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Arrivederci Mama: Love Songs of a Stolen Daughter

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Arrivederci Mama:
love longs of a stolen daughter

By

Angela Sebastian

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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“If you are alone and nobody is assaulting you, you must be sick and sickness comes from the almighty Zeus and cannot be helped.”

~Homer

“Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is what it means to have no loved version of your life but the one you make.”

~Dorothy Allison,

Two or Three Things I know for Sure

Una Preggheria Senza Risposta

*Mia Nonna apprezza,
"Lasciatte che I morti parlino,"
Vuole dire,
"Lasciatte che mia figlia parli."*

*Mia figlia apprezza,
"Non lasciare che Nonna
La raggiunga troppa presto,
Mama."*

*Mia figlia apprezzava,
"Lasciami vivere abbastanza
Per vedere mia figlia
Come donna."*

En Inglais

Unanswered Prayers

My grandmother prays,
"Let the dead speak,"
She really means,
"Let my daughter speak."

My daughter prays,
"Don't let Grandmother
Join you too soon,
Mama."

My daughter prayed,
"Let me live long enough
To see my daughter
As a woman."

1953, *Arrivederci Piccolo Dio*

The sky is marble—pink, orange, and gold—when my grandmother, Margherita, stands in the middle of her garden and contemplates doing exactly what the pale doctor told her not to. *E niente*, she decides, it's nothing, and drops to her knees. She feels the tug, a slow burning pinch from somewhere in her stomach, and winces. Her hands roam over her belly through the pockets of her house-dress. She smiles when she feels the reassuring thump, and sets to work. She drags her nails through the dirt, more coarse and dry than the rich earth of *Cariati*, and sorts through the herbs. Only a few basil leaves left, the parsley tired from too much sun, and the others, thriving, she ignores. She only planted the rest to please her husband, anyway. American weeds, she thinks. She braces one hand on the wheel barrow and the other beneath her belly before rising, and curses as her legs buckle before righting herself. The basil and parsley are tossed on top of the tomatoes, lettuce, and peppercini's, already picked that morning, and she continues down the narrow strip of dirt toward the eggplants.

A big dinner today. Many people in her house. Strangers, most of them, but, still, *amici*; she will be able to speak to people who, at least, understand her words. She goes over the preparations, cooking, table, dress; she has spent the last two weeks baking the *wanda's*, and the *crustoli*, little pastries like gifts that remind her of home and her mother. She touches her hair and feels the hard plastic rollers still in place, and tries to ignore the constant nudging from her belly. He must be American, she thinks, as she rubs the swelling through her dress again. He and his father both insist on celebrating this Day of Labor. *Americani!* To celebrate laboring! She

snorts and selects the largest eggplant to add to the contents of the wheel barrow. The marble sky begins to swirl and light appears on the grass below the kitchen window as she finishes her collections. She props the wheelbarrow against the edge of the door, then walks to the front of the yard. She looks left, then right, at the houses of her neighbors, still quiet and dark. The sun will wake any moment, she thinks, and shakes her head. All of her neighbors are *amici*, most *Calabrese*, like her, but this place has changed them. Back home, Margherita would not be the only one awake at this hour. She squints hard, pretends the rolling hills before her are *Cariati*, the streets made of stone, her mother across the alley doing a wash. She shakes her head again, checks the rollers are still in place, and waddles back through the yard. She stops to pick up a few *mele* that have fallen to the ground and shoves them in the pockets of her dress. She breathes hard as she goes through the back door and greets her husband in dialect, *I'm glad you had a nice long sleep. I had to go down on my knees to get the herbs for your party.*

My grandfather, Michael, sits at the kitchen table, his face hidden behind a newspaper. He doesn't move.

Il café, please, Michael says to her, perhaps because he doesn't know how to make his own coffee, or because he's used to women waiting on him. He rustles the newspaper as he turns the page.

They have lived together only six months, and she doesn't know him well enough to read his mind yet. Her mother told her it will take years before she understands him. *Men and their moods*, her mother warned her before Margherita departed for the boat in Naples, *are like capre, goats. They must be loved and fattened before they are willing to share their milk.* As Margherita measures coffee into a ceramic cup, she tries to pronounce this new word, *please*, under her breath. But it comes out like *pesce*, fish. Michael laughs behind the newspaper.

P-l-eeese, he says. Per favore en Italiana. *You must learn, Margherita, or everyone will think you're asino.*

Bah. *Inglese e stupido lingua por asine*, she says as she places the coffee in front of him. *There is no beauty in such hard words!*

He puts the newspaper down. He tells her that if she continues to act like a donkey, *asino*, he will treat her like one. She touches her belly, and says, *P-l-eeese*, before leaving the room. In her bedroom, she sits at the end of her bed and starts a letter to her sister, Elizabetta, in Cariati. It begins, *Sono nell inferno...con il diavolo...* I am in hell...with the devil...

When they were children, Margherita and Michael, whose name was Guisepppe until he arrived at Ellis, were promised to each other. Like most marriages in *Calabria*, their betrothal was designated for the sake of uniting lands. The Anastasio and Rizoleo farms in *Cariati*, a small village carved into a steep cliff on the coast of the Ionian Sea—the toe of the boot—would become a large family-owned parcel; though neither Michael nor Margherita would stay in *Cariati* long enough to benefit from the union. He was four years older, and when Michael discovered the arrangement their mothers had made, he no longer spoke to Margherita like an *amica*, but as a *servo*, a servant, which angered her at first, then left her bewildered and finally indifferent, resigned. At twelve, he already had a reputation in the small village as a *Casanova*, and she wanted no part of that. Margherita's family was learned. They were pharmacists and lawyers and bankers. Not dirty farmers who always smelled of olives and pig shit, like Michael's family. She lamented to her mother, who smiled and told her how happy her father would be to hear the news when he returned from South America. Margherita's only memory of her father was watching him wave from a boat bound for Brazil when she was four.

When Michael was nineteen, he left *Cariati*—like most of the men in the village—to work on the Union Pacific railroad in America. He wrote to Margherita, but she did not reply, until her mother found the letters stuffed inside her mattress and became livid. Margherita wrote back. Michael told her of his adventures in America, of the food, and the people, the landscape, how he had found a nice neighborhood for them. My grandmother discovered in a letter that she would be moving to America after their wedding. They would live in Iowa, but until Margherita heard him pronounce it, she told everyone it was called *Eeowa*. He was saving enough money. It should have only taken a few years before he could come back.

But then December 7, 1941.

By then, Michael was working in a shoe repair shop, the assistant to the manager, when the men in dark suits came. They asked questions. Michael had heard of this. He had friends who had been visited by similar men. They were looking for spies. Italians, like the Japanese, were easier to spot than Germans. Southern Italians, who were dark, whose hair curled like *the mulignan*, were easier still.

If you want to prove your loyalty to the United States, you must join the army. Fight against the fascists, said the dark suits.

He had heard rumors about *amici* who had caused trouble and were forced to flee to Canada. Michael didn't want to cause trouble.

He joined the army as a translator and a boot repairman. And instead of being married at eighteen, which was custom, Margherita was twenty-eight before Guiseppe—Peppino to his friends, returned to *Cariati*, and insisted that everyone call him by his American name, Michael. Two months later they boarded a ship in Naples bound for America. Second class cabin on the Queen Mary. It took six weeks of rain and sickness before they saw The Statue of Liberty. Margherita wasn't impressed. *It is smaller than I expected*, she told her new husband as they

stood on the deck, crammed between countless others who were awed into silence. Michael ignored her and began whispering with excitement about their journey from New York to Iowa, which, he told her with great excitement, would take only days on the train he had helped build.

They arrive together, as a herd, from the neighborhood. Men first, then women, carrying paper sacks stuffed with loaves of hard bread, bottles of wine, gurgling children. Margherita stands behind her husband on the front porch as he exclaims *Benvenuto, benvenuto*, welcome, welcome, as though he hasn't seen most of these faces everyday for the past six months. The house is too hot, so Michael ushers his guests through the long rectangular shaped house and out the back door where card tables have been set up next to the garden. He opens the window in the kitchen and turns the radio up as loud as it will go. A news program is on, instead of the music he was looking for, but still, he looks pleased when the other men gather around the window to listen. He is the first among them to be able to afford a radio. *Presto*, soon, he says, laughing, a television!

Margherita watches him for a minute as he pulls his pants leg up to show everyone his new saddle shoes, which are mostly white, and impractical, she thinks, but two young men bend down to touch the faux leather. He puts his hand in his jacket pocket as though searching for a handkerchief, but pulls out, instead, the photo of the little shoe repair business he has bought on contract from his former manager. He appears surprised to find it there, as he passes it around, and several bodies huddle together to get a look. Margherita is suddenly reminded of *Cariati*, of the little boys—*piccolo Dio's* she had called them back then—who used to stand around in groups popping the heads off the *lucertole*, the little green lizards that lived in the stone cracks of

the village. The leader of the *piccolo Dio*'s was always the one who popped the head the quickest.

Margherita turns away from the spectacle, arranges a table cloth, pours lemonade, and smiles at the children. The older ones try to touch her belly. She lets them. *What will you call him*, they ask, and she smiles, unsure, *No lozo ancora, I don't know yet*.

The women return to the kitchen and begin piling prosciutto, salami, olives, and hard cheese onto plates. *Your house is very beautiful*, they tell Margherita, and she relaxes into dialect. Into women who look like her and sound like her; their faces hard with lines, their hair and skin darker than any of them wanted. The olive skin tone was much more pronounced in America where all of the women tried to powder their faces into cotton. One, the Flotta woman, who is Margherita's third cousin on her mother's side, stands at the window, and looks out to where the men have begun corking wine. Flotta's husband pours two glasses and places both to his lips. She sighs, mutters *che brute*, and balls her fists as though preparing for a fight. When she sees Margherita watching her, Flotta places her hands on Margherita's belly and makes the sign of the cross. The other women take up Flotta's prayer and together, they pray to *Santo Francisco* for a *bambino*, a boy.

The afternoon is a lazy one, as the women watch their children run through the trees, pelting each other with grapes, laughing. The boys try to get their fathers attention, but the men huddle together, whispering about jobs, so solemn, but one, Michael, only smiles at their worried tones as though he knows the future. America will prevail. Margherita watches mostly, but listens, too. Learns the business of the neighborhood. *Don't shop at the Chinese drug store on the corner, they cheat Italians, instead, go to Fannaro's one block over. Mrs. Tursi will die soon, everyone has been taking food to the house. Father Leto will retire next year, his nephew GianCarlo, will arrive from L'Italia next month and train to take his place at St. Anthony's*

parish. Margherita should take some of the leftover wanda's from the party to mass next week. Don't walk down 9th street, ever, the mulignon stand on the corners begging for scraps like dogs and killing each other with powder.

When they have finished their *frutta*, some *mele* and cinnamon, some figs for good luck, Margherita pours coffee, pleased that the party seems to have been a success. She is tired. She imagines that soon, her new friends will begin packing up to leave. She is surprised when the women gather their sacks and their children and bid her farewell, but the men don't move from their chairs.

Clear away this mess, Michael tells her and she obeys, stacking the small desert plates on top of one another.

She puts the plates in the sink, then turns off the light in the kitchen and goes to the window to watch them. The radio is still on, and she tries to ignore the crackling and mewling coming from the speaker. *This is Big Band*, Michael had said when the news changed to music. Margherita wrinkles her nose at it and wishes she could turn it off.

The Flotta woman's husband, Francesco, has been drinking steadily all afternoon, and even in the thinning light, Margherita can see the redness of his cheeks and eyes. She knows what will happen next. How she knows is a mystery, but, still, she knows. Flotta is aiming at her husband as surely as if he had a gun.

Flotta sways on his feet and tells Michael to turn the music up, that he wishes to dance. He turns on the spot and asks where all the *puttana's* have gone, before erupting in thick laughter.

Putta's! Come back! He calls into the oak trees at the side of the garden. He looks around, laughing still, but the others are quiet, embarrassed for him. *Oh, come now, you haven't become*

American women, have you? Your fathers' would line you up and let the asine piss down your throats if they could see you now!

Michael looks blank, traces his thumb around the rim of a wine bottle, and Margherita thinks he is trying to decide whether to ignore the drunk or to deal with him. Another man, the white-haired Sarcone, puts his hand on Flotta's shoulder, tells him to be quiet or to go home. Everyone else, some ten men, look to Michael, it is his house after all, he should be the one issuing orders. Flotta knows this, too.

The big shot can tell me to go if he wishes, Flotta says and turns toward Michael.

Michael nods once, his decision made for him, and says, *Why do you want to ruin a good time, Francesco? Zito, shut up, or be gone.*

You must rise from your throne if you wish to throw me from your castle, Peppino, Flotta says, and stumbles forward to stand directly in front of Michael.

Margherita is frightened. She has seen duels in Italy. The ones who remained in *Cariati* after the drought and *Il Duce* drove all the men to the America's; the cowards, the insane, the frail, all had something to prove. When she was a teenager, they tucked more boys into the earth than fig seeds.

She realizes she is panting and tries to slow her breathing as she watches her husband stand up. He is a good three inches shorter than the drunk Flotta, smaller in body, too, like all of the Anastasio men. Without a word, Michael takes up the wine bottle and smashes it across Flotta's face. Margherita hears the whap! against his red flesh, the shatter of glass on the concrete. Flotta falls in a pile, twisted, unmoving. No one approaches him and the longer he lies there, the more his dark clothing seems to bleed into the concrete.

No one touch him. Sarcone, go to his house and tell his wife he will stay here tonight, buona notte, Michael says, leaving the men outside. He enters the house, slams the kitchen door behind him.

Margherita drops to her knees to hide under the kitchen table as he stomps past. She feels the pinch, the slow burn she felt earlier in the garden. Silently, she prays for a girl, for my mother.

The Origins of a Liar

I'll write a story about what could have happened. The mother still dies, and the daughter is just old enough to drive herself to the funeral. There are no brothers and sisters; no blood aunts, uncles or cousins, except for the ones thousands of miles away in the peasant region of Italy. But there are grandparents. The grandparents are magic, delivering me—their only grandchild—from poverty, from bloodlessness, one quick death, one mature C.D., at a time. And there's the Countess. Countess Carmela of Capri, the laughing girl who is me and my mother both. The construction of a dumbass kid.

I see us now through the green glass of the wine jugs in my grandparents' pantry. Blurry, fermented, real and imaginary tossed together. Fun house images, floating far away and too close, embarrassing. Including—especially—me. I see them through the green glass of who I imagined we were. Who we should have been. Mediterranean goddesses with wandering legs. Mobsters. Expensive plane rides to the old country. Sunday dinners with more family than space in the dining room.

We were none of this.

By the time my memories break off in solid hunks, and I arrange them, Grandma uses canned sauce and generic Xanax. Mom is in one stage of death, or another, or dead altogether. Grandpa sits in his kitchen chair, oxygen mask in one hand, cigarette burning in the other. In death, Grandma and Grandpa became Nonna and Nonno. When I discover I want to be Italian. And Mom is a word for other girls. For Carmela who runs through olive fields until she finds the perfect hiding spot.

I see them through green glass, but maybe I should admit this is the barrier I've *chosen*. The one that makes them more than just my family. Through green glass they are *Italiano*, they are Frank Sinatra, they are seersucker suits and crucifixes washed in blood. People to be feared. I am Carmela, tracking my life in fairytales. The markers for an identity designed to make me forget. But you'll know the truth.

Dad is another story. At kindergarten round-up, I knew my parents didn't stand a chance of hitting their diamond anniversary. Dad was, and is, tattooed. Ink on the outside seeps through his skin, stirs his madness, and nobody is happy about it. Least of all me. I am always ten years old, sitting in the passenger seat of his red mustang. My eyes on him so I won't see the needle edge past 95 mph. I listen through the storm of wind and interstate dirt as he shouts his Life Rules to me: No fat chicks, and he'll be dead at, or before, 56 like the rest of the men in his family. So he's not fucking around anymore.

Here's what I know from him: He meets my mother in a cowboy bar. Smokey's out on 6th next to the tire factory. Dad calls Mom "spunky," says she walks up to him with all the swagger of a mini Doberman pinscher and offers to buy him a drink. She doesn't look like the other haggard chicks in the bar, most of whom pull shifts down at the tire factory. Mom is classy from the word go. They dance, drink half-dollar whiskey. Mom presses spandex-covered hips into Dad's groin while Streisand's "The Way We Were" seduces her from the jukebox. I can only assume she thought Dad's jeans and red-neck twang would really take the piss out of my grandparents. Especially my grandmother, my Nonna. What Dad doesn't tell me, but what I'll figure out after Mom is dead and he's on his second round of rehab: When they met that night,

- 1) He wasn't wearing his wedding ring, and
- 2) He had just found out he was sterile.

But in this story, we all sit down like adults. *It's your choice*, they say. Maybe nothing that happened would actually happen. Maybe the growing up part of this story can be reconstructed into something sturdy, something that doesn't fill me with shame and silence. Maybe it was all a fairytale, a Grimm story. Countess Carmela's adventures in Multiple Sclerosis, methamphetamines, cultural reincarnation, adolescence.

Maybe I wasn't an asshole after all. Maybe it wasn't me at all.

I resurrect Mom and she is no longer an echo fading into the basement floor of the Mausoleum, but a contact in my cell that I punch up and ring daily. We're even friends on Facebook. *A bad dream figlia*, Mom says. She strokes my cheek and sits on the edge of my bed, Carmela in her head, ready to make sense of it all, to give me her voice. I pour myself inside her.

Nonna and Nonno reclaim the kitchen table; they eat *pane* and *pesce* with the volume turned all the way up on *Wheel of Fortune*. They, too, are no longer tucked into marble drawers on either side of Mom. *Work harder*, they say, *and don't talk so much*.

Dad wears the Brooks Brother's tie I bought him for Father's Day instead of his holey jeans spattered with blood—a map of his myriad addictions. He sits long legged and calm in an office instead of hunched over inside the two-man tent he's set up in my uncle's attic after running out on his latest girlfriend. *Shut up*, he says, *you're fine*.

They are whole, intact, and all mine.

