own stuff.”

“Yeah...they wanted me to earn my first car. But with the Saab, we aren’t going to have room in the garages anymore, so it makes sense that this piece of shit goes.”

Phong continues on about the virtues of Saabs all the way down into Pottsville, about well-weighted steering, suspension tuning. The fog’s getting thicker and thicker. Suddenly he swears and hits the wheel.

“What’s wrong?”

“Aw, shit. It’s cool. I just forgot something important at my house.”

“Aren’t we going there tonight? Like, for dinner?”

Phong looks confused. Then he smiles. “Oh, right. Yeah, so no big deal, I guess.”

After a few more minutes, Phong’s house looms into view. It’s an enormous old colonial. A saltbox frame, originally, but a new wing’s been added on to the back, intersecting the severe slant of the roof, and the house appears to stretch on forever into the fog, a never-ending passage of stone and white window panes. I’ve never been inside. Phong’s always picked me up and driven me wherever—the park or the movies or the diner. The car shudders as the engine stops. Releasing his seatbelt, Phong turns to me and grins.

“Be right back, Lee. I’ve got a surprise for you.”

We’re parked underneath a motion-censored floodlight that flashed on as we neared the four-car garage. But no light shines from the house. Not a single light.

“Phong, is anyone home? Where are your parents?”

“I don’t know; they must be on call.” I stare. This doesn’t make sense.

“Shouldn’t I come with you? I thought your mother was going to cook dinner. The point was for me to meet your parents. Damn it, I was practicing how to use chopsticks!”

Phong rolls his eyes. “Lee, my parents are Vietnamese. It’s not cool for me to date a white chick. They think you’re named Nguyen Thuy Lam. Let me just run inside and grab what I forgot. I promise you’re going to like this. Trust me, it’s gonna be a lot more fun than meeting my parents.”

He leaves the car door open. Fog seeps in. The touch of the wet air makes me feel as if some giant invisible animal’s breathing down my neck. I’m moments away from being swallowed. I wish we could see the sky tonight. I hate cloudy nights to begin with, but this fog makes me feel claustrophobic. I close my eyes and try to picture the sky we saw on our second date. Phong had picked the location of the first; coffee at the Pottsville Diner followed by a dumb action film about a third world war against robots, a heroic muscle-y guy who blew up a lot of stuff, and the token hot girl who initially antagonized the muscle-y guy, but ended up hooking up with him. For the second date, I chose the lookout on Mahanoy Mountain.

When you’re going there, it feels like you’re driving your car up this corkscrew road into a wasteland—nothing around but scraggly trees and dirt. It’s creepy. But all of

a sudden, you make a hard right turn and find a pull-off, a short gravel path. That's where you park. Then it's about a fifty yard walk to the lookout. The lookout's really just a cement bench and a metal guardrail shoved into the side of the mountain, but the view is pretty spectacular. Way, way off to the side, you can see Ashland. You can see the lights of all the houses and buildings, tiny yellow-white dots that flicker on and off. Main Street looks like one big streak, but the rest of the lights are so spread out they almost look like a reflection of the stars, and the forest becomes this big black ocean that mirrors the sky.

Things seem so crowded when I'm in town, but when I'm observing Ashland from the mountaintop, I feel like I can breathe. Shit my mom says about eyebrows and makeup doesn't seem to get to me as much. It's easier to recognize that she's only trying to help, that our ideas of what's important just don't always line up. It's strange because when I'm on the mountain I somehow feel closer to my home—I feel like part of me'll always be down there with the little speck of light that's our house—but I'm also reminded of how I'm part of something much, much larger, and how incredible that is.

Perspective, I guess. That's why I like the lookout. I tried to explain that to Phong. I took him in the hopes of getting him interested in at least a little bit of naked-eye astronomy. I told him about the phases of the moon—how weird it is, that we only ever see the same face because of synchronous rotation—and I named all the constellations visible to us. He wasn't very impressed with any of that—got frustrated since none of the constellations really look that much like animals or whatever they're supposed to be. I tried to explain their significance beyond the old picture-stories, how in modern astronomy, the constellations are actually internationally defined regions of the

celestial sphere. And how it doesn't matter that Cassiopeia looks more like a squashed W than a beautiful queen, because in reality the stars aren't physically related to each other at all. Human eyes aren't strong enough to look at the sky and distinguish brightness and distance.

Phong returns, tosses a brown paper lunch bag onto the backseat.

"Mind telling me what the hell we're doing?" I ask.

"That would ruin the surprise."

Phong backs out of the long driveway like a madman. He floors it. Lucky the driveway's straight. He cuts the corner as he swerves left out into the street. The tires gouge out two dark brown ruts in the immaculate lawn. I've never seen him this happy. He actually has dimples, he's grinning so widely. I brace myself against the glove compartment, which springs open. Used tissues and more BK wrappers and crumpled papers cascade onto my lap. I brush the mess onto the floor and smooth out one paper left perched on my knee.

"A minus on a pop quiz in European History last year? Jesus, I hate memorizing dates. Impressive retention of detail, Phong. For someone who can't remember his girlfriend's real name."

"Hah, yeah, that's the only A I got in Euro all semester. Cheated off the chick in front of me."

"Phong, where the hell are we going?"