Sperm Guy

I have my mother's eyes. Large, brown, and inquisitive, if you believe the photos. Unfortunately, my nose is hers, too. It was celebrated at St. Anthony's as smallish compared to some of my classmates', but it's still the one feature she gave me that I wouldn't mind giving back. If we were standing next to each other, my mother and I would be within an inch of each other's height. Ten years ago, I was the image of her senior portrait. I look in the mirror, and have no doubts about where this feature or that one came from. There is some debate, however, about the rest of me. Like who my father is.

Don't get the wrong idea about Mom. My conception, my birth, were miraculous, at least as far as she, and then-modern medicine, was concerned. She and Dad tried to have me for years. Weekends were spent in the car, traveling back and forth to the university hospital in Iowa City. Injections were taken, by both of them at first, until a kindly doctor told Dad not to bother. No swimmers in his pool. Mom had a tipped uterus. Complicated, yes, but not impossible. They hung solace on a two-thousand-dollar-a-pop price tag. Then the story starts to unravel.

One of my earliest memories, after Mom and I moved out on our own and she was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis and I was pretty much left without supervision, is of my hands, small against the heaps of junk and papers, as they tore through her desk drawers, searching. I couldn't have been older than six or seven, and yet, somehow, I knew. I was told, by everyone bigger than me, including Mom, Dad on his weekends, *Nonna* and *Nonno*, and Mary my Godmother, that I was wrong. My parents were my parents and stop asking silly questions. So I did. When I was twelve, I considered my earlier behavior "normal." Most kids think they're adopted, don't they? Too many fairytales, too much *Oliver Twist*. I don't remember

if it was before or after Mom died, but sometime when I was sixteen, my dad told me the truth. He wasn't my dad.

We were watching Oprah. Me, dad, and my friend Laura, all sprawled out on the couch, the Pizza Hut remains on the coffee table, empty Mountain Dew cans perched on the box next to the over-flowing ashtray. The episode was typical. The guest, a woman crying into a white handkerchief, Oprah facing the woman while the lights glinted off her diamonds as she adopted the sardonic smile for which she's famous.

"And when did you meet your real parents?" Oprah asked.

"Four years ago. My husband and I had been searching since before we were married," snuffle-snuffle, "And then, one day, I found her. My real mom."

The audience leaned forward in their chairs.

"And then what happened?"

The woman was still crying, but she managed to get the next bit out. "Mike and I flew to Tampa to meet her. We-were-so-happy-I-just-cried-and-we-hugged-and-and-she-looked-just-like-me!"

The rest tumbled out between commercials for Tide and Weight Watchers. The woman and her long-lost mother began seeing each other regularly, that pesky feeling of abandonment was forgiven, forgotten, and everyone lived happily ever after. The end. Next week, Oprah's Favorite Things episode!

We turned the T.V. off and Laura, a conventional "mother hen" even at the apathetic age of sixteen began clearing off the coffee table. "I don't know if I'd want to know if I was adopted or not," she said.

"I would," I countered and grabbed the ashtray out of her hand.

I lit a cigarette. Dad frowned but said nothing. He had been trying reverse psychology for the past two months and it wasn't working. I now felt like I could smoke anytime, anywhere. I lay back on the pillows and propped my feet on the now empty coffee table.

"I mean, just for like, medical reasons, I'd want to know," I said.

"Well, maybe," Laura said, "but still, most people don't end up having good relationships with these people. They don't just forgive and forget and go on Oprah," Laura said.

"Yeah, but you really, truly wouldn't want to know if you were adopted?"

"How do you know you're not?" Dad's voice was quiet, and we both turned toward him. He sat in the leather recliner with the ugly plaid patches sewn all over it to cover the rips.

I started to laugh, but he looked so strange, almost guilty, as his eyes began to bounce from different surfaces in attempt to avoid my gaze. "Right, I'm adopted. Quick, call Oprah!"

Laura started to laugh, too, but I could tell from the way her eyebrows were raised that she felt like I did. Parents should never joke about their kids being adopted.

"I'm serious, what if you were, would you really want to know?"

He had leaned forward in his chair, and I swear, it was like he was getting ready to say something he had been dying to say for years. Turns out, he was.

"Yeah, I'd want to know."

Laura looked back and forth between the two of us, and if she and I hadn't been so close, I would have been pissed that Dad had chosen to tell me this story in front of someone else, but it was Laura, the closest I had to a sister, so it was okay.

"Your mom was artificially inseminated."

I ran away. Well, I ran to the end of the driveway, turned right so I was going down hill, and then started jog-walking until he caught up with me and dragged me back to the house.

“It just got too hard,” he said. We were sitting on the double rocker. I played with the pack of cigarettes and didn’t look up once while he talked. “We wanted you so much. I would come home from work and find her in the living room, crying. We didn’t know what else to do.”

“But I’m yours, right? It was your sperm. I’m yours.”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, hon.”

I stopped crying long enough to ask questions.

“It took about two years. One with me, before we found out that was impossible, and one with the guy, the donor.”

He wouldn’t look me in the eye, and to this day, especially when he gives me advice, he still doesn’t. He was also lying.

“Who was he?”

“We never knew his name, never saw any pictures of him or anything like that. Just got questionnaires to fill out. Today, I guess, they give you files on actual people, but back then you just got to list your preferences and keep your fingers crossed. Your Mom wanted someone with Italian heritage, someone who was professional, like a doctor or something, good medical history, tall. “

I laughed. “Shit, what am I? Like four feet tall? She got screwed on that one.”

All of a sudden it was okay to swear in front of him, too.

“And, I’m terrible at math and science,” I said, shaking my head. “So was mom. Sperm Guy couldn’t have been a doctor.”

“Like I said, we never found out for sure. She was pregnant after three tries. When we found out, we were so happy, we really didn’t care who it was.”

I looked at him, noting his size, the shape of his head, color of his eyes, angle of his nose. I loved him, but I wasn’t in there anywhere. I was angry, devastated, the “mean reds” Holly

Golightly called it. But I was excited, too. I knew I would be a writer someday. And I knew it was a story worth telling.

Later, I began to question everything about myself. Not how I looked, I was all Mom there, but the other parts. I'm the only one in my family who would rather read than watch football. I have zero athletic ability. I'm not an artist or a musician. I'm not easy going. I'm intense mostly, and dry. And I'm the only one who dreams of living someplace else. I tried to imagine what he—who will forever be identified as “Sperm Guy” in polite conversation- must have looked like, what he did for a living, if he believed in God, if he's married with children and I have half-brothers and sisters out there somewhere who have no idea that their dad is someone else's dad, too. Does he even know? Should I use past tense when I talk about him? As though he's dead? Dad didn't know anything else, Mom was gone, her parents would have had simultaneous coronaries if I had asked them anything about it, so that left Mary, and eventually, Dad's mom, Grandma Winnie.

Mary, my Godmother, was Mom's oldest friend and good for stories when she felt I was old enough to hear them. She regaled me with tales of her and Mom's misadventures at the Academy, about the boys they chased, the cars they wrecked. I told her everything I knew.

“That's a bunch of crap, Angie,” she sighed over the moldy yearbook lying between us on her kitchen table, the gold embossed “1972” faded in the harsh overhead lighting.

She took a sip of burnt coffee and sighed again.

“Your mom didn't want anyone Italian; she wanted someone who looked like your dad, like an *Americana*. She never wanted you to know. I can't believe John told you.”

“Well he did. And I'm glad.”

“Don't ever say anything to your grandparents. She didn't want them to know *niente*, either. Even more than you.”

“*Nonna* and *Nonno* don’t know?”

I was shocked. I couldn’t believe my mother and father hadn’t even told her parents. “So who all knows?”

“Well, me, obviously, your Dad, and you. Your Grandma Winnie might know, your mom was always turning to her when she had problems with your Dad, but I don’t ever remember her saying so for sure.”

The way she talked, I felt like some dirty secret Mom had tried to keep, and told Mary so.

“Puh-lease. Your mom wanted kids so bad, when you were born she wouldn’t let them take you away to the nursery, had you right in the room with her. I know they do that all the time now, but back then it was strange.”

“This whole thing is strange.”

Mary shook her head. “As far as your mom was concerned, you were a miracle. When she could still talk, she said so all of the time. ‘Thank God for Angelina’ she would say.”

Grandma Winnie, on the other hand, had a different recollection. Four weeks after my son was born she stood in my living room, cradled Vinny in her left arm and shook her head.

“You know, I don’t think your mom ever really wanted kids. I mean, she did, but not like your dad did. It was him who got up in the middle of the night when you cried, and him who made your breakfast and got you ready for school.”

I shrugged and tried not to focus on the gray stain on her sweater. Grandma Winnie’s memory has been going and I constantly have to remind her to make sure she has her purse, car keys, and sun glasses before she leaves.

“You know, he doesn’t like to talk about it, but once, Christmas I think it was, or maybe Thanksgiving, well, whenever- when he was still married to that Donna anyway, “she

repositioned Vinny and began to pat his back. “I just told him, I said, ‘John, no one cares if you can’t have kids,’ and he looked at me and got real serious and said, ‘yeah, but *I* do.’ I never mentioned it again after that.”

I stopped rinsing dishes and turned the tap off.

“Wait. You mean he knew he was sterile even before he and Mom were married?”

He had never told me that. He said that he and Mom had found out about the fertility problems together.

“Oh yes. They told him when he was still in the Navy. He and Donna tried for a year or so before he went in to get tested. He told me once that Donna had done up a nursery in their old house, and he’d come home and find her sitting in that old rocking chair, just bawling away. They were divorced less than a year after he found out.”

“I thought it was Mom who was always crying in the living room, or the nursery, or whatever. Did he tell Mom this?”

Would she even have married him if he had? I began to get that queasy feeling in my stomach. Grandma had put Vinny down in his swing and grabbed her coffee cup. She took a long swig before answering.

“I’m not sure.”

Ten years later I mentioned all of this to dad, who shrugged, said he could barely remember what he ate for breakfast that morning, and maybe he was wrong. I found out a few years ago that on the day I was born, Dad left the hospital and didn’t return for hours. He said he went to Glendale, the cemetery where his father is buried, with a bottle of Old Crow and didn’t remember much after that.

To me, it’s just a weird story. Something about me that makes me unique, but I’ve noticed, on the few occasions when I’ve mentioned it, that it makes people uncomfortable. They

look at me like I just told them my dad died. I don't understand this. I don't feel sorry for people who are adopted because they had the benefit of living with a family who truly wanted children as opposed to living with people who considered their children to be "mistakes." It doesn't matter. My dad is my dad and details aren't going to change that. The only time I've ever felt uncomfortable about our situation was in the hospital when my son was born. Family and friends were visiting us, and Vinny was being passed around. People kept making comments about his looks and speculating on who he took after the most.

"He's definitely got your eyes Angie, but that chin is all Cory."

"When his eyes are shut, he looks like Grandpa Mike."

"He has long fingers and toes just like his uncle Kevin."

I didn't say what I was thinking: That any resemblance to Dad's side of the family was a fluke.

Dad had leaned forward at one point to have a better look at him and got that strange look on his face that I hadn't seen for twelve years.

"It kind of looks like he has my nose," he said. "Wouldn't that be funny? If he kind of looked like me?"

It didn't sound funny. It sounded awful, and suddenly I had a vision of my own birth. My mother propped up in bed, holding me, the families all standing around, making the same speculations about whom I most resembled. And dad standing there, having to endure it. I imagine that's when he ran away from the hospital to the cemetery. And I began to wonder again, like I haven't in years, having been satiated by time and the self-involved state typical of twenty-somethings, about what I may be passing on to my son.

I have no way of knowing anything about Sperm Guy. *Niente*. Those files are sealed, and no one, not even my Aunt Adelaide, a doctor at the University where I was "conceived" can get

access. I can trace Mom's family back to the first olive farm in *Calabria* and have a whole host of stories *di Italiana* to go along with it. With Sperm Guy, I can only guess. And I do. The fantasy changes periodically. For awhile I believed he was a member of PETA and worked for the Peace Corps. Now I think he's an investigative journalist with a death wish. That would make a good story.

Please, Love Me

I stand in the center of a group of girls who might be my friends. But what can I say to make them love me and invite me to their houses where their mothers and fathers are waiting to supply them with snacks? I don't think too long, this attention will fade once the fleeting nature of recess tears them away from me and they shift in awkward groups toward the tether ball pit or the monkey bars. I let my eyes unravel. *I've been keeping something from all of you*, I say to the yellow letters that spell out St. Anthony's on Fran's sweatshirt. *I'm blind*. Because I'm now pretending to be blind I don't see the looks on their faces. Maybe I thought about this more than I realize.

Fran, who is shorter even than me with fuzzy hair and large, yellow teeth, talks. *You're what? But, but...*

Now Beth, whose hair is like Charlie Brown's and wears thick glasses, but is nice and very smart: *How can you be blind?*

I keep my eyes on Fran's sweatshirt. I have it all figured out. It's completely reasonable. *We came here a few weeks before I transferred and I mapped out all of the stairs and hallways and stuff so I know how many steps to take.*

Because I'm eight, I've never heard the phrase: If you're explaining, you're losing. So I just keep going. *Sister Joann reads me all my assignments and the teachers let me take the tests after school. I'm not even supposed to be telling you guys this. It's a secret.*

I want to look at them, to see if they're tearing up, or reaching out to hug me, but I know how to stay in character from my dealings with Grandpa and Dad. I'm a pro. I keep my head down and wait. No one speaks.

It's fall. The leaves dance at my feet, and the wind carries the boys' shouting from the kickball field into my ears. I suddenly wish I had kept my mouth shut. I'm fast, I could run the bases in no time. I could win the game for my team. But now I have to pretend to be blind until I die.

I don't know why I say these things. I look up and see their faces: Fran is curling her large lips in disgust. Beth looks the way Sister Joann, the guidance counselor, looks during our weekly meetings. Brenda, who reminds me of a refrigerator because she's so large and square, has already lost interest. She's taken at least two steps in the direction of kickball. Now I have to say the hardest part:

Haha, I'm just joking, I say and fall all over myself, bending at the knees, hiccupping in excitement. I want to pray a Hail Mary that they believe me.

Fran leans over to Beth and even though she cups her hand to cover her mouth, she speaks loud enough for me to hear. *What's wrong with her?*

Countess Carmela

Countess Carmela should have been my bedtime story. The girl born in Capri; her house carved into the cliffs jutting over the Ionian Sea. The girl who rides on the wings of her magic Painted Lady butterfly, and has no father to speak of. If my mother had known Multiple Sclerosis would steal her voice before my ninth birthday, I think she would have taken a cue from Michael Keaton's character in the sappy movie *My Life*, where he finds out he's dying and proceeds to videotape every thought that's ever occurred to him so his unborn child will have a catalogue of Dadism's to refer to in times of turmoil.

Under the guise of a fairy tale, our shared character Carmela might have told me about the money, or why my Dad was losing so much weight, or that all girls smell that way down there. Carmela could have been our translator, and my mother could have given me this memory:

I say, "It must be awful, being sick before you die."

Mom tucks the blanket around my feet, legs, stomach and sits on the edge of the bed. I keep my arms out because I don't like not being able to move them. She brushes her fingertips over my arms like a paintbrush. It kind of tickles but now is not a time for giggling and I dig my toenail into the back of my leg to make sure I don't even smile. "You'd think God would give someone the best day of their life, if it was going to be the last one."

Mom's hand starts jerking and she slips it under the blanket. The cane is propped in the corner of the room. Lately, I have developed the ability to know where Mom's cane is at all times, without even looking. She sees me not looking at the cane. Or her hand still jerking under the blanket. I stare at the ceiling.

“In Capri, they don’t feel pain. They get tired, that’s all it means to be sick. Like when you stay up too late. Then, when it’s their time, they float away, to the sky or the sea. It’s another adventure, one so secret, so wonderful, that we can’t know anything about it until it’s our turn. It would ruin the surprise.”

“If it’s so great, then why did Carmela cry so much when Marigold died?” I ask.

“That’s normal, to feel sad when people, or in Carmela’s case, fish, die. She loved Marigold, and she was sad that she wouldn’t see her anymore. But Carmela was okay after awhile; she got over it. You will too.”

I ignore the “You will too.” Like the cane. And the hand.

She leans over and kisses me then, and she starts to stand up but I pull on her arm. I need her to stay just a little longer, until my eyes get sore and it hurts to keep them open. When I wake up, she’ll be next to me, but I’m always asleep when she comes to bed.

“But she picked Marigold out of the ocean when she was still a baby,” I say, annoyed that she’s trying to cut out before the story is finished. “Marigold was Carmela’s third best friend!”

“Carmela will make other friends. You’ll see.”

“You’re lying,” I say, still pulling on her until she sits back down and leans on the headboard that looks like wood with funny carvings but is actually just plastic. “Just finish it.”

She raises one eyebrow.

“Please,” I say.

She turns then to look in the mirror over the dresser. She stares at herself while she talks, her nose wrinkled like she smells something bad. She hates her new haircut. It’s cut like a boy’s. She thought it would be easier, but some days she doesn’t even want to leave the house and I know it’s because she doesn’t look like her high school pictures anymore. Her voice sounds tired and she rubs her temples.

“With Wilcox’s help—you know Carmela always listened to Wilcox—Carmela decided that they would have a funeral for Marigold—“

“Funeral?”

“It’s a ceremony for someone who has died. It allows the people left behind to say goodbye one last time.” She smiles suddenly in the mirror but it’s not a real smile and I say the first thing I can think of to make that smile go away.

“Where’s Dad?”

Mom’s lips twitch a little.

“Yes, Carmela would hold a funeral. And she invited those people—and animals—that knew Marigold best. And they gathered in the church with the priest for Mass. And the priest told stories about Marigold the goldfish, and even though they all cried, they smiled at the thought of their friend. And when it was all over, they went back to Carmela’s house and had a big dinner with *pastachina* in honor of Marigold. But most important of all—are you listening, I want you to remember this—“

I look directly into her eyes—which are my eyes and Nonna’s eyes exactly—to say yes, of course I’m paying attention.

“No one was sad anymore. Do you understand? Carmela wasn’t sad after the funeral. She had only good feelings.”

I feel like crying now even though I don’t know why.

“Good night,” I say, and I turn over on my side, away from her. I regret letting her go so fast when I hear the door click shut but I can’t look at her anymore.

Jesus smiles down from his picture above the bed. It’s not an ordinary picture. It plugs into the wall and Jesus glows. It keeps me awake. I unplugged it once but when Mom saw what I had done she started talking in Nonna’s accent about a *diavolo* and ran (for her) to plug it back

in. She said if you unplug Jesus, the devil will creep into the room and turn you into a frog and you'll be left croaking forever. To counteract the glow, I sleep with a pillow over my face.