"Relax. This is gonna rock. Trust me." He takes a hand off the wheel and squeezes my neck again. Pottsville's deserted. There's no one in the valley brave enough to challenge the fog, I guess. We pass the dark rectangular shape of what's got to

be Pottsville High. Strange, how before Phong started swinging by to pick me up and “take me to youth group,” Mom drove me here every Wednesday. I know the roads and the landmarks, but now I can’t tell which way’s up and which way’s down. Something light brushes the top of my head, and I jump.

I look up at a sheet of tan-gray cloth, secured to the metal roof with a Pottsville High Honor Roll magnet. The fabric sags, rubbing my hair, and I can feel the static electricity. Between the fog and the static, my hair’s going to look just great, wherever we’re going. It’s too cramped in this car, with the cloth lying on my forehead like bangs that won’t stay out of my eyes, and buildings that I should recognize, but don’t, rushing past the window. My woolen coat collar scratches my neck.

Bump-bump-bump. The Honda rattles over an uneven surface. I wrack my brain. What road’s this unpaved in Pottsville? The people here pride themselves on the upkeep of their roads and parks and such. Then I remember there’s an old covered bridge you can normally see from the second floor of the high school. But that would mean...

“We’re at the Schuylkill?”

“You guessed it.”

“What in the name of the sweet baby Jesus are we doing at the Schuylkill River? Much less on the foggiest night we’ve seen in who-knows-how-long? Not okay, Phong. This is not okay. We were supposed to have dinner with your parents. I’m freaking starving.”

“I thought maybe we’d work up an appetite before eating.”

My leggings adhere to the backs of my knees and I can feel my sweater growing damp under my arms. I hate how sweat pools in the most awkward places. I’ll probably

have sweat through my peacoat within an hour. And Mom will see the pit stains and make me get it dry-cleaned. “What do you mean, work up an appetite?”

Phong kills the engine and switches off the headlights. He unbuckles his seatbelt and leans over. Pulls my face towards his own, none too gently, with a hand on each of my cheeks. I turn away.

“Hell, no! I didn’t sign up to make out on some damn covered bridge with a guy who hasn’t got balls enough to tell his parents his girlfriend’s not Vietnamese.”

“Come on, Lee. It’s a historic bridge; it’s one of the first bridges ever built in Pennsylvania. I thought this would be romantic.”

A short maniacal laugh explodes from my gut. “Romantic? This is the least romantic date I’ve ever had the misfortune of going on. Besides, what the hell? You can’t stop a car on the middle of a bridge when the fog’s so thick you couldn’t see my ass if I waved it in your face.”

Phong twists the keys still dangling in the ignition and starts the Honda. “Fine, then. We won’t park here. We’ll use the riverbank.” We fly across the bridge, and the car almost rolls over as Phong jerks the wheel to the left. The tires leave the road and we’re hurtling down, down the bank towards the dark water. We lurch to a stop, tires spinning on the slick grass. I don’t know how the car managed to stop; it feels like we’re parked at a forty-five degree angle, with the hood of the car pointed at the river. Phong reaches behind me and grabs the paper bag. He fishes around for the opening, pulls out a package of Trojans, and lifts the box reverently with both hands, like a priest offering up the Body of Christ. “I figured it’s about time.”

“About time? What makes you think I’d let you come near me with one of those things?”

“Cool, you’d rather go without the glove? I knew I liked you.”

“I would love to slap you right now, Phong, but that would be animal abuse. You start this car and take me home.”

He stares me down. I’m not about to lose this contest. My eyes water but I pinch my arms. Don’t blink. Don’t blink. Don’t say anything. He’ll have to take you back.

“You know, sometimes I really don’t get you. Fine. We’ll just make out for now.”

If it’ll get me home, I’ll deal. I close my eyes. Let’s get this over with. Phong lunges forward, presses me into the seat. I feel like I’m choking and shove him away, but he continues to gnaw at my face and neck. I shove him again, harder.

“Christ, Lee.” He looks up, makes eye contact, but his hands keep moving. Where are his hands?

“Phong, I’m done.” I grope around, find the door handle, kick it open and trip out. The mud oozes through my leggings, coats my kneecaps and palms in cold sludge. I turn back for my purse, yank it off the seat. All I know is I want to get to the bridge, away from the car. I stand up and start walking.

Strong hands grab my hood and my arms windmill. I try to protest but nothing comes out, so I clench my hands into fists, swing my arms up, and box. Phong staggers backwards. I spin to face him and push with all my body weight. He lurches into the Honda’s trunk and falls on his ass.

Just like the buses on the icy hills of Ashland, the car slides. It slides slowly at first, dislodged from its grip on the slippery wet grass. The Honda picks up speed as Phong scrambles after the rear tires on all fours, as if he could simply reach out and pull the car back up the bank. I don't wait to watch it plunge into the water. I've already turned and I'm running, savoring the air, the burning in my lungs.

Once I'm on the bridge, I pause to look back and catch a glimpse of the Honda, a purple-black Titanic disappearing into the fog. I rest my hands on my knees, bend over and laugh. I'm not so scared anymore; I'm not really thinking oh my god what just happened. Mostly, I'm thinking I just love being outside, alone with no one but myself in this blessed thick blanket of fog. I thank the Schuylkill. God, I love its steep banks. I love rivers. Water. I've never felt so *alive*, and I just keep thinking how all the Earth's water arrived via comets during the Late Heavy Bombardment. Thanks be to comets. The universe makes sense; the comets brought the water and the ocean plants grew and exhaled oxygen, and then the terrestrial plants put down roots, and their oxygen formed our atmosphere, and now I'm here standing on this bridge, breathing in the air the comets made possible. I love how my strong thighs, my solid muscles, carry me away from the bridge. My thick brutish calves, honed to compact efficiency, transformed from fish gills to porpoise fins, fins to the haunches of apes, the legs of early hominids. My survival instincts have taken over. I don't stop running until I reach the well-lit parking lot of a strip-mall.