I sit up and look in the mirror. I glow like Jesus.

La Cucina

Sometimes in conversation, I imbue the past with my own colors. You wouldn't know the difference. The reality: Mom and Dad divorced when I was five. Mom and I went to live in a red brick ranch two miles away from Grandma and Grandpa's, and Dad bought a stunning bachelor pad on the side of town now famous for its mobile meth labs. Mom was symptomatic, but was still six months away from a diagnosis. Dad was already enjoying his motorcycle and skanky women who all seemed to have dirty fingernails in common. But Mom didn't want to believe she was dying, so we tried out a Mom-and-Daughter-Against-the-World-Existence for awhile until the nurses started coming every day. But in this story, I don't want to be alone. Here's what could have happened, the existence I'll tell you about over lunch at a diner, or as I scoot closer to the edge of your couch.

Nonna says I can learn to cook when I'm 28. Until then, I have two jobs. First, to sit in Mom's place at the kitchen table now that she's eating off a tray in the living room, which has been happening more since her last doctor's appointment, and second, to tell Nonna how good the food is.

"She does this when she's little, too," Nonno says of Mom's new habit before dinner one night. He rolls tobacco into a white piece of paper and then licks it closed.

"One year," he says, smiling through his dentures, "*Sua* Mama is maybe twelve, fourteen. The first big snow hits, and the furnace, it quits. I call the man to fix the trouble and after he finish, you know what he brings me?"

"What?" I ask, excited.

I glance at Mom, who sits in Nonna's armchair in the living room, watching *Dallas*. She points her fork at the TV and tells J.R. to go jump off a bridge.

"No smoke in the house!" Nonna shouts at Nonno who has just flicked a match. Her back is to us as she flips a pork chop, stirs a sauce, and condemns the entire world under her breath.

Nonno holds the match aloft until she stops muttering then sticks his tongue out at her. I cover my mouth to keep from laughing.

"*Pastina!*" he says, "She dump a whole bucket worth down the vent to the furnace!" Nonno lights his cigarette, which causes Nonna to scream as though the stove is attacking her.

She spins around, and her flowered moo-moo billows around her knees. She points her wooden spoon at Nonno. "No smoke in the house!" Then quieter, after glancing at Mom, who has suddenly grown still, her fork poised in front of her mouth, Nonna looks him in the eye.

"And no say this things to Angelina—you gonna give her ideas! *cazuna!*"

They scream at each other in Italian. I wait until a winner is declared, but Nonna locks herself in the bathroom, and Nonno's plate is still empty. Stalemate.

"See, she tells us," Nonno starts again when he hears the water running in the bathroom. "'Oh, Ma, oh Pa, I don't want to watch news, I take my food into the living room and watch something I like,' she was a tricky one," he looks into the living room, and laughs.

I realize after a few seconds that both of us are staring at Mom. She looks too small for Nonna's chair. Her hair is short now, like a boy's, because she can't lift her arms to brush or wash it anymore. She's got her work skirt on, but has changed her blouse into a t-shirt. She won't look in mirrors.

"What else did she do?" I whisper to him.

"Once," Nonno puts the cigarette to his lips to show he's thinking about it, then he leans forward so we're only a few inches apart, "she crashes the car—"

The bathroom door bursts open. “You smoke outside or I go!” Nonna shouts for the third time. “I move into my own apartment! I make my own money! And you smoke alone until you die with no one to cook!”

Nonno pounds his fist on the table and screams in Italian dialect. Nonna shakes her spoon on the stove top and screams back. Mom still doesn’t move and I watch *Wheel of Fortune* on the kitchen TV.

“I go see what’s going on down there,” Nonno grumbles, and points in the direction of the apartment buildings he owns, a half a block away from the house. He grabs his fedora on his way out the door. “Call when it’s ready.”

“Pasta e furnace e crash some cars! Bah!” Nonna talks to the stove after he leaves.

Then, she shuffles food over to the table. Steaming sausage, salad made from tomato and oil and onions, two loaves of sliced bread, a bowl of black olives, celery with cream cheese, soup with tiny meat balls, pork chop over pasta and a pinkish sauce. She sits down and grabs a knife from the butter dish and points it at me, but I know it’s not me she’s mad at.

“You know why your mama throws the pasta into the furnace? Because this man wants to eat it every day!” She says, “I work with a Chinese—they work hard—and she teach me to make the egg roll, but he tells to me, ‘No, egg roll is shit food! Make pasta! Make pasta!’ I say for him to make it then! Bah...this man..”

She butters her bread like it’s somehow offended her and I start piling food onto a plate for Mom, but when I get up from the table, Nonna catches my arm.

“She eats already,” Nonna says.

“What’s she eating?”

“T.V. dinner. Go get your Nonno and tell him *mangiare*.”

Dad

Dad pulls on his Superman costume and heads off to work. This is not a metaphor. It's not an isolated incident, either. Sometimes it's Superman, other times it's the devil. War paint, a green Mohawk, a ripped t-shirt with Fuck You scrawled in permanent marker. It depends on his mood, whether he's got beef with the other postal employees, and how much powder he's got left in his amber vial—which he says is crushed up aspirin because he doesn't like to swallow pills. He'll finally quit when I'm in high school and one day I make a show out of pulling a stolen vial out of my backpack at lunch. I snort the aspirin that I crushed that morning up my nose and I have the entire table's undivided attention as I explain why it's better to snort than swallow. At this point, I don't know the difference between "good" attention and "bad" attention. Just look at me, is the unconscious thought driving my adolescence.

I'm twelve when they send me to live with him. Nonna and Nonno throw a fit, screaming at him that a girl has no business living alone with a man. They go to the courts to fight it, but he's the dad, they're only the grandparents. Why then, after six years with Mom, with Nonna and Nonno, with nurses? When I'm basically a short grown-up? This is the question I'll ask myself even when I'm 32. Is it my social security check that I receive once a month after Mom goes to long-term care at Mercy Convalescent Home? Did Grandma Winnie, his mom, finally get to him? Maybe he actually wanted me, even though I wasn't really his. But I don't know that yet. In fact, I don't know much about him at all. But I learn fast.

I'm twelve, and my dad swears a lot and lets me watch Cinemax, and says, explicitly, bed times are for fags. He's got porno in his closet on the top shelf that I easily reach with a kitchen chair and two shoe boxes, and watch until my eyes glaze over when he's in the garage for hours building motorcycles. Some are just sex, others have real story lines. He's moved Connie out and

repainted the second bedroom in his little house for me. Got me a water bed for \$50 out of the classifieds. Put a little TV in there, too. He says they're my walls, if I want to write on them, go ahead. We don't do the dishes until the kitchen starts to smell and I usually draw the short straw. It's not his job to tell me what to do. I'll figure things out on my own, or I won't. And then he's gone, his '86 Wide Glide thundering down the street, saddle bags like wings at his ankles. When he dresses in costume, or has a party, or takes me to a motorcycle rally, or introduces me to one of his girlfriends, I can't help but thinking my dad is the coolest.

But before this, when it's still me and Mom at home and Nonna and Nonno basically live with us, this happens:

I'm on the porch reading one of Mom's sex books when Dad pulls up in a truck I've never seen. Before he can swing his legs onto the pavement, I jump out of Nonna's rocking chair and run down the driveway to tell him about the man in a green convertible that tried to kidnap me yesterday.

"I was walking to Sammy's," I say, out of breath and hugging him around the waist "and he pulled up next to me. He had a picture of a puppy, and he wanted me to help him find it but I said 'no way, get lost.' And finally he did—"

He bends down to hug me but I only feel his hands on my shoulders. "Hang on, Angie," he says, as he removes my hands from his waist. "Right back," and the front door slams behind him. I sprint around the porch and then sneak into the pantry. I know they're all in the kitchen eating for the twelfth time today. Except Mom. I hide behind the door and my face wrinkles up all on its own when I hear Nonno's voice.

“—buy some flowers, John. Go with Maria to dinner somewhere nice. She take you back—“

“It’s not your place, Mike, it’s not your business—“

It’s been so long since I’ve heard Dad’s voice that I have trouble separating it from the news man’s on the TV Nonno watches at the loudest possible volume. I smell bread in the oven and I know this means that Nonna is standing at the stove, pretending Dad doesn’t exist.

“It’s no good, John, no good for Maria or Angela. This *separation*—“

“Listen, I called Mary, I told her I was coming by to take Angie out for lunch. I’ll have her back in a couple hours,” Dad says.

Someone claps. At least that’s how it sounds from behind the pantry door. Like one single clap. And then footsteps. I race back to the front porch, grab my book, and hurry to sit down.

He opens the front door, takes the book out of my hands, reads the title, and shakes his head. He opens the door again and throws the book inside. “Come on,” he says, pulling my arm, “we’re going to Country Kitchen. You can tell me about Sammy’s new puppy on the way.”

In the truck, I look sideways at Dad. His hair is longer, flatter than I remember. He’s not wearing his glasses. His arms look skinny sticking out of his muscle shirt. There’s a new tattoo on his forearm of the Tasmanian devil with its tongue sticking out and a whirlwind underneath with my name in cursive letters. He turns his head and catches me looking at the tattoo.

“Whatcha think?”

“Cool,” I say. And that’s what I’m trying to be because I feel like if I even act like I care about what’s going on then he’ll vanish.

“I’ve got a surprise for ya,” he says, smiling with teeth.

I start to get excited but just then I notice the blood under his nose. I grab a napkin from the floor that looks sort of clean and hand it to him.

“Jesus, your grandmother’s got a fuckin temper,” he says, dabbing the blood away.

He throws the napkin out the window and then does something I’ve never seen him do before: He checks himself in the mirror like Mom does. Runs his fingers through his hair, pats his cheek and smiles?

I stare out the window and begin counting light poles. I have to click my teeth together every time we pass one. Any minute now I’m going to start crying. I time my sniffles with the light poles so it sounds like I’m only coughing.

Dad clears his throat a few times and drums his fingers behind me on the seat.

“Dad, what’s a junkie?”

“Hey—great tune!” He turns a song up that sounds like someone’s banging on a trash can.

Dad tells the pretty blond hostess that we’re meeting someone and she leads us to a booth in the back of Country Kitchen. There’s a chubby woman sitting there. She wears a tank top made out of jeans and she has a red bandana on her head. I see black hairs poking out. She smiles up at Dad with crooked teeth then waves at me with a pudgy hand covered in grimy silver. Like I’m supposed to know who she is. She slides over and Dad sits next to her. At first I don’t know what to do, but since there isn’t room for me to sit next to Dad, I take the seat across from them. I sit with my butt on the edge of the cushion. My feet won’t stop banging together under the table.

“This is Connie,” Dad says, staring at a picture of steak and eggs on the front of the menu.

“Hi, “I say, trying not to stare at “Connie.”

I follow Dad’s lead and open my menu, but my eyes—all on their own, I swear—keep sneaking glances at Connie’s teeth. In history class, Sister Pat showed us pictures of Berlin after America did God’s Work against the Nazi’s. All of the buildings were broken and crumbly and that’s exactly how Connie’s teeth look to me. Like crumbly cement blocks that someone needs to bulldoze. They’re also bent forward. A word from next week’s vocab/spelling test: protrude. I recite the sentence I will use to remember it at test time: Connie’s teeth protrude out of her mouth. Like they’re planning an escape.

The more I look at her the more she reminds me of another chubby woman Mom and I saw when we went to Greyhound Bus station to pick Dad up from his one-weekend-a-month drill practice. The woman leaned against the ticket counter, yelling her fat head off at the poor old man who worked there because the bus was late. Her three kids squealed and pulled on her clothes. All four of them looked sticky. The woman wore a red bandana in her hair, too. Mom yanked me back when I tried to help one of the little kids who kept falling down and was screaming almost as loud as his mom. “Don’t you dare,” Mom said, “We’ll have to bleach your hands when we get home.”

I know I’m staring now because I’m pretty sure the dark skin peeking out of Connie’s tank top is a nipple. Startled, I look up and smile to keep from laughing.

“Angela,” she says, and leans forward.

Now I’m positive it’s a nipple. I stare at her face, imagining WWII Germany and planes flying at her mouth.

“You’re just as gorgeous as your baby pictures,” she says.

I catch a whiff of something like garage and bathroom coming from Connie. I wonder what Dad would do if I pinched my nose right now. “Yeah, most people say I look exactly like my mom.”

“Well,” Connie says, blushing right down to her nipples, which are both on display now, “She must be a very pretty woman.”

“She is,” I say, looking directly at Dad, who’s now reading about omelets.

I want to slam my menu down on his head but instead I just open it and try to decide between blueberry and strawberry pancakes because Nonna says berries are too expensive and will only make pancakes with chunks of banana because she gets them for .28 a pound at Aldi’s. She’s been teaching me how to shop “like an Italian instead of a *cazuna Americana*.” Strawberry, I decide, because they’re prettier and come with whipped cream.

“Yeah, Mom’s really pretty, huh Dad,” I say, watching Connie,” She’s really *thin* and always wears suits. And her makeup comes from Avon.”

None of this is really true anymore, except the makeup part and that’s only because the Avon lady delivers. Mom’s new medicine makes her look like a pregnant cow—her words. Connie nods and picks up three packages of sugar. She rips the tops off and pours them into her coffee cup. Dad twists around in his seat, then whistles at a waitress leaning against an ice machine next to the kitchen. She tilts her head like she’s thinking about coming to our table.

“Mom also wears perfume,” I say, sniffing the air around Connie.

“Enough Ang. Whadya want?” Dad says as the waitress stops at our table.

“Strawberry pancakes,” I say, dropping the menu back on the table.

“Sorry, hon, the kitchen doesn’t open till 4. It’s just the buffet,” she says, jerking her thumb back toward the long metal tables steaming with canned green beans and cream corn and some mushy orange casserole.

I look at Dad. He shrugs.

“I’m not hungry,” I say.

Connie hmph’s into her coffee.

“We’ll do the buffet,” he tells the waitress and she nods as she’s walking away.

“Well, I finally did it,” Dad says. He stretches his arms over his head and one of them falls on Connie’s shoulders. She moves in closer to him. “Got me a Harley.”

He’s smiling again like he was in the truck. I turn around in my seat to see if there’s a mirror behind me but I only see the blond hostess at the checkout counter, cleaning her fingernails with a plastic to-go knife.

“What’s a Harley?” I ask.

Connie giggles. “She’s so cute, John.”

“It’s a motorcycle, Ang,” Dad says.

“Is that my surprise?”

“Sort of,” he says and gives Connie a funny look.

“I’m gonna get something,” she says, “you want anything babe?”

Dad shakes his head and she shuffles over to the buffet.

“We’re leavin for Massachusetts next week, got a buddy up there,” Dad says, “Connie’s got her own bike. We thought you might come with us.”

I grab the salt and pepper shaker and begin pouring them into separate piles.

“Dad, what about—I mean, I thought—when are we going home? And who *is* that?” I point at the empty space next to him in the booth. I try to crush the salt and pepper shakers, then I toss them across the table. I begin fingering the piles of salt and pepper into overlapping swirls.

“Jesus, Angie,” he sighs and picks up the salt and pepper shakers. “We talked to you about this. Your mother and I—we’re just—I mean it’s been months, we just can’t—“

“But she’s sick.”

I lay down, flat on my back, when Connie comes back with two plates piled high with food that looks like the lunch ladies at school made it.

“Sit up,” Dad says.

I ignore him and try to figure out what song is coming through the speaker behind the booth. I hate it when they take a good song and turn it into elevator music. This could be Guns and Roses but instead of Axl it’s some girl country singer.

“So, what do you think,” Connie says from somewhere I can’t see, “do you want to come with us? The leaves are changing and the ocean is right there. Have you ever seen the ocean?”

“It’s October,” I say.

Silence.

“I have school!”

I pound my fist under the table and immediately regret it when I pull my hand back and see it’s covered with someone else’s purple gum. I wad it up and throw it at Connie’s legs but it bounces off and lands on the floor in front of her with a soft thud. I pray an entire Hail Mary that she’ll step on it when we leave.

“We’ll figure somethin out,” Dad says, “Dead great-aunt Gertrude’s funeral er some shit.”

“Who’s great-aunt Gertrude?” I ask even though I don’t care.

Connie’s voice now: “It’s just a teensy lie, honey. No one will have to know.”

“God hates nothing more than a liar, because all sin begins with the denial of what is good and holy,” I say, repeating what Father Leto tells me every time I have detention for lying.

“What?” Connie asks.

“Catholic school,” Dad says. “Sit up, Angie.”

Fran's House

The first thing Fran's mom asks when I enter their house is why I look so tired. I respond by asking what tired looks like. She tells me to get my flip flops off before I step on the pile carpet. Then, she braces my shoulders and marches me to the plastic gold mirror that hangs next to their front door. Fran, who is now my best friend, sits cross-legged on the plaid couch with a curling iron heating up next to her on the coffee table. She looks up from her *Teen Magazine* and rolls her eyes then does one of her weird arm spasms that I'm now required to call a "tick." She smacks the curling iron with the rebelling arm and yelps, but her mother ignores it. Fran calls her mother a "witch," under her breath, and this is also ignored.

"There." Fran's mom uses her pinky to sweep under my eye. "It's purple, all the way across." She pinches the skin slightly and I grimace. "Oh sorry, but look, all this extra—right here."

I lean forward and pretend to concentrate on my face but I don't know what I'm supposed to be looking for. This is how I look everyday.

"No ten year-old should have bags under their eyes like this," she turns me around. "What's wrong, did you have bad dreams last night?" She's very serious and she's still staring at the spots below my eyes.

I shake my head and look past her to the clock in their kitchen that says 8:37 a.m. My stomach growls, but it's not loud enough for Fran's mom to hear. Maybe now she'll skip the eye stuff and make me my frozen waffle like she's done every day since the beginning of summer vacation when she started babysitting me.

"You look like you didn't sleep last night. Did you sleep?"

“I think so. *Anne of Green Gables* was on PBS for 24 hours straight,” I say, which was true two weekends ago.

“You stayed up all night watching TV?” She lowers her chin and puckers her thick lips.

“Not all night,” I say quickly.

She raises her eyebrows. Mothers, apparently, know when you’re lying. “Did. You. Sleep. Last night?”

“I try not to until after the moaning.” I don’t realize how this sounds but Fran’s mouth hangs open and her mom looks like I just farted during mass.

“My mom,” I say, looking hard at Fran for help. “She moans at night.”

“Give it a rest, Sylvia,” Fran tells her mom who does an about face and pulls her hand through her short grayish hair, making it stand up like a cat’s does when you stroke its back.

“Call me Sylvia again, Franny, and you can spend the rest of the week Pledging pews for Sister Jo Ann.”

Fran ticks twice. Her arm shoots up like she’s answering a question in class, then her chin presses into her shoulder. She flips the page on her magazine. “Whatever.”

Sylvia turns back around, and gives me the stink eye so I won’t give her any crap, either. Not that I would. At least not on purpose. Or when she could hear me.

“From the disease, Angela, she moans from the disease?” She doesn’t wait for an answer. “Jim! Come look at this!” She yells toward her bedroom down the hall.

Jim is Fran’s father. He’s very old. Sylvia threw a big party for his fiftieth birthday in the latchkey room at school at the beginning of the summer. Everything was draped in black crepe paper and had “Over the Hill” written on it. She forced Fran and me to help her decorate, and the whole time she kept saying, “Better him than me!” Then all these veins popped out on her neck that didn’t go away until after the party was over.

Jim walks into the living room with a towel wrapped around his neck and an electric shaver poised in his hand.

“Yes dear.” This is what he says whenever he enters the room.

“Look at Angela’s eyes.” She points her finger at me and I can’t help but turn my head away.

Jim sets the shaver down on the coffee table next to the morning paper and the remote. He pulls the towel off his neck and crouches in front of me. His eyes move back and forth and I try to keep my face blank. He puts his hand on my forehead, keeps it there, then twists his neck around to look at Sylvia.

“Well?” she asks.

“She doesn’t feel warm,” he says.

“Her eyes are purple!” Sylvia over enunciates “purple” and gives Jim the same look she gives Fran and her sister when she wants them to clean their rooms; she’ll say something like, “A pig wouldn’t live like this,” or “You want me to have a stroke, don’t you?”

Fran’s sister, Liz, who is a year older than us and who would be pretty except her dark eyebrows meet in the middle of her forehead, comes stomping down the stairs from the room she and Fran share.

“Whose eyes are purple?” Liz asks, looking from Fran to Sylvia to me.

“Jim, move. Lizzie, look at Angela’s eyes.”

Liz is the good child. She follows orders with the diligence of a soldier in combat.

“Whoa,” she says, kneeling in front of me. “Whadja do?”

“She can’t sleep in that house,” Sylvia says to the ceiling, then narrows her eyes at her husband. “Jim we have to talk to her grandparents. She can’t stay with her mother if *this* is the result.” She points again at my eyes as though they’ve flunked a fractions test.

“Syl, let’s talk about this later,” Jim says, bracing his hand on his knee and standing up.

He gives me a weak smile, a hang-in-there- tap on the shoulder. He grabs the shaver off the coffee table and swings the towel at his side on his way back to the bathroom.

Sylvia curls her lip at his retreating back, and turns to me for round two of her interrogation.

“She moans at night because of the disease?”

“She can’t cry anymore so she moans.”

“Is that what the doctor says?”

“How would he know? He doesn’t sleep with us,” I say and immediately regret it.

“Angela,” she says. “Answer me right now. Why does she moan? How long does this go on? All night?”

“She moans from the bedsores.” I pause, trying to remember the order of the questions.

“No, it doesn’t happen all night. When she starts moaning, I turn her over and make sure her Depends isn’t too wet; if it is, I change it; then I can go to sleep.”

Fran laughs, I assume, at Depends, but she throws her hand over her mouth almost immediately and gives me the I’m sorry look.

Sylvia breathes, “Oh,” and suffocates me in her boobs, between which, I ask for my frozen waffle.

Pizza Money

I scramble to get the receiver back in the cradle and check the microwave clock. 12:23 p.m. I have forty-five minutes to an hour to find \$11.50 plus tip. It's not that we don't have food in the house, we do. I've been snacking on individually wrapped Peanut Butter Twix all morning, but pizza is hot. Besides, I only ordered a small cheese. Only \$11.50 plus tip. I'm suddenly excited and a little scared. I've only got forty-five minutes to an hour for my treasure hunt. It's something to do on a Saturday when Grandma is at work, Grandpa is at his apartment building fixing stuff with duct tape and Mom's nurses have their weekends off.

First thing, I scan the living room, checking for the easy spots. The phone table next to the front door has a bunch of junk in it, plus a candy dish that Grandpa dumps his change in. Mom's green shoulder purse with the wide, limp strap is on the floor next to the phone, half wedged behind the table. My eyes glide over the dining room table that doesn't belong in the living room to the china hutch, TV, sofa (don't forget to look under the cushions) and then land on the coffee table with the little ceramic boxes scattered on top where I hide stuff. The coffee table has a storage drawer underneath, but I'm pretty sure there's nothing in there besides some old magazines and my empty yogurt cups that have furry layers of mold growing in them. For some reason, I refuse to throw them away, and Grandma only dusts surfaces. Two more reclining chairs under the picture window, and I move into the hall. I like to do a thorough once-over on the whole house before I start pulling drawers open and peering inside pockets.

Mom's most favorite piece of furniture is a rectangular marble table that sits in the hallway. It's got a lot of fancy glass stuff on it, plus the big blue vase in the middle with the lid and gold etchings on the rim. I peek my head in the bathroom, consider the medicine cabinet, and the linen closet. Even with the vanity lights on, it's always dark in here. Everything casts a

shadow. I'm suddenly aware of two things: One, it's very quiet in the house except for the persistent buzzing coming in through the bathroom window that Grandpa keeps promising to fix, and two, Freddie Kruger might be hiding behind the shower curtain. I back out of the bathroom on tip-toes and carefully pull the door shut.

My bedroom, according to Grandma, looks like a cyclone went through it. Toys I no longer play with, clothes too big or too small, books I've read millions of times, blankets, and junk from Grandpa's apartment building, lovingly bestowed on me after he's evicted someone, litter the floor. Nothing is where it's supposed to be. The bookshelf is empty; the bed is just a naked mattress, the dresser drawers open and empty. The closet is jammed with more crap, and I've learned how dangerous it can be to open the doors. The last person to make that mistake was the fat woman from church who wore a man's tie under her sweater, and brought Christmas presents last year. My room is more of a catch-all than anything. I don't even sleep in it. I'll check here last, in a worst-case scenario.

The kitchen is a series of cupboards, barely seen counter-tops, drawers with mismatched items like silverware and cat food; plants hang from the window over the sink, line nearly every surface. Floor to ceiling wood paneling with pictures of deer that I'm sure someone got on sale. Carpet. The kitchen table is sticky, with plates and cups, my box of Twix Bars, some coloring books, a two-week old pink frosting cake for my tenth birthday. The oven has a pull-out stove top that sometimes doesn't pull out; usually when you want it to. It all looks good for my purposes. I'm sure there's change all over the place. I check the clock. 12:41. I have to speed things up. My nightgown swings around my knees as I run out of the kitchen and move all of the papers and pens off the phone table for my pile.

Mom's room is usually the goldmine of this operation, so I start there. She lies on the bed wearing her baby blue sweat suit with the pink flowers embroidered on the front, staring at the

ceiling. Her black-turned-gray hair looks like a greasy helmet and I imagine she would scream Holy Hell if she knew about it. I check the Foley bag and whisper, "Thank God," when I see it's only a quarter full; Grandma can change it when she gets off work in three hours. I pull the heavy curtains shut when I see the glare on the TV, then I turn the volume up on a PBS special about Amway because I know she and Dad used to sell the stuff. I lift her by the neck to put her pillow back in place. Now she's looking at the TV. Currently, we're in a blink once for yes, twice for no arrangement. It gets frustrating sometimes but it will only get worse. I don't know how good I've got it. I lean over her.

"I ordered pizza. Okay?" I say this very softly.

She blinks once and a tear slides over her bottom eyelid. I pull a handful of my nightgown to her face and wipe. Her eyes are more watery today than usual. When Grandma sees this, she'll say its hay fever.

"I'm going to look in your pockets for money. Okay?"

One blink. I hug her as best I can since I can't get my arms underneath.

She's got two beds in her room. One is the queen we share; the other is the hospital bed that we both refuse to sleep in. First because it's only a single and second because it's like sleeping on a rock. The metal contraptions overhead, like monkey bars, and the remote control that drives it up and down, used to be fun, but I've outgrown it. I smack the edge of the railing which makes the metal bars clang, and then open her closet. It's almost as bad as mine, except a lot of her stuff is at least hanging up. She used to wear suits everyday, and her purses always had to match the color of her jacket and shoes. I start on the end, in the pockets of a tan-colored suit jacket with little flowers sewn into the lapels, and work my way down. I have a routine. Jackets, then pants, then on to the floor for the purses. I'm very careful when I dip my hands inside those, sometimes there's sticky candy or gum and maybe a sharp needle from a broach. I don't look

inside. I just feel around. The closet yields two actual dollar bills, but more dimes than anything else. I pull up my nightgown to make a bowl, and then walk carefully to the phone table where I deposit all the money. Now the drawers.

Whenever I begin sorting through her desk drawers, I'm convinced I'll find my adoption papers. They say I wasn't adopted, and if you look at the pictures of Mom and Grandma when they were my age, you'd probably agree that I wasn't, but that doesn't stop my heart pounding whenever I open the top drawer in her desk. Instead of money, I find the copy of *ET* that Dad brought over on his last visit. He's got a motorcycle now and he's lost about a zillion pounds. When he knocked on the door, Grandma spit through the screen at him, and Grandpa took him outside to ask why he wasn't paying his child support. I had to sneak out my bedroom window and sneak around to the front yard just to see him. That's when he gave me *ET*. He said it was the funniest movie ever and the little girl was just like me. I didn't tell him that we don't have a VCR. He looked too happy. I put the movie on the bed next to Mom, and keep sorting but give up after a few minutes. I've been through here too much. There's nothing left except papers about insurance and pay stubs from when Mom went to work every day. I kiss Mom's forehead, ask if she needs anything. There's a pronounced delay between blink one and two but I'm patient. When it comes, I kiss her again and leave for the kitchen.

12:48. Yikes. I race through each of the four junk drawers, stop at the phone table, and dig into the candy dish underneath just to get it out of the way. I feel pretty good about the number of quarters it yields, about the growing pile on the table, more silver than copper, and I've got two whole dollar bills to add, too.

Living room. I check all of the cushions first; load it onto the table, and then stop. Even though I need to hurry, I have to look at my painting hanging on the wall above the dining room table. Sometimes I forget about it, and I feel guilty. It's not mine like I painted it, but the scene

inside it is a kind of promise, an escape that I don't really understand, but that I can't stop thinking about. I've drawn it so many times in my coloring books or on little scraps of paper that I can do it from memory whenever I want. If you see me sitting at my desk at school, my head resting on my forearms, I'm not sleeping like the rest of my classmates during Catholic Studies, I'm drawing this painting. It's a mountain scene at the top, and a snowy valley at the bottom. The sun, not quite bright enough to be called yellow, peeks out from behind the purple clouds. In the valley, nestled among fir trees on the bank of a snowy, still river sits a cottage, a curl of smoke rolling from the chimney. Unless you get right up to it, you don't see the outline of the person in the kitchen window, but I've been nose to canvas with this thing more times than I've hunted for adoption papers. I know it. That outline is me, waiting for the sun to come out, for the snow to stop falling, and when it does, I'll climb those mountains and even if I cut every inch of skin on the jagged pieces of rocks, I'll get to the top. When I explained it this way to Sister Jo Ann, my own personal guidance counselor at school, she nodded and said she knew I would, too.

I've still got my room, the bathroom, and the marble table in the hall, but I stop and do a preliminary count. Each little stack is one dollar exactly, quarters on bottom, then nickels, and dimes on top. After counting each stack twice, I panic. There are only seven. Even with the two bills, that's only nine dollars and forty-five cents. It's now 12:58. I race through my room, emptying the pitiful amount from my piggy bank, which is actually just an old coffee cup, skip the bathroom for now, and go to the hallway table. It's a decent amount, but once I get it all counted, I'm still short by a dollar twenty-seven, and no tip.

My grandparents live exactly one mile away. I let the phone ring at Grandma and Grandpa's at least a hundred times, praying that Grandpa came home for lunch. Sometimes when I call in the mornings and they take forever to answer, I start worrying that they died in their sleep or that they left the house and forgot to come over before work, but then, finally, one of

them hears the phone ringing. Grandpa's thick accent always makes him sound annoyed no matter what mood he's in. Why am I calling? I just wanted to know if Grandma baked anything or if I could have their TV Guide is all. To which he responds, eh? What? Angelina, speak louder! If Grandma answers, she wants to know if something is wrong with Mom. When I tell her no, she breathes heavy into the phone and tells me she almost had a stroke. But now, when I really need them to answer, they don't. I could call Dad, but his house is on the other side of town. I can just imagine how that conversation would go. Hello? a woman's voice, loud, distracted, TV going in the background, and then she covers the receiver with her hand, saying its Angela someone. Who the hell is Angela, John? And then I'd hear him tell the woman to shut up, and he'd get on, and try to sound pleasant until I told him what was up. You did what? He'd yell. Why would you order pizza if you don't have enough money? Jesus Christ. Where are your grandparents? Doesn't your mom have some money in her purse?

And then I remember the purse, wedged between the phone table and the wall next to the front door. I kneel down and pick it up. It's big enough a cat could fit inside, and it used to be bright green like a cucumber, but now it's grimy, and the leather looks more like an avocado. I try to remember the last time she wore it, but can't. From the color and size, I'd say it was a summer purse, so that would mean it's been a year. The zipper sticks and I have to tug to finally get it open. Inside, a lipstick the color of a candy heart, a case for glasses, empty, and some balled up receipts. Her checkbook. For an instant, I consider ripping one of those babies out and just keeping my change for the next pizza. But then I remember how we had to have a meeting at school last year with the principal when the bank sent back Mom's checks for tuition because the signature looked funny. They sat in a row in front of me, Principal Cordaro, Sister Jo Ann, and for some reason, the PE teacher, Mr. Schlack who pokes his entire head into the girl's locker room to tell us to hurry up. Sister Jo Ann asked if I was writing out my mother's checks, and I

said no because Grandma and Grandpa wouldn't want me telling them our business. But then they called Grandma and Grandpa in and Grandma started crying, complaining that she and Grandpa can't write in English and it has to be me. Sister Jo Ann told them to find someone else and now my Godmother, Mary, writes out the checks and does the shopping. Her signature is authorized. There's two quarters in the bottom of the purse and a handful of pennies.

Seventy cents. It's 1:04. I have two options and neither of them is good. I tip-toe to the bathroom, and gently turn the knob. I take a deep breath, pull on the bottom of my nightgown, and then leap into the shower curtain with my arms spread wide. If Freddie's hiding in there, I'm attacking first. I went to a slumber party a few months ago for a girl at school whose mom used to be friends with my mom. Their house was really tiny, and all eight of us had to sleep in her bedroom on a full size bed. When the mom went to sleep, the girl, whose name was Stacy, pulled this video out of her closet. Stacy said no one was going to sleep after this, and she was right. Then she popped it in, turned all the lights out, and we sat huddled around her 13" TV. The only scene I actually saw showed a girl tumbling across her ceiling, blood squirting out of her stomach. I saw Freddie's face for exactly one second, but that was enough. Now I see it everywhere. In bed at night in the shadow where Mom's face should be, behind the couch when I'm watching TV, in the wood grain on the bathroom door when I'm peeing. He's crafty. Comes out when you least expect him so that's why I figure it's better to jump into the shower screaming, "Die Bastard Die!" than to wait and be the girl with the blood-squirting stomach. I smack my forehead against the porcelain and I know I'm going to have bruises on my legs and arms but it's worth it. Now I can check the medicine cabinet and the linen closet without seeing Freddie's face. I see my forehead in the mirror, only a small red welt over my eye, and feel satisfied as I open the door. I find a little pile of pennies between the Vaseline and the Aqua Net. Nothing in the linen closet. Twelve cents. Fifty-eight to go.

Before going to the garage, my last option, I stop in Mom's room for an update.

"I fell in the shower, but I'm okay."

Two blinks.

"I was just playing. It's okay. Grandpa can fix the shower curtain tonight."

Two blinks.

"I'm sorry Mom, I'm running out of time." I kiss her again and don't wait for her answer.

I slowly open the door in the kitchen that leads to the garage and stand on the ramp for thirty seconds before I'm able to work my way over to her car. I consider opening the garage door, for more light, for more people to hear me scream in case Freddie comes back, pissed that I manhandled him in the shower, but then I remember what Grandpa says: You want people to steal from you, leave your doors open. He put the ramp up after Mom fell on the stairs. Now we've got ramps with green outdoor carpet in the garage and at the front door. I run down the ramp, sidestep and weave between all of the contraptions. If I wanted to, I could trace Mom's disease by counting all of the crap in the garage. Here's a pile of canes; she used one to go up the steps at church for my First Communion. The walker was used during the divorce and custody hearings. Over here, two wheelchairs, one motorized, one not, when she was still able to plan my birthday party in second grade. Next to them, a Mobie; it's like a scooter you sit on, with a basket in front. I used to ride it up and down the street until a kid on the corner told me I was pretty for a cripple. Shoved up next to her Buick is another mattress for the first hospital bed she wouldn't use, before the one she doesn't use now. The Buick has a blue parking sticker hanging from the rearview mirror, and a motorized ramp attached to the back where she used to put her wheelchair. I used to think it was cool that we could park right next to the buildings when she could still drive. She would say, "Life is a trade-off, Angela. And you don't get to choose the trade."

I ease the driver's side door open and sit down. The seats are soft, velvety, partly from the material and partly from the dust. I open the middle console. The sticky mess of M&M's is still there. She bought them for me then got mad when I tried to eat the whole bag. She shoved them in there and I can't even think how long that's been. I pick up a stick on the garage floor and use it to move the chocolate over to the side. Underneath are coins, gross and messy, but still coins. I dip my hand in, take as many as I can, note they're all quarters, and then run back inside to wash them at the kitchen sink. I'm just finishing when the doorbell rings. It's 1:15. He's two minutes late.