I retrieve my phone from my purse and scroll through to find my house number. If the world were perfect, the fog would suddenly clear. I'd see the stars. I'd see the stars, and in my mind I'd zoom out and see myself in the observatory at Columbia, tracking

comets as they enter the outer-regions of the solar system. The fog doesn't lift. But I laugh and laugh, because I can close my eyes and still see myself in New York City, me, a small-town anthracite coal-region hick from Pennsylv-tucky, come down off the mountain, risen up out of the valley. I call home.

I Want You to Make Me Cry

“Holl, your dad’s on the phone.”

“I’m drying my hair. Tell him I’ll be right there.” Holly wraps a towel around her head and stumbles out of the bathroom. Normally she’d feel self-conscious, traipsing around her apartment in nothing but stockings, a bra, and a towel turban. Tonight, she’s late. The concert doesn’t start until seven thirty, but Holly likes to arrive with at least two hours to kill. Shivering, Holly finds Jackson in their kitchen, leaning against the refrigerator. He holds the phone in one hand and takes a swig from a grape juice carton clutched in the other. Over the lip of the carton, he raises his bushy brown eyebrows in approval at Holly.

She slaps at the hand holding the juice and reaches for the phone. “I hate it when you do that.”

“What?”

“Sorry, not you, Dad. I was talking to my fiancé.” She grins and glares at Jackson, who pulls a goofy fish face and takes another drink.

“Just wanted to say break a leg tonight, honey. You know I’ll be there.”

“Aren’t you tired of elementary school concerts yet, Dad?”

“Are you kidding? I look forward to them every year.”

Holly snorts. “Your enthusiasm’s so convincing.”

“Well, fine, they’re not the most...harmonious of experiences. But I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

“You’re sweet. All right. See you after, then.” Holly returns the phone to Jackson, who’s now eating leftovers out of a Tupperware from the fridge with a spoon.

“Your mom coming?” Jackson’s mouth twists into a scowl that nearly disappears into his scruffy beard.

“Dad didn’t say.”

“So that’s a ‘no.’” Jackson rolls his eyes.

“Jackson, cut it out.”

Switching out the Tupperware for a second round of grape juice, Jackson snorts. “I’m not supposed to like my future mother-in-law, Holl. It’s against the rules. I still can’t believe she won’t come to see you conduct.”

“Jack, I gave up on that years ago. Mom loves me. She just can’t be there for me tonight.”

“Even your brother said he’s probably coming.”

“You’re kidding. Martin really did? Yeah, well, he needs a break from law school, I guess. Ha. The other day when I invited him to come, he looked up the miles from Camden to Waldwick and told me how much gas money I’d have to pay him.”

Martin’s teenage years had been somewhat violent. He’d head-butted a sizeable dent into the front door one day, when their mother tried for the hundredth time to talk him into taking up violin again. He calmed down once he went away to Rutgers. After spending his first two years long-boarding down the streets of New Brunswick, playing in the chess club, and learning the finer points of drinking liquor, he’d somehow landed an internship with a local law firm his second summer. Once employed, Martin sobered up and hadn’t looked back since.

“Holly—” Jackson stutters a little. “Holl, I’m proud of you. I fell in love with you when I saw you teach my class for the first time. You didn’t know it, but I stayed outside the music room and—”

Holly groans. “And watched through the door, and ever since, you’ve looked forward to walking your class to the music room every Wednesday,” she finishes. “Save the pep talk. I have it memorized.” She leans forward and kisses Jackson’s cheekbone. “I do appreciate it, though.” Holly rests her forehead on Jackson’s shoulder. The static from his burgundy sweater vest frizzes her dark curls.

“Those kids, Holly. It was the kids. They fell in love with you, too. You should have seen it.” Pulling back, Jackson plants a kiss on Holly’s neck. He smiles and wipes the grape juice droplets from his mustache and kisses her full on the mouth.

Grimacing, Holly reaches up to feel the sticky patch of juice on her neck. She licks her lips. It’s been a while since she’s tasted grape juice. Closing her eyes, she can practically see her mother bringing out the juice-boxes, and Jennifer Rosencraft kicking her feet, dangling off the swing.

--- --- ---

For an autumn day, it had felt unseasonably humid the afternoon Jennifer Rosencraft followed Holly home from school after kindergarten let out. Holly glared at Jennifer, who trailed behind even as Holly took the long way home, stopping to pick dandelions and sprinting across her neighbors’ lawns. Holly locked the gate of the split-rail fence that enclosed her backyard, but Jennifer just stood there, statue-like, on the road side of the fence. Her small brown eyes and thick eyebrows were just visible above the top slat of the gate. So Holly let Jennifer come inside the fence and play on her swingset

while her mother brought out some Cran-Grape juice boxes. Jennifer let the juice dribble down her chin and swept her tongue back and forth to lap up the purple streaks that stained her bottom lip. She sat pumping her legs on a swing, mesmerized by the voice drifting from Holly's house.

“What's that?” asked Jennifer.

“My mom sings,” answered Holly. “She sings all the time.”