He hands me my small cheese and I put it on the phone table. Then I tell him to hold out his hands. He pushes his cap back on his head. I count out each dollar in quarters, dimes and nickels, fifty cents which is mostly pennies, and I save the two dollar bills for his tip. I say keep the change.

Spectrum

The first time I decide to kill myself, I take Nonna's can of Aqua Net from the top of her dresser, and lock myself in the bathroom. I stare at myself in the mirror and begin to spray a steady stream into my mouth. I sputter and spit and cough before the can clanks against the linoleum, but I do not die. Later, I am grateful for this, as Nonna comes home from work early and has time to make *insalata* and *patata peppercorn* for dinner. The second time I try to kill myself I am walking to school, as I have missed the bus, and I decide to step out in front of a silver car too close to the cross walk. The driver, a blond woman wearing a visor and a pleated, short white skirt, gets within an inch of my face and says I have no idea how close I just came to getting *really* hurt. *Where were my parents?*

My mother and I are dealt away to professionals in the same month, one year apart. She goes to long-term care at Mercy Convalescent Home, and I am forced to visit her there after track meets on Sundays when I'm eleven. Later, I am sent to the children's ward at Methodist Hospital a few miles away, a long, rectangular unit called Spectrum. When I arrive, a nurse, whose body looks like a tree trunk, searches through my suitcase and removes the nail file and clippers. She says I'll have to prove that I'm no longer interested in hurting myself before I can have them back. She brings me a tray of cafeteria food, and tells me the first night I'm on Watch; she enters my room every two hours until dawn to make sure I haven't tried to hang myself with a bed sheet. At six, another nurse with bouncy hair and hot pink leggings bangs on the door, says to get up, it's time to exercise. When I walk out to the Rec Area located in the middle of the unit I see that there are eight other patients besides me; two boys and six girls. I discover at breakfast that morning that I am the youngest by two years, and a boy wearing a black hat with the word

“Compton” embroidered on the front in white letters says it’s fucked up to have to talk about his problems with a little kid in the room.

I like the food the best, especially breakfast. Every morning before Group Acknowledgements the new menus are passed around and I take my time before circling my selections. French toast, eggs, frosted flakes, pancakes, sausage links, bacon. Sometimes I order two breakfasts and smile inside when the counselors gush that they can’t imagine where I put it all. After breakfast, we are all taken down to a game room on the first floor. The Orderly in Charge says we’ve got an hour, then leaves, locking the door behind him. It’s supposed to be fun, to be a reward for “good” behavior, but for some reason it makes me sad. Maybe it’s the cobwebs, or the broken air hockey table, or the smell like the inside of a locker. And they won’t turn the lights on so it’s always dark. The walls were painted yellow at least a hundred years ago, and crusty, ripped coloring books and board games are spread around the floor. The tiny plastic tables and chairs are like the ones at school but no one is interested in playing games. We spend the time pressed against the windows, looking out at the mid-morning traffic zooming along Keo Way. Everyone claims “their” car and announces where they will go once they leave Spectrum. I call the green convertible speeding past the other cars, and tell them when I leave, I will drive it all the way to Italy with the top down. Kerry, a fifteen- year old girl who would be a boy if it weren’t for her huge boobs, tells me that’s impossible, and not to talk about things I don’t understand.

During Group Acknowledgements, Dr. Vanatta says it’s sometimes easier to say “she” rather than “I” when talking about ourselves. I look at the faces of the other people sitting around the large oval table and get the feeling that if any of these kids had been better looking they

wouldn't have had such a rough time in life. I take a deep breath as the group shifts their attention away from Crystal who has been complaining for the last twenty minutes about "her" dead sister. My turn.

"She was left alone with her uncle for one hour while her grandmother was at church," I say. "She sat at the kitchen table and watched as he removed a gallon size bag of pot from a backpack, and sold it to a strange man who had just entered the house without knocking. This same uncle used to sit on the back porch of her grandmother's house with a rifle and a bottle of whiskey, watching the Vietnamese farmers tend the plots they rented every spring from the DNR."

I take a deep breath, ready to continue lying my ass off, but then Charlene pounds on the table and says, "Enough of this horse shit." Everyone turns their attention to Charlene and I'm about ready to complain, but even Dr. V. is doodling on his clipboard.

Charlene starts talking. "She," she makes quotation marks around her ears when she says "She." "*She* just came from a meeting where her mom relinquished her parental rights. *She* has no idea what will happen to her now, or where *she* will go when *she's* discharged from Spectrum."

People start crying.

I lie in bed that night, trying to think of something to say that will impress them like Charlene's story when I hear loud screaming and banging outside my room. I get out of bed, tip-toe to the door, open it a crack. Charlene is screaming, a chunk of hair is missing from the top of her head, and her arms are jerking around while two of the orderlies and the tree-trunk nurse push her into the Quiet Room. The door is triple locked, and I hear tree-trunk say that its easier getting her in there now that Charlene has all but stopped eating. The orderlies snicker and I push my door shut.

“All of the cousins are under the blankets on her grandmother’s bed,” I say. “They roll around, pinch each other, and pretend to take naps. One cousin wraps his arm around her and pulls her on top of him, back to front. She moves away but he continues to do it. Sometime in the middle of the night she wakes up to find another cousin’s head underneath the sheets of the pullout in the living room. The beam of a small flashlight moves across her legs, and stops at her underwear.” Dr. V stops doodling.

I have earned phone and free- time privileges. I spend the unsupervised time after dinner in Samantha’s room, watching the older girl brush her long brown hair and write poetry to the boyfriend who broke up with her before she was admitted to Spectrum. Samantha showed up last week with a large suitcase, one arm in a sling, and square bandages on the back of her knees. She explains that she couldn’t cut her wrists because of a bone abnormality that no one could pronounce, so she tucked two kitchen knives between the folds of skin behind her knees and pulled her legs to her chest until she passed out. Samantha’s first poem to her ex-boyfriend begins, “Now *you* are alone.”

The counselors give me paper, plastic scissors, and crayons. They explain to Dad when he comes to visit that the activities are to help me regain my missed childhood. Dad hesitates, then sits down Indian-style and says he’ll make paper dolls, too. He tells me to start drawing the faces while he cuts the pattern. One of the nurses knows him from somewhere, and I see them talking before she buzzes him out. I ask her how she knows Dad and she shrugs her shoulders and says it was a long time ago. I tell her he’s lost a lot of weight and ask her if she doesn’t think

he looks better this way instead of fat like he used to be, and she shakes her head and says no, he looked better when she knew him.

I leave Spectrum, and without even asking me, they send me to live with Dad.

Prison Politics

Dad is single, which of course means he has decided to become a vegetarian. This means that if I plan on eating at any point during the week, besides pasta and *breshola* on Sundays with Nonno and Nonna, I am now a vegetarian, also. He places the Dixie plate on the TV tray, hands me a fork and a can of caffeine-free Mountain Dew. “Eat up,” he says.

I poke at the tofu burger, sprouts, and sweet potato fries, shaking my head. I don’t know how much more I can take. Last year, after he and Elena broke up for the twentieth time, he turned to Louis L’Amour paperbacks, which culminated in a two-week camping trip in Montana. Just the two of us. Then he met Lynette. That was the end of sorting through clearance bins at the half-price book store on Saturday mornings. I bend a sweet potato fry in half, hating it for being flexible and not crisp like McDonalds. I do the math on how long vegetarianism could possibly last. I taste the tofu, and let it fall out of my mouth back onto the plate. Three months, tops, or until he meets someone new, whichever comes first. Lately, I’ve been leaving the newspaper open to the personals section.

“I need money,” I say between pretend mouthfuls where I chew air.

“Me too,” he says, his eyes firmly on the TV and Walker, Texas Ranger.

“its Homecoming next week,” I say.

“What? You got a date?” He pokes me in the ribs and I drop the fork.

“How much do I get in Social Security?”

“Not enough,” He says, no longer laughing.

“Well, I think I should at least get some of it.”

“You get lights, and gas for the car to drive you across town to your fancy school. Water! Taxes! Insurance in case somebody does us a favor and burns this shithole down.” He gets up

and walks the ten feet to the kitchen where he tosses the fork and throws the empty plate into the trash.

“Dad, I need a dress,” I call to him over the TV.

“You’ve got dresses!” He calls back. “Angie, you’re so worried about keeping up with the Joneses.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” I say, following him into the kitchen. “And I don’t have dresses!” I throw the fork into the sink, toss the plate and stomp into my room. I lie on my bed for fifteen minutes before I go back into the living room. “Can you drive me to my friend’s house?”

He drops me a block away but makes me point out which house I’m going to. I make him promise not to come get me until I call. Before I get out, he whistles, looking up at the three story brick home, and then shakes his head. “Must be nice,” he says. “Do all your friends live in houses like this?”

“Yep,” I say, “See you later.”

I slam the truck door, give him a look and wave for him to go. Only after the taillights on the truck have disappeared around the corner do I begin walking to the house next door to the one I pointed to. Last time, he showed up early and stood half-on, half-off the porch of Ben’s house, talking to Ben’s lawyer Dad and not looking him in the eye. I’m not taking any chances this time.

Ben and I sit in the stairwell on the second floor with the light turned off, having broken away from the rest of the group that has congregated in the basement of his house. His hand is on my thigh, and I feel two damp fingers snake beneath the seam of my shorts. I thank Christ I remembered to shave my legs. We talk about the new snow mobile his dad bought him for his

birthday, an Arctisomething F7. I pretend to know all about the place in Colorado where his family will go for Christmas. I've known Ben, or known of Ben, for three years; a basketball player, ruffly reddish brown hair. Assorted Freckles. Book smart, but he can't ever seem to find a pen in Honors English. I used to stand on the sidelines at parochial school basketball games and watch him sprint up and down the court, his arm stretched out and his palm splayed, screaming like a maniac for the ball. Now I know better. Some girls gush after Ben in the hallways, but I pretend to ignore him.

“Come on,” he says, “I want to show you something.”

We trip down the dark hall, laughing, and he opens a door. It's a bedroom, but not his.

“They're down at the lake,” he says, motioning to the framed picture of his parents on the dresser. “They won't be back until Sunday.”

Since school started I have discovered that rich people have a lot of wood in their houses, and Ben's parent's room doesn't let me down. Huge wooden headboard. Built-in shelves that hold sterling silver frames, books of the leather bound variety, and sparkling knick-knacks. Matching night-stands with matching lamps. Wooden bench at the foot of the bed. Fluffy blanket tossed over the arm of a rocking chair in the corner. Two dressers. Two closets. A bathroom the size of my house. An actual fucking fireplace with a wooden mantle, photos of Ben and his sister with Mickey at Disneyworld on top. The wood is all stained dark, and I think this means it must be expensive. Everything cream colored and green, but I'm sure Ben's mom would say it's something like egg-shell and forest.

He backs up into the room and flops on his parent's bed. The comforter whooshes under his weight.

“What did you want to show me,” I ask. I tilt my head and half-smile because I know I look like Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct* when I do. I've practiced.

He rolls over and pulls a small bottle from the drawer in the night-stand.

“This,” he says, twisting off the cap and taking a small sip. He makes a face, tries to subdue it, and pauses before swallowing. “Bourbon,” he says, “the only thing my dad drinks.” He tilts the bottle in my direction.

I shake my head. He takes another drink and then fumbles the bottle onto the night stand. I think he’s probably drunk. He stretches his long arm toward me and pats the bed. I arch an eyebrow—at least I try to, but I’m sure both eyebrows go up, which is annoying.

“What?”

“C’mere. I want to tell you something.”

I take my time, stopping to admire a picture of Ben in a little league photo on the dresser, and then I’m standing next to the bed, pressing my body against the mattress, and hoping my boobs look bigger than they are. I don’t move until he pulls me down. I turn on my side, support myself with an elbow.

“What?” I ask.

“You’re different,” he says.

“What does that mean?” I tense up, but I manage to keep my poker face intact.

“When you come out of the locker room after gym and your hair is wet, you look really hot.”

“I look hot with wet hair?”

“Yeah...and when I called to see if you wanted to come over you said ‘Maybe,’ and I dunno, it was just the way you said it. ‘Maybe...’” Courtesy of Demi Moore in *Indecent Proposal*.

“And?”

“I like you.”

An hour later, I call Dad who somehow pulls into the right driveway and I almost fall on my face trying to hurry up and get in the truck before anyone sees him.

The hierarchy at my “fancy school across town” is complex, and it’s taken me awhile to sort everybody out. It breaks down like this:

First, there’s the Old Money. Kids who live South of Grand Avenue in the Tudor style houses on sprawling acreages. Kid’s like Courtney Smart whose last name is plastered all over the new gymnasium. Kids whose parents don’t even see their bills, they have people for that. Kids who have actually met the fucking president, and whose parents have played golf with him and they have the pictures displayed on their piano’s to prove it. Under no circumstances do Old Money kids talk about money. Ever. They make up anywhere from 5-10% of the students.

Then comes the New Money, kids whose parents combined their 100K annual income to spend their lives paying for a two-story house in West Des Moines, private school tuition, and a once-a-year trip to the Cayman’s. New Money measures worth by the quantity and quality of their (and everybody else’s) possessions. For example, Dan Catman remarked to me one day in study hall that the new Pioneer Car Stereo Ben was showing off in the parking lot earlier in the day is actually the cheapest model Pioneer makes. I think he forgot who he was talking to when he said this. New Money is usually one generation removed from Poor White Trash, though, reminding them of this provokes some serious hostility. Unfortunately, New Money makes up the majority of the student population. They claim anywhere from 50-75%.

The rest, like me, have no money, not even paper money and a leased German car, but are on scholarships or have parents (in my case grandparents) who would rather die than send their kids anywhere besides a Catholic school.

We don’t stick together.

Most of the time, we make inappropriate jokes in class, offer to drive everyone everywhere, and jump through flaming hoops to make sure no one ever sees where we live. We do this in order to claim favor with Old Money, and for reasons like this: Last summer, I was hanging out quite a bit at Charlotte Moore's house. Her dad owns the regional Budweiser distribution company. It's a hand-me-down from Great-Grandpa Moore who is retired in Boca. Their garage, or one of their garages, is actually one big walk-in cooler filled with enough entertainment to keep them all drunk and happy for decades (this includes Mr. Moore, who is sometimes not very nice but always sends flowers to Charlotte or Charlotte's mom and sisters whenever he has "fucked up," as Charlotte says).

So we're hanging out in Charlotte's room one day, listening to Edie Brickell, and she looks up from her *In Style* magazine and says Dave Matthews is playing in Chicago tonight, we should go. I look at my watch. 2:45 p.m.- it's at least a 5 hour drive to Chicago. We won't make it in time, I tell her. She gives me that look that all Old Moneys give when confronted with someone who thinks about money constantly. It isn't unkind, but the look definitely makes me feel like a novelty. We'll fly, she says, it's only an hour. Before school started, I would have acknowledged my lack of funds. Now, I just sit back and assume the invitation has already been made. Charlotte slides a shiny credit card across the counter at the airport before it occurs to me: I've never been on a plane before. I keep this to myself.

At the end of freshman year, this happens:

It starts as a series of half-whispers in homeroom. I put my head down on my desk and fold my arms over my head, listening.

Brad Erickson?

The Governor's kid?

Is he okay?

Is he dead?

Two people.

Drunk.

Jail?

Nope.

By third period the hallways hum with theories. Charlotte's older sister was at the party with Brad before he left. He needed to drive, he'd said, swinging the keys to his brand new Tahoe around his index finger and stumbling out the door. No one thought anything about it, apparently, Brad is just like that. Old Money huddles in tight groups for the rest of the day, licking the figurative wounds of one of their own. New Money starts a pool on how exactly Brad will weasel out of trouble. Ben says Brad's dad won't let anything happen to him, no matter what he did, and most believe him, including me. Those kids never get in trouble. At the beginning of the school year some kid on the golf team had over a pound of pot in his locker and absolutely nothing happened to him. Nothing. If I swear in front of one of the nuns I get J.U.G. (Justice Under God, it's the Catholic version of detention) for a week.

Amazingly, I hear the full story when I get home from school. I drop my backpack on the floor and go to find Dad. He's in the garage, as usual, watching oil drip into a dirty aluminum pan from somewhere under his new motorcycle. He's rebuilding a wrecked 86' Wide Glide for Nevaeh (Veggie's have been replaced with greasy cheeseburgers) his new girlfriend, to ride on their proposed trip to Sturgis next summer. I tell Dad the Governor's kid killed someone last night. He says nothing, but waits for the last drop of oil to plop into the pan. When he's sure it's finished, he removes the pan, and places it on the workbench behind him. He grabs a shammy and starts wiping his hands.

“Actually,” Dad says, “he killed two people.”

He turns back around and grabs a wrench before disappearing under the bike again.

“How do you know?” I ask, pissed that he knows more than I do. I never get to shock him anymore.

His voice is muffled and I’m forced to bend down and look through the system of hoses and pipes under the engine in order to see half of his face. “Been on the news all day,” he says.

“And?” I am annoyed. “What did they say?”

“Hand me those bolts on the bench, and the washers next to them.”

I don’t understand why anyone would name a small metal ring a “washer.” It makes no sense. I was clueless the first time he rebuilt a motorcycle, but I figured out early on that if I wanted to see my Dad for more than three minutes a day, I’d better learn how to help him in the garage. I can now disassemble and reassemble (with minimum extra parts left over) any butterfly-style carburetor. I can even “tune” it, though I have no ideas what this actually means. I hand him the washer and repeat my request for information.

“The stupid brat tried to pass a semi after one in the morning on Highway 141. Hit an old couple in a Buick. Killed ‘em both on the spot. Course, the kid’s fine, though ain’t he?”

“He wasn’t in school today...”

“I wasn’t asking if he’s okay. I was telling you. He’s fine. His dad gave a press conference this morning.” He says “press conference” like somehow he’s been personally injured in the matter, like “His dad gave me a migraine this morning.”

“Was he drunk?”

Everyone was saying he was drunk. Said he was acting crazy, trying to hit on the captain of the football team’s girlfriend before he finally got the hint and took off.

Dad sits up and looks at me, serious. “Don’t matter. People like that, they can buy themselves out of whatever trouble they get into. That’s the difference between them and us.”

“But, if he killed someone—two someones—something’s gotta happen to him.”