When Mrs. Rosencraft drove up with her window down, hollering “Jennifer, get your ass in the car,” Jennifer didn't make a sound. She handed her half-full juice box back to Mrs. Delancey, as if it didn't belong where she was going, before crossing the yard and slinking into the front seat. Holly realized, then, that some children didn't have soft mothers and clean homes and Cran-Grape juice in the afternoons.

“Come on, Holly. Let's go inside.” Holly followed her mother through the screen door into the kitchen. “You can help me wash the vegetables for the salad and set the table.”

Holly opened a drawer filled with linen napkins while her mother began to hum as she sliced tomatoes, red wedges glistening like rubies in the sun filtering through the curtains. Velvety notes seemed to radiate from her mother's whole body; with her mouth closed, the sound came from everywhere at once. Finally her mother took a breath. The air became thick with the words she sang, all floating, chant-like, on the same pitch. “*Ave Maria, piena di grazia, elleta fra le spose e le vergini sei tu...*” Noticing her audience, Mrs. Delancey stopped.

“It's Verdi, from *Otello*. A prayer that Desdemona sings, just before she goes to bed. The beginning sounds just like a prayer from church, doesn't it? She's saying a

Hail Mary, just like you learned in Sunday school. But soon comes the good part, when she starts to use her own words.”

“Why is she praying?” Holly asked.

“Well, she’s scared of what’s going to happen next, so she sings a prayer, and that makes her feel better.”

Holly lay the napkins on the counter and pulled a cucumber out of the colander in the sink. Standing at her mother’s side, she ran the knobby green vegetable under a stream of water from the faucet as Mrs. Delancey continued to slice tomatoes, resuming the chant. Although she only sang one note, Holly could feel the rhythm of the phrases, and she basked in the syllables on which her mother dwelled, allowing her voice to round out, deepen. Holly pictured a boat on a calm ocean, sailing glass-smooth over blue water, rising and falling with the smallest of waves. She almost forgot the opening chant was going to end when finally Mrs. Delancey’s voice lingered on a word and soared up and back down again. “*Prega per chi adorando...*”

The pitches ascended slowly, tender in their approach to the apex of the phrase, and Mrs. Delancey touched the highest note with the gentleness of someone brushing away a cobweb, gossamer-thin like tendrils of steam spiraling skyward. The motive repeated, safe and familiar and sincere. Though her mother sang the simple melody with confidence, the last phrase, after one final soar up, returned to the opening chant and faded with a sentiment Holly couldn’t name; something between sadness and resignation, peaceful on the surface, but somehow unsettled, distressed. Holly and her mother prepared the rest of the salad in silence.

Holly Delancey's mother had never looked more beautiful than she looked that evening at dinner. Holly sensed this meal was special, because her mother had placed one candle at the top of each of the three placemats around the table. Everything about her mother appeared brighter in the candlelight; her eyes a deeper hazel, her cheeks pinker, the curly black hair Holly'd inherited even glossier. Holly tried to copy each of her mother's movements, miming how she chewed her cucumbers, how she cut her steak into small cubes and poured herself another glass of water from the pitcher without spilling a drop.

Her mother sighed. A deep sound Holly hadn't heard before. Her father laid his fork on his plate as her mother cleared her throat. "Before we have dessert, Holly, there's something we want to tell you," her mother announced.

"In a few months," her father continued, "you're going to have a Baby Brother!" Holly knew her father thought these last two words were important; she could practically hear the capitalization, having recently mastered the difference between uppercase and lowercase letters. Holly squealed and her father laughed and patted her shoulder. For two years, since Adele Stauffer got a baby sister, Holly had longed for a sibling. Pushing back from the table, Holly slipped off her chair. She encircled her mother's torso with her arms, one hand resting on her mother's stomach, the other on a shoulder. Arms latched around her mother, Holly's chest warmed, almost expanded, when she thought of how lucky she was, how proud she felt, belonging to her mother.

--- --- ---

Holly pinches her wrist as she steps out of her car onto macadam. During the drive to Liberty Bell Elementary, Holly'd heard her mother's voice repeating that chant-

like note, over and over. She feels as though she's in a trance. Somehow she manages to get herself inside the building, to hang up her coat, arrange her scores in concert order, assemble her students in lines as they arrive and corral them onto the risers on the stage. Holly remains numb and distant until she hears a student calling her name.

“Miss Delancey. Miss Delancey!”

Holly checks her watch. The metal band pinches her arm hair. Mother always said hairy arms are a sign of intelligence, she thinks...

--- --- ---

When the days grew dark earlier and the air colder, Holly would walk home after kindergarten and curl up next to her mother on the bed in her parents' room. Lying in bed became their routine. The larger her mother's stomach grew, the more time they spent lounging on the mattress together. Holly memorized the hills and valleys of her mother's body stretched on its side; dipped waist, rounded stomach, the small slope of her nose, her pointed widow's peak, the sharp angle of her chin. Her mother told stories of how she had played records for Holly before she was born. “Songs about love,” she'd say, “because I wanted you to know how much I loved you.”

Propped on her side one afternoon, Mrs. Delancey murmured to Holly that she felt too tired to sing. She rolled off the bed and pulled down a box of records from a shelf in her closet. As Mrs. Delancey set up the dusty turntable on her nightstand, Holly made tents out of the sheets and blankets and pillows. Together, they ducked into a soft white world of cotton and music, private and solemn. Mrs. Delancey rested on her back, eyes closed. Holly couldn't understand the words to the song, but she recognized the tune as the melody her mother'd sung the afternoon Jennifer had followed her home.

When the records stopped, Holly tried to reproduce what she'd heard. Holly wanted to sing to the baby so he'd know she loved him, too. She wanted to sing this prayer for him. Her mother didn't seem to mind that Holly couldn't really sing, or sing in Italian. When Holly faltered, she shook her head and began to hum. Holly rested her head on her mother's stomach to feel the vibrations. She pictured her baby brother smiling in his sleep and attempted the song a second time.

Her mother smiled a rare smile and told Holly that "Verdi would have been proud." Holly still didn't know who Verdi was, but she basked in the praise. Holly suggested they could name the baby Verdi, which earned her an actual laugh. The most beautiful music Holly'd heard in months. When her father came home from work, Holly leapt into his arms to tell him. The bridge of her nose collided with his tortoise-shell glasses. He rubbed his red whiskers against Holly's cheek and carried his daughter back into the bedroom. The three of them lay on their backs and laughed some more, discussing what fun they'd have when the baby was born.

--- --- ---

Ten minutes to show time. Holly decides to use the bathroom again. She shuffles forward on her toes to the bathroom at the back of the stage so the microphones hanging overhead don't pick up the taps of her stilettos. Locking the door, Holly steps over to the mirror and examines her reflection. Her bush of tangled black curls appears still relatively tamed, held in place at the nape of her neck with a hair tie. Her blue eyes look strangely green in the fluorescent light. Green like Martin's. Holly decides she couldn't possibly look any less like her red-headed brother. She replays the conversation they had a few days ago, when she asked him, half-joking, if he wanted to come to the concert.

He'd laughed at the idea, talked about the gas money...and Holly'd asked, then, if he'd ever liked music in the first place.

"Hell, I loved it, Holly." He'd hardly taken a second to answer. "Don't you remember? I used to beg Mom to sing. You remember that song she used to sing to us every night before we went to bed?"

"Oh, yeah, the one in German. Mozart, right?"

"Yeah. *Ruhe sanft*. Man. The way she sang those octaves at the end of the first verse..."

"Effortless."

"Yeah. One evening after I was done practicing, I played it back for her. Probably not in the right key; I just picked out the melody by ear. And the way she looked at me then—"

"You realize I would've given anything to have her look at me like that?" Holly had interrupted.

"Holl, the expectation that was there—the pressure—be glad she never did."

"You really were fantastic."

"Well. I know I let her down."

"No, not at the violin. Of course you were a great player. But I meant when you said you were going to stop. You didn't owe anyone anything, and you knew what you wanted...I never could see that for myself. And now look at where I am."

"In the backstage bathroom of your old elementary school, which still smells like pee." Holly's voice sounds hollow in the tiled room. Noticing a smudge on her glasses,

she rolls up the sleeves of her flowing silver sweater and runs the lenses under the tap. Holly dries her hands and opens the door. She pauses, then locks the door once more and forms two wads out of the scratchy brown paper towels. Reaching down the neck of her sweater, Holly secures a bundle underneath each armpit before leaving the bathroom.

Re-crossing the stage, Holly steps onto her podium and faces the thick black curtain. Locating the spot where the two halves meet, Holly separates the curtains and scans the gymnasium. Rows of folded chairs fill the room. She finds Jackson shepherding his fifth-graders into a line in the front of the hall. Two redheads near the left side catch her eye; Martin's come with her father, after all. She pictures the funny little kid he used to be, little Marty-cutie-pants, her younger brother with a strange affinity for shoving pussy willow pods up his nose. Now he's tall, and his neck's grown thick, and he keeps his curls neatly trimmed. He could be a clone of their father, the same man, but thirty-three years younger.

--- --- ---

On Martin's third birthday, which marked the start of a phase during which a Star Wars-enamored Martin only answered to "Stormtrooper," Holly woke to shouting from her parents' room. She heard her father pacing and pictured him with his large hands on his hips. He'd have ruffled his red hair, and his eyes would be narrowed.

"I hate it here, Fred," her mother spat. "You said we'd move back to Greenport. To my family. You said you'd find a job there. There are plenty of pharmaceutical jobs in New York. You could work for Advion, or for Bristol-Meyers—they're all about healthcare products, just like you—"

“Veronica, I’m sorry. We’re talking about being part of management of my own branch at Johnson&Johnson. I can’t turn down what they’re offering me. You want our children to have opportunities? It makes sense to stay in Jersey. It won’t be six figures, but I’m going to make three times what you could.”

“But I could start training again, Fred, I know I could do it.”

Something slammed. “You didn’t seem so happy when you graduated with a vocal performance degree and no job. I wouldn’t call subbing for random parts in random shows for random companies a *job*. You know you were lucky we met on the subway. The only good thing to ever come out of me travelling into the city every damn day. Ha. Your savior, from Hoboken.”

For only the second time in her life, Holly heard her mother crying. The first time, her mother had shut a porch window on her pointer finger. This crying sounded different. Holly felt sad in her stomach.

Weeks later, Martin sat down at the piano. After Holly had finished plunking out her piano lesson, Martin toddled over to the bench and pulled himself up. His fat legs stuck straight out, not long enough even to bend at the knee over the front of the bench. At first, Martin blinked at the keys. He tested a few, using his pointer finger. When he found the right note, slowly but perfectly, he reproduced the melody line of the piece Holly last played. Holly clapped and laughed. Her mother came running from the kitchen, hands dusted with flour. She gaped at Martin as the melody tinkled to a hesitant conclusion. The disbelief on her mother’s face change to joy, change to a radiance Holly identified as deep, deep pride. Sweeping over to Martin, her mother kissed his forehead again and again, leaving two white handprints on his cheeks. “Oh, Martin!”