I get a sudden vision of my thirteen year old self, sneaking out to the car while Dad and a girlfriend whose name I can’t remember now had locked themselves in his bedroom for two days. Just a quick loop around the block. I didn’t realize how sensitive the gas pedal was. I jammed my foot down, backed straight out of the driveway, across the road, and into the neighbor’s chain-link fence before it occurred to me to hit the brakes.

At school, no one talks about them, the ones who Brad killed. No prayer or moment of silence in homeroom like we had when Karrie Willis died after Homecoming. I read in the obits: Frank and Jean McMahan leave behind four children, 11 grandchildren, and one great-grandchild. It doesn’t say how they died.

Brad Erickson is out of school for one week. He is tan when he comes back, and brags that he’s getting off with only a misdemeanor- driving recklessly. The kicker, though: Two years before this happened, his father, Governor Erickson, ran on an incumbent platform that sought to reinstate the death penalty in Iowa. It didn’t pass when the bill finally made it to the House, but as I watch Brad strut down the halls, saying “what’s up, man,” to his friends, I think to myself: what if it had?

My dad’s girlfriend for the past 11 months is named Nevaeh. (Sadly, this is a record for Dad).

I hate Nevaeh for the following reasons:

1. Her name. Did you catch that it’s “heaven” spelled backwards? She told me that the

first time I met her and I vomited a little bit. She doesn't get the irony.

2. The fact that she has more tattoos than Dad, who's holding at 9, and likes to show them off whenever my friends comes over.
3. The way she sits in the kitchen, waiting for the rumble of Dad's Harley to sound his homecoming from work—something she knows nothing about apparently—under an umbrella of sickly-sweet, blue Cove smoke. My “asthma” means nothing to this woman.
4. Her son, Dusty, who is a year older than me and goes to the public school a mile from our house and calls me “princess” because I go to private school. He refuses to take off his old Metallica shirt, and personal hygiene means a gallon or so of the Old Spice from our medicine cabinet. Once I caught him peeking at me through the hole in the bathroom door that I usually keep covered with a wash cloth.
5. The way she showed up to my spring choral concert dressed like Janis Joplin. Scarves, John Lennon glasses, apparently Dad made her keep the mike-stand in the car. She thought it was festive.
6. The night she did back-to-back shots of Jack Daniels and started a fight with Dad about how much allowance I get. She wanted to go sailing in the Gulf of Mexico, but that requires money. After Dad took off on his bike, she did another shot, told me he wasn't even my biological father and to “cool it with the attitude.”

Sundays at the Home

Nonna and Nonno get upset if I cover my nose when we walk through the double doors at the nursing home, so I hold my breath instead. When I was younger, I couldn't peel the odors apart, I just knew it smelled bad. And once, when I was twelve, I actually threw up in a potted plant next to the plate-glass window in the lobby. Nonno wiped my chin with his handkerchief and told me to move my *cula* before anyone saw. Even now, if Nonna is especially slow in walking to the elevator, or Nonno has to sit down for a minute because of his emphysema and I'm forced to breathe, I gag on the odors of chicken soup, pungent urine, and what I imagine to be rotting flesh, all damp and warm with body odor. Nonna and Nonno said they chose this dump because it's close to their house. But I say it's because the home has to take on low income and Title XIX patients. The first floor is office space, the laundry. The second floor houses the shuffle-board players and couples who still know they're married. Above that, NR: Non-Responsive. My mother's room is on the third floor.

I'm fifteen, and my permit says I'm only supposed to drive to school, but Dad's got himself a new girlfriend (holy effing surprise), which means I could drive to the moon and he wouldn't notice. So on Sunday mornings, I pretend to sneak past his closed bedroom door, and drive to Nonna and Nonno's for pasta and a trip to the nursing home. I sort of hate it, but it gets me out of the house for a few hours while Dad and New Girlfriend act all gross on the couch.

As soon as I walk into Nonna and Nonno's, the phone rings. It's *Zio* Peppino calling from Cariati, which happens every Sunday morning. Nonna and Nonno don't have long distance. *You know how much it costs to talk so much, Angelina? Let them pay*, Nonna says. I know when *Zio* asks about Mom. Nonna, always in her pink armchair when she's on the phone, will stand up and

pace around the dining room table. I grab the cord before she trips over it and follow her as she makes laps.

Che cosa? Maria? Nonna shouts into the phone, like all of sudden she's hard of hearing when usually she's the one screaming at Nonno to turn the TV down. *Sta bene*, she says, *sta cosi cosi*, but it sounds like a question. And then she moves on to gossip about her friends in the neighborhood who have kin in *Cariati* and it becomes a transatlantic café and biscotti klatch. Once the conversation has moved safely away from my mother and her tenure in a state-run nursing home, Nonna sits back down in her chair and props her slippered feet onto the ottoman, chatting about *puttanass* and *Il Papa John*.

No word or phrase exists in my grandparent's dialect for nursing home. I checked. In Italia, or at least in southern Calabria, the old and sick are cared for by immigrants in the family home. My *bisnonna* Elizabetta in *Cariati* has an entire family of Bulgarians at her disposal. Before the Bulgarians it was Ukrainians who served stray dog as an entree for over a month before anyone got wise, and before them it was a mother and young daughter from Ethiopia who were "too black to be good for anything." It's an indentured servant arrangement, and they don't last long. The Bulgarians—unbeknownst to them—are about to get the boot.

Last week Zio Peppino woke early and found Elizabetta in bed, a handkerchief secured over her mouth, hands tied to the railing. The lady Bulgarian said Elizabetta was getting up at night and searching the house for her *amore*, *bisnonno* Giuseppe who died in 1978. Zio Peppino knows a man at immigration who will revoke the Bulgarians' visas once the paperwork comes through for the Czechs he found wandering outside of Bari. Nonna promises to light extra candles at Mass, for Elizabetta, not the Bulgarians. When she hangs up, I want to ask her if the family knows where Mom is, and if they do, how did she explain it to them, but I know if I did she would only tell me *zita*—shut up—so instead I unwind the cord from around the table and go

pound on the bathroom door to make sure Nonno hasn't fallen asleep on the toilet again. I vacuum after we eat, then it's time to go.

I can breathe in the elevator for some reason but when the doors open on Mom's floor, I have to hold my breath again. I don't know when the stench stops bothering me, when I forget to think about it, but obviously I do because we spend the whole afternoon at the home. The hallway next to the nurses' station has a dry erase board that tells me the date, day of the week, name of the current president, doctor on call, and the city and state. This is written in rainbow colors, the date in red and so on down to a purple Iowa. In the bottom right-hand corner is a small mirror with the caption overhead, "What's Your Name?" Once, when Mom first came here, someone changed the information when no one was looking. Date: December, 7, 1941. Current President: FDR. 90 year-old Ray McIntyre started screaming, "Dirty slant eyes!" and had a stroke. No one said anything to me about it, but I'm pretty sure they thought it was me. Four years later the nurses still give me the stink eye whenever I leave my mother's room to venture into the hallways.

Mom's room is a double, but ever since Mrs. Hodgkin's died last Christmas, Mom's had the place to herself. I don't know if she realizes this. I don't know if she realizes who I am, either, but that doesn't stop me from walking in a straight line toward the bed, leaning over her, brushing the hair out of her eyes, and kissing her on the forehead. *Hi, Mom* I say. She doesn't see me, but stares up at the ceiling. MS has dismantled her neural system, so she sleeps with her eyelids open, and I never know whether to keep my voice down. The window next to her bed faces east, so I shut the vertical blinds, but her pupils don't change. Nonna, Nonno and I have individual routines, and this is always how I start mine.

Nonna checks the Foley bag. If it's more than half full, she makes me empty it into the toilet. The first time she made me do it, I complained, and she fed me *mortadella* for dinner and didn't tell me until I was done eating that I had actually consumed horse meat. Now I just unscrew the cord, dump the bag and keep my mouth shut. Next, Nonna begins an inventory of Mom's stuff. She starts with the drawers in the dresser, accounting for every nightgown, pair of underwear and socks. If anything is missing, she will stop, mutter something that sounds like, "*somanabitch!*" and walk out in the hallway to flag down the nurses. She will spit on their white shoes, curse in *dialeto*, and demand to know the whereabouts of a tube sock. The nurse will shrug and walk away. Nonna will spit at her retreating back and then return to the room to begin inspecting the shelves next to Mom's bed. If anything is missing from there, she repeats the hallway tirade. The only time Nonna speaks to Mom directly is when she removes the framed photo of Mom and Bishop Di Matteo on the night stand which was taken the first year Mom came to the home. In the picture, Mom stares at the ceiling and the Bishop beams at the camera. *Maria! You see! Look figlia, atsa you with a Bishop!* Nonna pretends Mom has responded by saying *Si, Si, a Bishop come to see you!* then she puts the picture back and arranges the prayer cards from St. Anthony's that are sent to the home twice a month.

Next, Nonna adjusts her glasses and looks Mom up and down, head to toe. I watch her face and know she's trying to determine how long ago Mom was bathed. She picks up Mom's hand, digs the dirt out from underneath her fingernails, and then moves on to the toes, wiping between them with her handkerchief. She mutters in *dialeto* and I am forced to make apologies to the staff at different intervals. Actually, this is part of my routine. As a way to lure Nonna out of her investigations, Nonno jokes and asks if she's going to check on Mom's *cula*, too, to see how long it's been since anyone wiped her ass. This makes Nonna cry. She pulls the handkerchief from her pocket again, and lifts her glasses to wipe her eyes. Then she sits down

and begins the Rosary. In her best English Nonna says *I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, Our Lord...* She must pray the entire Rosary at least three times before we are allowed to leave.

Nonno's routine is in five parts. He walks into the room, touches Mom's foot through the blanket, shakes it slightly like he's petting a good dog, then, due to his cataracts, he pulls the chair up to within three inches of the TV. He taps the remote until he finds *Bonanza*. Five, maybe ten minutes into it, he's snoring. After he wakes up, he uses the restroom, pees all over the seat, and then heads for the game room on the second floor, where he will yak with the WWII residents and cheat at shuffleboard.

At this point, I have two options. I can watch TV after Nonno has left, the *Golden Girls* comes on at 2:30 p.m. or, if I'm too antsy, I can go visit Sherry. I always check the TV first, *Golden Girls* is often a rerun which I can usually watch no problem, but sometimes I feel like talking to someone. On those days, I slip out into the hall and walk straight toward Sherry's room. On my way, the nurses pretend to ignore me, but the orderlies, who are all men in dark green scrubs, smile when they see me. I smile back.

Next to Mom, Sherry is the next-youngest patient at the home. *Fifty-three and still kicking*, she says proudly whenever I come to visit her. Sherry has no legs. They were amputated during one of the hundred operations she has had since she was born. Mitochondrial something. Sherry was never expected to live past infancy, and so she considers her life to be somewhat miraculous. She told me this the first time I met her. I never would have actually gone into her room, but she caught me hovering in her doorway and motioned me in. *You want to see, don't you?* she asked, and whipped the white sheet off. *No legs*, she said, and actually laughed. It looked like the stumps had been tied off with twine. They weren't smooth, but wrinkly, and I couldn't look away.

Sherry has a “boyfriend” named Gary who shows up at the home covered in dirt and grease. He works for the railroad. He’s what Nonno calls “*ritardato*.” I don’t understand their relationship. When I was younger and first met Sherry, I didn’t understand how someone in a wheelchair could have a boyfriend. Now I don’t understand how someone who can’t have sex can have a boyfriend. If they do have sex, which seems impossible as none of the patient rooms have locking doors, what does he do with her stumps? Can they even spread far enough? I never ask her this question, or any others I have. Instead we play rummy and I tell her about my track meets, about singing in the choir at school, about Dad and fill in the blank girlfriend.

When I go see Sherry, my first job is to help her into her chair. I grip both of her hips, turn her sideways, and she draws her arms around my neck. I lift Sherry into a sitting position and she grabs the metal bar over our heads. I push the wheelchair up next to the bed and while she holds the bar, I swing her into the chair. She settles in, maneuvers in front of the door and leans forward to look out into the hall. She then tells me everything that’s been “going on” at the home, which usually means which patients had visitors and how many fights she and Gary have had since my last visit. I am dismissed when Gary shows up, but even when she’s just got him on the brain it’s hard to talk to her, so sometimes our visits are cut short and I return to Mom’s room feeling a little grumpy, which I don’t understand.

When I come back, Nonna dozes in the chair, her rosary dangles around her index finger. Mom is sleeping or awake. I watch traffic through the window, find *Captain Kangaroo* on PBS, and recline in the chair next to Mom’s bed. I hold her hand, which is the exact size and shape of mine, but hers is warm, mine cold. Nonno comes back from shuffleboard ten dollars richer and asks if we’re ready. I shake Nonna awake, put my arms as far around Mom as I can.

Andiamo, I say and Nonna and Nonno follow me to the elevator.

This is our routine, without exception, for more weeks than I care to count.

Sometime before my DWI, but after I've lost my virginity to an acid dispensing Staples employee, I have lunch with my other grandmother, my father's mother, Grandma Winnie, in a restaurant across the street from the nursing home, which is no longer a nursing home but a vacant building with "FOR LEASE" signs tacked in every window. Grandma Winnie sips her iced tea and says *Well, it was just a matter of time, after all the lawsuits.*

What lawsuits? I ask.

Oh you remember, they caught some orderly doing—things—to some of the patients.

That's all she remembers, which is fine because I can't listen anymore, and I try not to think about it, but this is impossible, because I'm already having visions of *bisnonna* Elizabetta tied to her bed six thousand miles away. She morphs into Sherry with her stumps spread wide, who transforms into Mom with her hospital gown shoved up around her waist, as legs clothed in green scrubs nudge her knees apart... No.

I change it all. I turn it into a story with a brave young heroine and police detectives, but then it sounds too much like an episode of *Law & Order: SVU*—and who can believe that stuff, really, week after week.

1972- Where I Come From

Ezia sits under the kitchen table. An American magazine, a gift from her cousin Maria, is spread open on her lap. She flips the pages, seeing one sickly looking girl after another smiling up at her with horse teeth. She mouths words she doesn't understand. *Cover girl. Top Secret Week in China.* She becomes frustrated, and concentrates instead on the pictures, thinks how nice it would be to go to America, to leave *Cariati* behind forever. She turns back to Sophia Loren on the cover and runs her finger along the actress's jaw line. It would be so easy for Ezia to stow away in her cousin's trunk when she returned to America in two weeks. No one would miss her. Ezia's mother, Elizabetta, would be relieved of one more *cazuna*, and Ezia's father, Guisepppe, could stop pretending to understand his eleven year-old daughter.

Then she hears it. That word. The one whispered in the village, in Ezia's own house.

Puttana.

With extreme care, Ezia places the magazine on the floor in front of her and draws her knees to her chest. She covers her mouth. If they remember she is in the room, they'll shut up like they do every other time Ezia tries to listen in. For some reason, they refuse to talk about her cousin in front of her.

Ezia strains to distinguish her mother and sister's voices from the rest of the chaos. Sound is lost in the kitchen; young and old, *familia* and neighbors alike, barge in for coffee and milk, her three brothers' clunky boots smatter pig shit all over the dirt floor, dogs creep in to quickly lap at stray bits of fallen food before some kind soul kicks them back outside; the radio, always playing at the maximum volume, currently presents Mia Martini's cursed vibrations into the room. All of this unites with the clouds of dust and flour pounded from the dough on the kitchen table as the two women work, and Ezia's mother slanders her niece who arrived from America,

looking sulky, the month before. This was Maria's *grande giro*, her grand tour after finishing school. Ezia could tell by the way her cousin always seemed to be looking west, toward America, with watery eyes, that Maria didn't think there was anything grand about it. Twice, she'd heard her moaning from her bedroom, *Six weeks, six shitty weeks*. Ezia had gone to the library in *Crotone* the next day and knew that *six weeks*, meant *sei settimane*, but *shitty* wasn't in the dictionary.

Puttana?

Ezia knew perfectly well what that word meant. Her mother had slapped her for saying hello to the woman with the short skirt in the market. *Don't talk to that puttana, or il diavolo will jump from her mouth in to yours! Slap. Capisci?*

Puttana? Mama, what are you talking about? Ezia's older sister, Lulu, asks.

Lulu married a Lemmo boy last year, but still spends every morning with her mother as though nothing has changed. Ezia notices that Lulu stays longer and longer now that Lemmo is preparing to leave for Argentina in the fall. When he goes, Lulu will move back home until he returns to Italy, which could take years.

Ezia hears Lulu stretch the dough in front of her, the sound elastic like the slingshots the boys in the village use to torture stray dogs and cats. Lulu pats the dough with her rough hand a few times, then grabs the broom handle from the corner of the room and attacks the dough. The table creaks as Lulu rolls the handle back and forth, applying a little more pressure with each pass. Dust floats down to land on Ezia's head, but she doesn't dare move.

Puttana! says Elizabetta, seeming to enjoy the word, as though this is all the evidence she needs, to prove once and for all, that she is superior to her Americanized sister and her lone female offspring. *Fausto says Maria was out with Antonio Flotta all day yesterday! Nobody saw them! Nobody heard them! Where did they go? What did they do?*

Ezia knows her mother is drawing her hands out from her round body, as though suspended on a cross. Elizabetta is animated like Father Di Salvo during Mass.

American girls are different, Mama, Lulu says, her voice crisp.

There is frenzied movement from somewhere above the table, more whispers, and then Elizabetta bends over, her eyebrows lost somewhere in her graying hairline, as she examines her youngest daughter. She frowns at the sight of the magazine.

Ezia, go down to the cellar and get us another bucket of flour. Be useful!

Yes, Mama.

Wait. Go to Zia first, she needs changed. Put her in the chair and then get the flour.

Don't take all day, her mother finishes, waves her arm at Ezia as though sweeping her from the room.

Yes, Mama.

Ezia crawls out from under the table, brushes her knees and clothes and hair of the dust that has settled on her. She grabs the magazine, rolls it up, but her mother snatches it from under her arm, gives her a look, then throws the magazine outside where the pigs pounce on it. Lulu pinches Ezia hard on the shoulder, says to quit sneaking around like a rat. Ezia gives them both disgusted looks before she leaves the room. She hovers behind the door, and waits to hear more about the *puttana*.

What does Fausto know? Lu challenges her mother. He spends all day cutting fichi and bossing my husband around.