He scowled. “You called me Martin.”

“Sorry, Stormtrooper. Just wait until Daddy hears!”

Their father was quite excited as well, and so Martin Delancey began his musical education like his older sister, in the back room of the stuffy cat-hair-covered trailer of Waldwick, New Jersey’s local piano teacher. GloryAnne Beck was an overweight Baptist who spent most of her time, when she wasn’t teaching piano lessons, working on jigsaw puzzles on her kitchen table or grooming her cats. She went barefoot because of poor circulation in her feet, wore sparkles in her short hair, and changed the color of her contacts every week. Her irises were hidden behind bright purple smiley faces the day she admitted to Veronica Delancey she wasn’t qualified to teach Martin.

After some research, Veronica discovered she’d have to travel much too far to find a serious pianist willing to train such a young boy. A neighbor informed Veronica that, while lacking pianists, Waldwick, New Jersey was home to a very talented violinist. He’d gone to Curtis and had played principal second in the Philadelphia Orchestra for years. So Martin switched from piano to violin, under the tutelage of Albert Fienberg. Holly continued to study piano in GloryAnne’s trailer.

Veronica attended each of Martin’s lessons. She stood in the corner and took notes while her daydreaming son struggled to focus. She learned as much about violin technique as Martin, and supervised his practice every day, reminding him to adjust his bow arm, drop his wrist, play closer to the frog. As Martin grew older, she’d sit in his room, just listening to him practice. Martin would play for hours while Veronica sat, her eyes squeezed shut. Sometimes, she rocked back and forth in time to the music, smiling and nodding, twisting her curls around her pointer finger.

Holly continues to scan the audience. Her heart leaps when she sees a mass of curly black hair, but when the woman turns, Holly realizes her nose is too large, chin too rounded. Nameless parents occupy all the other seats; a band of frazzled-looking adults stands at the back of the gym underneath the basketball hoop. Some appear bored as they slouch and stare vacantly at the stage. Others butt elbows and shoot dirty looks, vying for the best aisle seats, setting up tripods and video cameras. The gym air feels humid, ripe with the scent of too many sweaty people, too many brands of perfume. Holly sighs, finds her father and brother again. They're still both sitting with their left ankles crossed over their right knees. Holly wonders what it's like for Martin, being in the audience this time.

Fourteen-year-old Holly sat between her parents in the audience at the Liberty Bell Elementary talent show. The school's gym doubled as an auditorium, so the spectators suffered through the acts on squeaky metal folding chairs. Martin performed last. He stood center stage, eyes cast downward, violin bow dangling in his right hand, the neck of his instrument clasped in the other. He pinned the bow between his feet to free a hand to tug at the hem of his green woolen sweater. Holly had helped him pick his concert outfit—he'd said yes to the khakis, no to the red button-down polo, insisting on a green sweater embroidered with a reindeer head on the chest, though it was a little small. He nodded at the accompanist, who began the arpeggiated opening of Gounod's *Ave Maria*, set to a prelude from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

Martin raised his bow to the string, frowning slightly. The audience stilled as Martin drew out the first few notes. This is purity, Holly thought. This is holy, what he's pulling out of his instrument. She'd never felt prouder of her brother. Captivated, the audience followed the child as he swayed with his crescendos, the wooden body of his violin resonating with a voice that sounded as though it belonged to a musician far older than Martin's eight years. Holly, however, watched only her mother, who leaned forward in her chair, hands clenched in her lap.

She stared at her son, gasping audibly as the piece approached its climax, swelled in a final ascent to its highest pitch yet. Her mother trembled along with the intensity of the vibrato; Holly feared her mother would fall out of her chair, collapse or explode and cry out, but Martin hit the pitch, and her mother relaxed as the violin slid down into a lower register. The last note filled the gymnasium with a solemn resonance. The audience leapt to its feet, but Holly's mother remained slumped in her chair, smiling.

After the recital, the Delanceys went out for ice cream at Friendly's. The four of them took up a booth. Holly sat next to her father, and Martin and their mother sat on the bench across with Martin's violin nestled between them. Mrs. Delancey set her elbow on the case and talked ecstatically of Martin's performance, analyzing the highlights of each phrase. Scraping sprinkles one by one off his sundae with his spoon, Martin remained silent. Mrs. Delancey only paused when he rubbed his eyes.

"Are you tired, Martin? If we leave now, we still could fit in a warm-down. Mr. Fienberg really wants to hear improvement on your low tones."

--- --- ---

The screech of feedback from a microphone brings Holly back to the stage. From behind the curtain, Holly recognizes Principal Moore's nasal voice. "Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to Liberty Bell Elementary's Annual Holiday Concert!"

Facing her students, Holly whispers, "OK, here we go! I'm so proud of you all. You've worked so hard! Now, just have fun, and remember—I want you to make me cry. I want you to make me feel something." The children nod back at her.

Holly motions to the janitor stage right, who pulls a cord and parts the curtain. The rush of heavy fabric generates a breeze. Holly sucks in the fresh air before the hot gym atmosphere wafts over the cooler stage. She smiles and bows at the waist to the audience before facing her students and lifting her arms. The janitor pushes the play button on a speaker system, and a twangy hoedown tune begins to play. Holly's students grin out at their parents. A few of the kids wave. Of all the songs on this concert, her students are the most excited for this opening number. "It's an eeeeeeverlasting fruitcake; just as soon as it's gone, it will reeeeeappear..."

Holly bounces on the balls of her feet, beating the time in a large two-beat pattern. She points dramatically at the appropriate sections for cues; at the bridge, the choir splits into harmony, and the first row passes a pillow decorated like a fruitcake. A dull rumble from the gym informs Holly at least some of the audience appreciates the prop. A banjo duet clangs over the speakers, slower and slower and slower, and Holly's students reach up their arms and wiggle their fingers to one final "That eeeeverlasting fruitcake; oh it shows up at our house eeeeach yeeear, OH YEAH." Holly raises her hands, gesturing for more, more sound, and her students comply, some howling with laughter. Holly bows, sweeps her arms out and crosses the stage like a game-show host displaying a

prize. She prays her paper-towels will hold. Holly relaxes, stops worrying about what her backside looks like under the spotlight, lets weeks of preparation, engrained muscle memory, take over.

On Martin's twelfth birthday, Veronica gave her son the music to Bach's Partita No. 2 in d Minor. "Mr. Fienberg says you're old enough to learn this," Veronica murmured as Martin traced the title with his middle finger and flipped through the pages. "The Chaconne. It's my favorite. I don't think there's another piece like it." Holly, designated photographer at family events, snapped a picture. She smiled to herself, having captured her mother's beaming smile. From the head of the table, Martin handed back the music.

"Mom." His voice broke. "Mom, I can't do it. I can't do it anymore."

The table of cousins and school friends went silent. Holly's father dropped the piece of cake he was cutting himself.

"What do you mean, Martin? Of course you can do it. I know it's a hard piece, but Mr. Fienberg is confident you can handle it. I'll help you through, Martin. It'll be beautiful."

"That's not what I mean. You know what I mean." Martin's voice rose higher. "I just can't *do* it anymore." Martin stared at the table. He tossed the music in front of his mother. The bottom edge landed on a plate covered in melted ice cream. Holly couldn't help herself. She knew she should've set the camera down, but she pointed the lens right at her mother and pushed the button.

The Polaroid showed it all; her father and cousins frozen, nervously eyeing Veronica. Veronica's open mouth, her hazel eyes fixed on her son across the table. In the frame, the vibrant tablecloth, the green and blue paper napkins, the candles on the half-eaten birthday cake and the balloons tied to the back of the chairs looked too colorful, too cheerful a backdrop. Holly saved the picture, taped it to the back of one of her bedposts where her mother wouldn't see. That night before going to sleep, she studied the picture, cultivating a churning sense of almost-pleasure. The blood pounded in her ears, and she felt confident, felt proud, as if she had known all along to wait with the camera, ready to immortalize her brother's fall. She couldn't pretend she hadn't guessed this was coming. After his last lesson, she'd heard Martin sniffing in the downstairs bathroom. Holly'd tried to get him to come out, but he told her to go away because he was catching up on some reading.

While their parents had managed to make it through the rest of Martin's birthday party gracefully, the moment the guests left, the arguing began and didn't stop. Martin took to hiding out in his room. Veronica would sit outside his door and shout, which made their father shout. One particular fight resulted in a shoe sent through the grandfather clock in the living room. Holly's father had yelled, "You pushed him too hard, Veronica. It's as simple as that. He's not a performing monkey."

"He doesn't know what he's giving up."

In response to this conversation, Holly threw herself into her piano practice with new energy. Though she hated the tedious work, she practiced for hours. She listened to recordings, asked her father to drive her to The College of New Jersey's music library so she could study scores. She remained convinced that if she worked hard enough, she

could bring her back her smiling mother, her singing mother, the perfect and generous mother who'd brought out a juice-box for Jennifer Rosencraft. As a senior in high school, Holly decided to pursue a degree in piano performance. She practiced her audition material endlessly, pounding away while her mother read in her bedroom and Martin watched reruns of Gilligan's Island.

The day before her audition, Holly noticed her mother standing in the entrance to the piano room. The setting sun blazed through the kitchen window behind her mother, who seemed a woman wreathed in fire. Holly swallowed hard and whirled into a Chopin mazurka. She lost herself in the frenzied dance of a piece, banging out the final octaves. But when she turned to receive praise, her mother looked numb, distant. Holly realized she'd been holding her breath. Exhaling, she broke the silence.

"You know my TCNJ audition's tomorrow, Mom. I'd—I'd love it if you would come with me. You know, give me some pointers. I guess we haven't been talking much lately. And maybe it'd be fun for you to be inside a music school again."

Her mother's face darkened. She gazed at a point somewhere above Holly's head before answering. "Oh, Holly. Holly, you're so sweet. But you must know by now. It's not there for you. It's just not the same. It doesn't come from the same place."

Holly faltered. "But I love it, Mom. I love it just like—"

"You weren't born to do it. You weren't born with it like he was. He could've been great. He would've reached people, Holly." She stepped forward, reached out and lightly held Holly's wrist, massaging it with her thumb. "He would've done something that mattered. And it's not at all that you won't do important things. Oh, but sweetie, it's just not the same."

Holly stiffened. Jerked her wrist away. “Of course I know it’s not the same, Mom. But I love it, too. I love it, just like you loved it.”