You wait, Elizabetta says, You see. There will be trouble. Trouble!

What trouble? Who's in trouble? Ezia's father's voice, which always sounds hollow, as though any moment he is going to cry, floats out from behind the door. Ezia jumps. He returned from Argentina after five years only last month and Ezia is still getting used to his voice.

E niente, replies Elizabetta, smooth and without pause. *I was just telling Lulu that if we don't get a few good hard rains before September, there will be trouble next spring.*

Eh, the rain, he says. *More stubborn than a pregnant mulo.*

Ezia imagines her father, knife in one hand, a few *mele* in the other, bending over his belly to peer out from the kitchen window into the olive fields. She hears him sigh, and a moment later, a chair is dragged out from the table. He tells Elizabetta and Lulu to go work on something else so he can have a few minutes of peace. The radio is turned off. Ezia hears the wash bucket scraping against the floor and knows her mother and sister have gone outside to begin the wash. She tiptoes out to the terrace and goes next door to her Zia's apartment, whispering to herself *Cover Girl*.

All of the houses in *Cariati* are connected, whether through tunnels in the alleyways or through the terraces jutting over the edge of the cliff; if you wanted to, you could go from one end of the village to the other, with only a few steps outside. Because of this, everyone in town knows of Ezia's Zia, her Auntie, locked away in an apartment next to Ezia's house; it was pointless, Elizabetta had told her, in trying to hide Zia from the rest of the town. *Secrets can be kept under stone, but not earth; the dirt will always protest—that's why a murderer must be hanged by the neck and thrown to the pigs!*

Ezia stands in the doorway to her Zia's bedroom and hears a shallow murmuring followed by a thump. She eases the door open and peers inside, letting her eyes adjust to the dark until she can see the bed shoved into the corner of the room. The strips of material are wrapped around her Zia's wrists and ankles and tied to the bedposts. A wide strip covers her torso and is tied in a knot under the mattress. Zia stares out at Ezia, opens her mouth in a toothless smile—a

surgeon from Crotone removed all of Zia's teeth after she almost chewed her tongue off during one of her fits. Zia fights against the ties for a moment then lies still as Ezia approaches her.

Good morning Zia, she says, too brightly, too loud.

Zia murmurs and strokes Ezia's hand as she removes the ties from around her wrists. Ezia frowns at the purple indentations; it must have been one of her brothers who put Zia to bed the night before. Ezia rubs the marks away and wraps her arms around the older woman's waist, and moves her legs into a V. The changing first, which Ezia has trained herself to do with her eyes and nose closed. Then she lifts her, struggles under her Zia's weight, and places her in the soft chair that looks out the window to the sea. She opens the curtain and the sunlight pours into the small room. In the light, Zia's face looks like a skull covered in cheese cloth, her arms hang at her sides. Ezia wraps the sheet around Zia's waist and secures it to the back of the chair.

Better? Good. Mama will come soon with breakfast.

Ezia kisses her on the cheek and leaves to collect more flour.

Twice, Maria looks back as though she knows she's being followed, and Ezia is forced to squat behind the *asino*. When her cousin turns back around and resumes walking toward some unknown destination, Ezia rises slowly and tries to stay in the shadows cast by the awnings of the buildings, but the rope isn't long enough, and she is forced to walk next to the *asino* instead of behind him. The sun will go down in twenty minutes, leaving the village a mess of narrow, black alleyways, so she must keep Maria in sight. And Ezia must stay out of sight, which would be easy if Maria wasn't stopping every ten feet to talk to someone—Americans are famous in *Cariati*, puttana's or not, and all of the women sitting on their terraces, or the men standing and

smoking in the doorways to their stores, want to talk to Maria. *Where is she going? What is she doing? How does she like Cariati? Does she know John Wayne?* Maria smiles, embarrassed,

Mi dispiache, non capito, Maria replies to all of their questions; she knows only three Italian sentences, and this is the one she is forced to repeat most often.

From this distance, Maria doesn't look like an American, like the ones who come to *Cariati* in August wearing sandals and shorts and cameras, saying *Buon giorno*, at two in the afternoon. She wears her long black hair in a knot on top of her head, like all the women in the village, a loose, soft skirt to the ankle, a striped shirt with no sleeves baring the gold letters "Giorgio" across the chest—a gift from Lulu who bought it in a shop in *Fierenze* on her honeymoon. No, it's only when you get close to Maria, when you see her face, and she gives you that look—the same one a *capra* has right before you feed it—that makes you realize she's different. Elizabetta says American girls expect *il mondo*, but they don't want to work for it. *Let someone else work*, Elizabetta complains when she thinks no one is listening.

Ezia concentrates so hard on Maria's back that she is at the gate before she realizes Maria has led her up to the edge of town, to the cemetery. Ezia tethers the *asino* to a lemon tree, pats his nose and ducks inside the gate. When she was smaller, she and the other children would come here during the day, to hide from one another, or to look down onto the ocean, until Marco Vianetti became lost in the labyrinth of crypts for two hours and his mother was sure he was taken by *il diavolo* and she moaned like a sick dog until they found him. The next Sunday at Mass, Father Di Salvo told the children they were not to enter the cemetery unless their mothers were there to watch them. Now Ezia only comes when someone is dead.

Maria walks with purpose, as though she knows her way around, and Ezia is forced to make more noise than she would like to in order to keep up. She creeps along, trying to watch her feet; the ancient steps are uneven and crumbling in some places and it is not uncommon to

fall down. But Maria seems to be floating toward something, her feet don't appear to be laboring over the same jagged stone. It is too dark to see more than the stripes of her shirt, but Ezia has the distinct impression that her cousin is smiling. She goes further along, up and down the narrow paths, toward the crypt of the Anastasio family, the family of Maria's father, who had scattered north and west, leaving Maria the only Anastasio currently residing in *Cariati*.

When Maria stops at the crypt, Ezia is not surprised to see another body—this one distinctly male—appear out of one of the dark passageways next to the Formaro's. She crouches behind a headstone and watches, wondering who the boy is and what they'll say to each other since Maria doesn't speak Italian and none of the boys in the village—or girls for that matter—speak English.

But of course they don't really speak. Maria hoists herself on top of a tomb—Ezia wonders if Maria knows she's sitting on her *bisnonno*'s lap?—and the boy, now Ezia can see it's the Flotta, the big one who calls Ezia "Donkey Face" every chance he gets, sits beside her. He's hiding something in his hands. Maria tries to pry them apart, but Flotta is too strong, and he laughs as Maria's small hands struggle to see what he's hiding. He asks her if she's sure she wants to see, and Maria punches him on the arm. *Non parla Italiano!* She says, but it's a joke. They laugh. Finally, he removes one hand from on top of the other and a *lucertole* jumps from his palm onto Maria's head. She screams, starts flailing her arms around and tries to jump off the tomb, but he covers her mouth, pins her arms to her side. He is still laughing.

Just a joke, he says.

She gives him the blank look, says *non capito idiota*.

He shrugs his shoulders, points to his mouth, and laughs. *A joke, see?*

Do you know about the wolves? He asks her, and at the same time, Ezia sees him take Maria's hand, holding it.

She gives him the look, the blank one she uses on Ezia's father when he peppers her with questions about America at the dinner table.

He throws his head back and howls. *The wolves*, he says, and Maria says, *Si, si*, but Ezia can tell Maria has no idea what's he talking about.

The wolves live in the mountains, up there. He twists around and points toward the black mass on the other side of *Cariati*. *In winter, when there is no food for them to hunt, they will come into our town, looking for lambs. When they find one, they howl—he howls again—like that, and the other wolves follow the sound. When we hear it, we get our rifles and shoot them. I have killed over 20 wolves myself! We leave the bodies where they lie, as a warning. But once, I cut a wolf's throat, and sliced out its stomach. I have been very lucky ever since. I am going to university in Cosenza next year.*

Maria looks out to the spot where Ezia is hiding, and smiles, and even though Ezia knows her cousin cannot see her hiding behind the marble headstone, she smiles back. In English Maria says *I have no idea what you just said*.

Flotta sits up straighter, drapes his other arm around Maria's shoulder. He kisses her, and as Maria reaches toward him, Ezia turns away, ashamed. She creeps back to the *asino* tethered to the lemon tree at the gate and tries to get the words in the right order. *No I have idea what you said. Have no idea I what you said. You have no idea what you said.*

Ezia begins to cry. I push the stop button on my voice recorder and Ezia looks at me, apologizes for becoming emotional. *It was a different generation, Angelina, my mother only*

knew what her mother taught her. Before I moved to Milan for college, I had never even seen an airplane! Or an Asian!

So you don't know what she did in the cemetery that night? If she really was a puttana? I ask and it occurs to me that I don't really care. Well maybe I don't.

Ezia smiles weakly, Your mother came back to the house twenty minutes after I did. That night she taught me to say "I have to go to the bathroom," in English.

A Hot Time at the State Fair

It tried to stand up. That's when we saw it. We were already in the truck, leaving the fair, and as I looked through the windshield into the dark, the figure stumbled, fell down. We laughed, thinking it was just another drunk trying to find their car in the dark. But then the headlights of my Uncle Jimmy's pick-up did a looksy over the yard we were parked in as we backed up toward the street. The figure settled pretzel-shaped about twenty yards away, tucked between a busted Toyota Celica and a couple of neon crotch rockets. My uncle kept backing up.

"Stop," I said. "What is that?"

Uncle Jimmy hit the brakes, annoyed. I could tell he was annoyed by his quick grunt, the way he turned his whole body toward me. He sighed. "What?"

"There," I pointed to the spot, hoping it was an animal.

The stink of soy beans and blue-ribbon cattle manure mingled with the August heat, and drifted in through the windows, cracked an inch to keep the inside of the truck from fogging up. His hand was on the gear shift, ready to put the entire night behind us, but he flashed the lights again, and I saw white, fluttering, swaying thin against the black grass and sky. In that moment when the headlights flashed, I realized I was looking at a person, and when I saw the pink flowers on her bra, I knew she was a girl.

She didn't have a face.

"What the fuck is that? Jesus fuck, what the fuck *is* that?" I remember this phrase, so loud in the little, two-cylinder pick-up, but twenty years later, I'm still not sure who said it.

That summer, I lived with Hairy Mary—after my stint in the loony bin, but before MS finally tucked Mom into her drawer at the mausoleum. Dad was in rehab or en route to rehab or on his way home from rehab, I never knew. He was always hard to pin down, but that summer he avoided me like it was his job. I wanted nothing to do with Nonna and Nonno and they weren't too keen on me at that time either, so Hairy Mary's place it was. We were both fourteen, and I knew her from catholic school. Mary's mom, Grace, was fine with the arrangement, especially when Nonna explained that I came with a once-a-month social security check.

It was a summer of firsts, as I imagine all summers of fourteen are. My first black boyfriend. My first time telling a boy No! and yanking his hand out of my cutoff jeans even though it made me feel guilty—that one was a white, trailer park boy Mary and I picked up at the Quick Trip a block from her house where we stole cigarettes and flirted with the ugly cahier when he caught us. My first summer of all-nighter's, Metallica inspired head-banging, smoking openly in front of adults, repainting the bedroom I shared with Mary between June and August. My first fight. Two, actually.

I call her Hairy Mary because she was more beast than girl, but I never said this to her face, or even out loud. She was Italian, like me, but had the kinky fro that Mom and I had been spared. Mary could have passed for about eight months pregnant, all that weight sausaged in an enormous belly. But if you asked her, she only weighed 115 lbs. and if you looked at her funny she'd belt you hard on the cheek. She had two distinct expressions that dominated her face when she wasn't sleeping: snarling and smirking. She was completely foul mouthed, and I was always impressed when she would walk right up to whomever and say fuck every other word until her victim started to whimper. I had survived childhood with sweetness and lies, but Mary's disappointments confined her to a state of permanent hostility, red and violent as her hair. She wore black trench coats in the summer, smoked Marlboros, and would threaten to beat your ass

even if she didn't know you, but especially if she did and you were smaller than she was, which was just about everyone, including adults. Most of the time she didn't follow through, and in the two years I had known her at school, I had managed to kiss her ass just enough to be considered her friend, the kind that walked behind her and off to one side, surfacing long enough to concur with whatever she said before escaping back into her wide shadow.

In June, we settled into the new arrangement. We fell asleep on mattresses placed side-by-side on the floor of her room, calling each other "sister" and even buying t-shirts that said so, fighting over the cigarettes, the mirror, the front seat. The thing about having a sister—about which I admit I'm ignorant—is that it seems like even when they can't stand each other, they still stick it out. There must be some gene in DNA for sisters that says "you're a fucking idiot, but bless you, you're my idiot." Mary and I, however, were fake sisters, and the whole thing would end very badly. But in the beginning, the charade was beautiful. For the first time in my life, I felt comfortable, maybe even superior to Mary, Grace, and Grace's third husband, Bob, who drove a powder blue Ford Escort, was half his wife's weight, and usually took my side when an argument broke out between Mary and me—which happened more often as the summer wore on. At first, though, I felt okay, even wanted, living in their little white house that needed a paint job and a thorough cleaning. But as summer rolled on, our relationship descended into the unbearable. And in the end, we were fighting, scheming, jealous, bored. Secretly, I hated her, and she probably hated me, too. No teenage girl ever really likes her friends. Even her "sister."

Grace and Bob both worked. Grace, at a shelter for battered women—which she had been herself in a former life she liked to remind everyone on the rare occasion when we the four of us would huddle around the card table for dinner, and Bob somewhere with blue coveralls and nametags. So Mary and I had days to ourselves. We walked everywhere. Up at noon, hit the street. The most important thing was getting out of the house; they had no air conditioning and

the stale heaviness of it was too much after eight in the morning. Mary, greasy, hair wild, stuffed into her trench coat, leading me around so well I might have been wearing a leash, and me in my short shorts, nervously twisting my neck to see if anyone was looking at me. We'd head to the Quick Trip for a soda, then slump over to the music store in the mall to look at tapes we couldn't afford. Eventually, we'd end up at the Sun Vista apartment complex. This was my favorite part of the day for a variety of reasons, namely the air conditioning, the pool, and the boys. But not in that order.

Before this, the only time I had ever been in an apartment was when I helped Nonno clean up after he evicted someone. I was never allowed to interact with the tenants directly. But this was different, and Nonno wasn't there to pull on my hand and lead me home. These apartment complexes were huge, built like mazes, with different entrances, courtyards, people outside talking loudly, drinking, smoking, kids running everywhere. But it wasn't a community in the sense that everyone looked out for one another. Instead, they all seemed to be fighting about something. Maybe because they were all crammed in there, scuttling from one apartment to the next, accusing each other of theft or vandalism. And they could smell it when you didn't belong. I learned early on that being nice and quiet wasn't the way to navigate this world. I pretended I was Mary, much bigger than my 5'0" 90 lbs., more confident, shit talking, chain smoking, laughing and saying hell yeah! when offered booze from dirty bottles. I pretended I was the person I had created in the loony bin, when I figured out in my first group therapy session that a sick mom and a negligent dad wouldn't cut it amidst people whose parents had abandoned them at shopping malls, sodomized them, and fed them rat poison.

Before I became a regular at Sun Vista apartments, I had never known any black people besides the two girls at school that the principal adopted from Africa, and I certainly didn't know any black boys my own age, but Sun Vista was full of them and I couldn't help my breathing as I

watched them doing belly flops into the pool. I realized after we'd been there a few times that Mary liked to show me off to those boys, which was fine with me. Before we left her house in the mornings, she would tell me to wear skimpy bikinis and she'd get on hands and knees with scissors and take a few inches off my cutoffs until they didn't even cover my ass cheeks. She put blue and white beads in my hair because the boys at Sun Vista were Crips and she didn't want them thinking we were Bloods or worse, Vicelords—so we never wore red or yellow.

Poolside, Mary would knock me in the ribs with her elbow which was my cue to pull my tank-top over my head and proudly reveal my B-cup boobs. The boys would say, "Damn!" which was our invitation to stick around and swim. At the beginning of the summer, I fell madly in love with a skinny kid named Shaoa (Shuh-o-ah) who was the leader in our little group. He had two younger brothers and a couple of arrests for vandalism and truancy under his belt. He slung his arm around my shoulders, assuring me he was straight up gangsta, and he promised he loved me, too.

We hung out by that kidney shaped pool most days, but Mary never took her t-shirt off and she was always slightly resentful about being relegated to friend status. To increase her importance in the group, Mary became the Protector, one of the boys, a "cool chick." If this was organized crime, Mary was the pining lieutenant to Shaoa's Capo, threatening girls who came near him—on my behalf, she always assured me. Mary and Shaoa always seemed to have "business" that didn't pertain to me, and I was so naïve I never questioned them when they went into Shaoa's bedroom and locked the door while I watched court TV. I was the dumb puttana. And Shaoa's mother was the Godfather, which crystallized one afternoon when she came home early from work and screamed her head off at the sight of at least eight horny teenagers scattered around her living room. Before this, I had convinced myself Shaoa lived there alone taking care of his younger brothers. From then on, we stayed outside.

My first fight happened at Sun Vista. Fights always broke out around the pool in the early evenings, but usually it was drunk white boys picking on drunk black boys or vice versa. Girl fights were a novelty, even though Mary always seemed on the verge of fighting everyone. She would put her nose in a smaller girl's face and call her whore, push her sharply on the shoulder, threaten her with "mafia" recourse—Mary swore on the cross she always wore that her uncle Pete was a made guy—until the girl backed away. But if someone even bigger than Mary started talking shit, that's when she'd look at me and say Grace wanted us home for dinner.

My opponent that night wasn't that much bigger than me, I could tell that right off, even though she and her friends were fifty yards away in a section of the complex where much older teenagers hung out. We were sitting on the jungle gym, having booted the younger kids as the sun went down. The girl was loud and I kept hearing her laugh and of course I assumed she was laughing at me. I started talking to Shaoa about how ugly she looked even though I couldn't see her face.

"It's ninety degrees out, why's she wearing jeans and a sweater? She got burns or what?"

"My mom's gone," was Shaoa's only response, and he looked pointedly up at his bedroom window.

I ignored this. He knew the deal—his hand could go everywhere except inside my shorts—but he was always trying.

"Some people need to shut their fat mouths," I said as loudly as I could without shouting.