The next day, Holly entered the practice hallway at TCNJ alone. Her father had tried to follow her into the music building, but she told him to wait in the car. She walked down the narrow corridor, searching for an empty room to use for her warm-up. Holly couldn’t focus. The dissonance of clashing instruments, etudes, scales running wildly up and down, up and down, overwhelmed her. She paused near a piano room, listening to the student inside play a Mozart concerto with a delicacy Holly envied.

The hallway stretched on endlessly, lined with tiny windowless prison cells, except Holly felt herself locked outside of the cells, rather than in one. She felt she was already in prison, trapped while smiling toothy faces with black curly hair and hazel eyes peered out of the practice rooms. They laughed, knowing Holly would never gain admittance to the mysterious world of performance and transcendence, never enter the sonic space beyond the self, never experience the paradoxical journey of passion and sensation that begins from within, and, gorged on its own energies, grows of its own will, rises up, more intimate than the stirrings of the heart from which it first streamed up like incense, pouring out, reaching up and up towards some ineffable realm.

Holly left the hallway. She left the building. She found the station wagon at the back of the parking lot and slung her music bag into the backseat.

“Holly?” Her father had been napping. His hair, red striped with gray, stuck out in all directions. He blinked a few times. “Holy cow, done already? How’d it go?” He pushed his glasses farther up on his nose.

“It didn’t. Just get me out of here.”

“Holly, I don’t get it.”

“Who am I kidding, Dad? She was so *right*.”

Her father started the car, swore, backed out of the parking space.

“I know your mother hasn’t made anything easy for you.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“Please, Holly, don’t make your decisions based on what she thinks. If you love this, don’t give it up.”

Holly didn’t answer, and they drove home in silence. When her father pulled into their driveway, Holly hardly waited for the car to stop before sprinting into the house, up to Martin’s bedroom. He lay on his bed reading a Hardy Boys book, wrapped in a blanket. Holly wanted to hurt him. She wanted to pull out his red hair, messy like his father’s. She took a deep breath. He’s your brother. He’s your brother.

“Martin.”

He didn’t look up. Holly seized the stress-relieving ball she kept in her purse and chucked it at Martin. It hit him square on his bottom lip. He clapped a palm to his brace-covered teeth. “Jesus, Holly. I’m trying to read, and I swear, if I broke a bracket—”

“Martin, shut up. This is more important than your damn braces. Do you have a recording of that piece? The one Mom gave you on your birthday?” Martin slowly lowered his hand.

“Yeah. Wow, it’s been a while. Yeah, I do have it. Mr. Fienberg gave me a bunch of old Heifetz tapes, too. But I like Milstein’s version a lot better. Should be on that CD *Violin Alone*.”

“I don’t care about Milstein. Just tell me where to find the damn recording!”

“OK, God. Try the top left shelf.”

Holly pulled the discs off the racks until she found the right album. She scanned the track listings for Bach’s Chaconne, inserted the CD into Martin’s boom box. She turned the volume up as loud as it would go. An anguished double-stopped chord ripped through the bedroom. The disembodied violin pleaded for help, drowning in its own misery as the piece spiraled faster and faster. Holly noticed how clearly the violin emulated the human voice. The violin’s weeping became the weeping of her mother; the glissandos her mother’s sighs, the trills her mother’s whimpers. Holly sunk to her knees when the recording stopped.

--- --- ---

The rest of the concert runs smoothly. The third graders clunk decently through their rhythm-stick accompaniment to an arrangement of the march from Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker. The first grade only falters at the last verse of the Chanukah song. Holly’s about to cue the downbeat of the final number with a nod from behind the piano on the side of the stage, when Principal Moore’s voice cuts over the speakers.

“Ladies and gentlemen, before these little angels treat us to one last song, I’d like to make a special announcement. Tonight marks Miss Delancey’s twelfth Liberty Bell Elementary Holiday concert! Just look at those smiling faces on the stage. It’s so clear how much our students adore their Miss Delancey. The school board’s met, and it was unanimous—they’ve named Miss Delancey Teacher of the Year!” Principal Moore displays a small bronze plaque to the crowd.

The audience responds politely; the children cheer and stomp on the risers. Holly hears Jackson’s cat call.

“Miss Delancey—herself a Liberty Bell Lion, I might add— devotes herself to bringing the magic of music alive for our children. I’ve sat in on her classes, and let me tell you, even I’ve learned a thing or two!”

“Now, how about a word from the Maestra herself. Miss Delancey, how did you decide to become a music educator?” He walks over to the piano and hands Holly the microphone, which feels heavier than she expects. She raises the microphone and exhales, broadcasting a scratchy breathing sound across the gym. “Well, Principal Moore, I’d have to say...” Holly trails off. She looks across the rows of bored parents, into hundreds of hot pink faces.

This is her life, these concerts. They blend together, all twelve performances of screeching recorders, wood blocks, cheesy skits, politically correct holiday songs that acknowledge all religions, despite the fact that her classes at Liberty Bell are comprised entirely of Caucasian Christian children.

Holly clears her throat. “I would have to say...I would say that I owe my career to my mother, who loves music, who needs music, more than anyone I’ve ever known.” Holly hands the microphone back to Principal Moore. She sits back down at the piano and nods at her students, pounding out the first few chords to “Joy to the World.” Her students beam at her, seeing their teacher’s tears flowing freely. How sweet, she thinks, thankful the chorus of shout-singing voices drowns out her crying. Looking at the little faces doing their best to find the pitches, form round vowels as she’s instructed them, Holly thinks, How sweet. They look so happy. They believe they’ve made me cry.