Mary jumped off the slide she had wedged herself into. "Come on, I'm not fighting any drunk bitches for you tonight." And she yanked me by the arm until I was standing up.

I might have had more than a sip off someone's beer. "I'll knock her the fuck out myself," I said, allowing Mary to pull me away.

The boys, sensing what was coming, all cupped their hands around their mouths and said, “Oooohhhh,” before breaking up with laughter, which only egged me on.

Mary didn’t say anything, just held on to my arm, dragging me away, until the girl started yelling at me, too. “Get back here slut!” And then she got up from the concrete steps she was sitting on, and started marching toward me. Ten people followed her.

We ran for the street, a four-lane highway, and after we got to the other side, I turned around, and gave her the finger. For some reason, I figured that apartment people couldn’t leave their complexes, that there was a force-field that trapped them there and as long as I was on the other side of the highway, I was safe. But then she crossed the street like it was nothing, and that’s when Mary said to hang back.

“It’s gonna happen,” she said. “You can run, but then we can’t come back here.”

Meaning that she couldn’t come back to throw herself at the 19-year old named Jojo who talked like a Baptist preacher and dressed like Kid-N-Play.

The girl had caught up with us, and was now only 20 feet away. “Hey, where you goin, slut?”

Mary stood next to me. “Punch her hard on the nose. Right on the nostril. And block your face,” she whispered, before slowly edging away.

Cars zoomed by every second. Again, even though the girl was pressing toward me, I felt like nothing could happen with all of the cars going by, with Mary by my side. Nothing could happen when there were families pushing strollers on either side of us. For Christ’s sake, we were standing in front of the Quick Trip.

“Look, I don’t know what your problem is…” I started to say.

“You’re my problem bitch.” She ground her fist into her palm. “Think you can just come into my house and talk shit? No fucking way, slut, no how. You ain’t better than anyone.”

Jojo the Preacher stepped forward to give his blessing. He spread his skinny arms out like Jesus on the cross, and spoke like one of the priests at church. “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness of men who hold the truth in wickedness. Romans 1:18. Proceed.”

And then the kids behind her formed a circle around us. I looked at Mary. She was standing there in her trench coat, rolls of fat hanging over her jeans, bouncing on the balls of her feet. She stared at Jojo the Preacher and sort of nodded like this was church and she was his disciple. Which made me the wicked about to get pounded by heaven.

I don't remember throwing a punch, or even trying to block. I just stood there while the girl grabbed my throat and side stepped behind me. Then she put me in a head lock, bending me over. One clear image I do remember: the girl had a hole in her sweater along the seam running from her arm pit to her waist. With my head pressed against the hole I could smell her and it reminded me of the Salvation Army store where Dad bought my bed. I screamed, but it came out gurgly, and with one hand I reached toward Mary, who was all blurry as my eyes filled. I tried to wrestle out of her grip, but couldn't. She had me on the ground in seconds. The whole time she had her hands around my throat, I could hear the cars, the whoops of her friends as they cheered her on, and the cashier at Quick Trip saying pump 3 was ready to fill, please pay inside.

I don't remember if anyone broke it up or if she simply got bored with my possum routine and walked away. When they had all gone back across the highway, Mary picked me up, dragged me home, and told Grace and Bob that I walked into a light pole when they saw my face.

After the big fight, which was what I began calling it the next day, Shaoa dumped me for the girl who kicked my ass. I cried, standing in the dim hallway outside his apartment while he

blocked my view of his living room and told me that Misty had really pretty eyes. The he shut the door on me. That was the end of our tenure at Sun Vista.

Mary was pissed. “Misty likes to fuck. That’s why.” She snarled at me as we trudged toward home on the Fourth of July. She pulled the box of sparklers she had stolen from the Tobacco Outlet out of her pocket and threw it in the ditch. “You could have at least let him finger bang you.”

I stopped walking. “Do you think that would have helped?”

We stayed at home more after that. Mary said she was going to start working out but she slept until two in the afternoon every day and then watched TV and ate generic macaroni and cheese. I sat in the driveway in a broken lawn chair and pored over Grace’s beauty magazines for a way to get Shaoa back until I found a new boy named Johnny who wore baggy overalls with one strap hanging down and no shirt underneath. He lived down the street and was very white. He liked to hold my hand and tell me about his cousin who did a fire-eating routine at the Iowa State Fair. Jimmy promised to take me when it started up in August. I squeezed his hand and told him I couldn’t wait. But I didn’t really like Jimmy and I started seeing one of Shaoa’s friends, Travon, on the side, because he lived at Pine Ridge, the apartment complex next door to Sun Vista.

About the only time I was in a car was when Grace, Bob and I went to meetings. Grace would swivel around from the front seat to remind me that she and Bob met at a meeting and fell in love. Sobriety was their shared hobby. In the loony bin I had convinced my doctor and the other patients that I was a crack dealer and that sometimes I snorted cocaine. I knew about snorting because once I caught Dad out in the garage and I knew all about crack from *Cops*.

They might not have believed me, but the only person who ever openly questioned me was Mary's older brother Dominic who was not allowed in Grace's house. He was driving Mary and me somewhere, and Mary explained that I had to go to meetings with Grace and Bob because of my former crack abuse. He turned all the way around in the driver's seat and said, "Really? What does crack look like?"

Mary whispered in my ear, "Say eight-ball."

"Like an eight ball."

"What's it made of?" He pressed.

"Crack, dummy." And then I rolled my eyes and he rolled his eyes and I don't ever remember talking to him again.

Meetings were at The White House. It's an old Victorian tucked back into the timber on the east side of Des Moines and looks exactly like every other Victorian house on that side of town. The only real difference is that on any given night, there could be more than fifty cars parked in the little gravel parking lot around back, but no one sees that unless they're supposed to. At the beginning of the summer, Grace and Bob brought Mary and me to a dance at the White House that we thought would be fun until we saw firsthand what addicts do in social settings. The dance floor remained empty as a hundred people milled around outside like zombies smoking cigarettes and complaining about the government. Mary and I spent the rest of the night leaning against Bob's Escort trying to get a twenty-four-year-old on methadone to buy us beer.

One time, we were leaving for a meeting and I took the cigarettes while Mary was in the bath. Mary and I always shared a pack. Back then, they only cost a couple bucks, but even that was too expensive to buy two packs every day. So I took the cigarettes, which I later claimed was an accident, but that was a lie. Who shows up at an NA meeting with a few cigs in a plastic baggie?—the box is a good stress reliever, you can hold it tight between your hands while

addicts recount the vivid details of their many crimes; turn it over and over, stand it up and knock it over like a domino. So I needed the whole box and when I got there I was glad I had them. I never talked, listening was hard enough, and I was always relieved when the meeting leader said a prayer because that meant it was over.

When we got home all hell broke loose. Mary was standing on the sagging porch waiting for us to pull up. Her whole head was in the backseat window before Bob had the car in park.

“What the fuck did you think I was gonna do when I got outta the tub?” She was screaming. Like horror movie screaming.

After months of phony drug use and NA meetings as a way to spend time with Grace, I think this was the first time I really saw addiction. Mary’s hair was flying around her pink face, her nostrils were so big, a nickel would have fit inside them. I was terrified that she was going to jerk me clean through the car window. I started to crank it up but she yanked the door open before I knew what happened. She saw the pack lying next to me on the seat and grabbed it.

“Where the fuck is the lighter?”

I unzipped my purse and dug around until I found it. “Here,” I held it out to her like a scrap of food to a wild animal, and flinched a little as she snatched it out of my hand. She purposely dragged her long red fingernails across my palm.

“Mary, calm down,” Bob said as he unfolded his long body from the small car.

“Shut the fuck up, Bob. No one’s talkin to you.”

Bob pulled at his beard and turned to his wife.

“Mary. Do. Not. Talk to him like that or you can go to your room.” Grace slammed the car door and slung her purse over her shoulder.

“Oh, of course you take his side,” Mary dragged deeply on the cigarette and her hair seemed to settle a little around her face, but now she was up for a fight. I was relieved that her attention seemed to be focused on her mother.

“He’s my husband,” Grace spat at her.

“So get a new one like you always do,” Mary laughed.

“That’s it, you’re grounded. You are the most disrespectful girl I’ve ever met,” Bob barked, shook his skinny finger and then backed away. He turned toward the house.

“Sure, Bob. I’m grounded,” Mary said, flicking her cigarette at his retreating back.

He slammed the porch door behind him and in that moment I wish I would have been smart enough to know what Bob did: Just get out of the way. Mary got her temper from Grace, but I had never seen it until that moment. In the dimming light, the two of them sort of resembled sumo wrestlers as they began circling each other.

“I have to get new husbands,” Grace said, moving in closer to Mary, “because they take one look at you and can’t get away fast enough. You’ve ruined more of my relationships with that foul fucking mouth of yours than I can count.”

Mary bit her lip. “Well, you’ve got a new daughter now!” She turned to me. I was a much easier target. “Why did you come here? Why don’t you go hang out with your own mom? Oh yeah, she’s a fucking vegetable.”

I was too scared to be angry. I said the first thing I could think of. “I’m calling my dad.”

I have to beg, he doesn’t want to come pick me up. He sounds like he’s falling asleep on the phone but its only 8:30. “Please,” I say into the dirty receiver. I’m standing under a bug covered neon light at the Quick Trip, crouched inside a phone booth. It’s still really hot, and it’s

getting darker. I turn my back on the two boys sitting on the curb a few feet away who look like they're at least eighteen. "Please, Dad."

"Jesus Christ," Dad says. "Fine," and hangs up.

It's a twenty-five minute drive from his house to Mary's but it takes him two hours, during which, I never leave that phone booth. He shows up skinnier, more holes in his jeans, his Harley shirt purposely frayed. A new tattoo peeks out from one of the holes in his shirt: a dragon spewing flames, the name Elena spelled out in elegant letters underneath. Why do the women portrayed in his tattoos always come in the form of monsters? I'm the devil. Elena, his new girlfriend who I know is married to someone else, is a fire spitting dragon. If my mother had allowed him to get tattoos when they were married, she would have been, a what? The screaming eagle on his forearm? The Tasmanian devil on his tricep?

"I want to come home," I say as he pulls up and puts the truck in park. He gets out and the two boys sitting on the curb finally leave their resting place when they see Dad, who leans on the hood and crosses his arms over his chest.

"What happened?" he asks but it doesn't really sound like a question. He's not looking at me.

"It's just not for me. Come with me and help me get my stuff," I say, and I start to get into the passenger side.

"Can't, Angie."

"What? Why?"

"Leavin in a couple days for Texas. To get help—"

"What's in Texas? I can go to Texas."

The light is completely gone now, and I can barely see his face, only his silhouette as he leans against the truck. Customers come and go, some looking at us, some not. I don't know how embarrassing this is.

"I'm sorry, hon, you can't come. I'm goin, but if you don't want to go back to what's-her-names, you can go to your grandparents—"

"No!" I scream, and now I'm crying. "You're an asshole." I say this with as much force as I can. I want to rush him, to beat him in the chest and scratch at his stupid tattoos and the stupid scar on his face that he got from a motorcycle accident when he was a teenager. This is the first time that I think I hate him.

"Yeah, well..." he says and I stare at the spot where his face should be.

But then I'm saved. The powder blue Escort pulls up. Grace gets out of the car, and she has her counselor hat on. She puts her arm around Dad, leads him back to the driver's seat of his truck, and they talk for a few minutes as Dad leans his head against the steering wheel. I don't know what else to do, I slide into the backseat of the Escort and lie down. Then we're pulling away, Mary with her arm around me, saying she's sorry and offering me a cigarette.

I won't see my dad again until September, when he's finally back from Texas and school starts. In twenty years, we've never spoken of that night.

I juggle Johnny and Travon for three whole weeks, seeing Travon during the days at Pine Ridge and Johnny at night because he lives closer to our house and the days are getting shorter. Grace and Bob have decided we're not allowed to stay out after dark, so it's a practical decision more than anything. But somehow Johnny finds out about Travon.

We were lying on the couch at Mary's when he said, "So, I heard you've got another boyfriend."

I was too dumb to pretend I didn't know what he was talking about. "No, he's just a friend."

And then Johnny's hand was inside my shirt. He rubbed his hand across my boobs, which was fine, but then he tried to unbutton my shorts, which he never did before, and I pulled his hand away.

"C'mon," he said.

And then it all unraveled into the most clichéd after-school-special scene.

"You're a whore anyway, why won't you do it with me?"

"I'm not a whore."

"You fuck black guys. That's what everyone was saying. Even her." And he nodded in the direction of Mary's bedroom where Mary was trying in vain to make her hair straight with her mother's iron.

"You can go."

He fixed the strap on his overalls and left. I cried.

This is the only time in my life that I won't have sex because it feels wrong. When I'm older, in high school, and suddenly surrounded by sex fiends—girls and boys—I won't do it because I'm afraid I smell bad, because I won't know how, but my abstinence will have nothing to do with morality, only low self-esteem.

Mary came out when she heard me and denied saying any such thing about me to anyone. Then she painted my toenails and exclaimed gleefully when she saw that Johnny had accidentally left two tickets for the fair on the coffee table. That was ten bucks.

"Who can we get to drive us?" she asked, the brush hanging from her half-straight hair.

When I finally get Travon on the phone I ask if he knows anyone who can take us and he says, uh, no, and not to call him again. But I'm getting used to boys dumping me, and this time I don't even cry or feel bad. I just keep flipping the pages in my phone book trying to find someone who has a car and won't mind buying me a corn dog and lemonade and maybe a ride on the Ferris wheel. I call my uncle Jimmy, who is not really my uncle, only my Dad's best friend but who buys me clothes sometimes. After a few minutes of hem-hawing, he sighs and says sure. Let's go to the fair.

She dresses carefully that night. Tank-top dress, heels, matching bra and panties.

This is all I know about her. The rest is what I've imagined, what I've dreamt about for two decades. I give her voice because she deserves at least that. At least that.

They keep buying me beers and I'm happy to accept. The Bud tent is packed with sweaty cowboys and girls named Charlene and Tracy, and everyone is slippery and drunk and swaying to Garth Brooks. But these two guys, the ones sitting across from me, they only have eyes for me. One is bald, purposely, and wears a black Guns N' Roses t-shirt. He says his name is Tim. His friend, whose name is Andy or Aaron, sips from a metal flask that he's got tucked into his waistband. They're full of it, telling me how pretty I am, even though I've got the world's biggest zit on my chin and my hair is doing something funny. I laugh, say thanks, and look around for someone better. But they keep buying me beers and at four bucks a pop, I'm happy to accept. Beth was supposed to meet me here, and maybe she's around, but it's so packed I can barely find my legs, let alone my friend. I keep drinking.

Tim and Andy or Aaron have weed in their van. Do I want to partake? I suppose I say yes. How else did I end up here? I'm stumbling across the grandstand, and I can see the bright lights above my head that say Iowa State Fair. I fall just inside the gate and a girl grabs my arm and tells me to be careful. I look into her eyes and guess her to be fourteen. She looks like me, I think, and I want to tell her so, but then Tim and Andy or Aaron are picking me up, dragging me across the street, and past the biker bar blaring classic rock. Then I only see shadows. They've parked their van in someone's back yard, like I did, but I couldn't find my car now if I tried. I want to pass out, but then they're hoisting me into the back of the van and its lights out until one of them turns the ignition and I know we're driving away. My dress is gone, but I know I'm still wearing one of the red heels I bought this morning because I can feel the blister on my toe pulsing. And then the fog lifts.

I try to sit up but someone's hand pushes me back down. No, I say. Loud. I scream. Something cracks across my cheek. Again. Glass. And then something drips into my mouth. And then I'm lying on the grass.

Mary and I pile into Uncle Jimmy's little Ford truck with him and Crystal, who is only a couple years older than me and who I think is sort of like Jimmy's foster child, and head to the fair—ten solid days of midway rides, fried foods on a stick, live stock, free concerts, and car races. Over one million people a year go to the Iowa State Fair and most of them park their cars in the yards of people who live close to the fairgrounds. I've heard that people make thousands of dollars letting people park in their yards. The trick is remembering what street you're on, what the house looks like.

The time we spent at the fair that night is lost on me. I'm sure I ate a bunch of fried stuff, looked at the blue ribbon pig with the giant testicles, and marched through the midway looking for people who were looking at me. Jimmy, I'm sure, spent a little time in the Budweiser tent and Crystal probably kept an eye on me. Mary met some friends and we didn't see her again until we were leaving. What I do remember: Mary didn't want to go home. She stood at the gates talking with her friends as we pestered her to get going. Jimmy stood a little ways to the side, saying "Excuse me," to the people filing through the gates, letting me handle it. Finally, Mary turned around and told us to go get the truck and drive back to the gate for her. Jimmy, who was patient and generous and who probably just wanted to get the hell away from Mary, said fine. We'd see her in twenty minutes or so and we hiked back to his truck.

They try to keep me away from her. That's what I remember. Jimmy first, then Crystal, who has bleached blond hair and wears a ratty gray hoodie, and who in the next few years I will grow to worship like my own personal teenage idol. The two of them stand in front of her, the headlights of the truck lighting them up like actors on a stage. Then Jimmy kneels next to the girl, and Crystal tries to drag me away to call 911. This is before cell phones, and Crystal squeezes my hand until it hurts as she and I go in search of a phone. The lights are out at the house where we've parked. We go next door, same thing. Then we're running, just running through the darkness looking for a light on a front porch or in a kitchen window. Four houses away, we find one, but the twitchy old lady behind the screen door tells to get the hell off her property before slamming the door on us.

"I'm going back," I say, and yank my hand out of Crystal's.

"Go sit in the truck," she says, and sprints down the street.

I'm disoriented and I make a wrong turn. I'm in a different yard surrounded by cars cold with dew and I can only think of Mary. I see her standing alone at the gate, checking a watch I know she doesn't even own, bouncing on the balls of her feet. She keeps scanning the busy intersection for the little pick-up, but no one comes. And then I realize I'm a child, and I'm alone in the dark and I start yelling for Jimmy, who, thank Christ, yells back, only a few yards away. I follow the sound of his voice.

I find him between the Celica and the crotch rockets, still kneeling, but now he's holding her hand, and whispering something I can't hear. For one clear instant I see her between Jimmy's legs. She is pale and naked except for her white bra with pink flowers. And her face is not there. She is a neck and then mush and then grass. Next to a muddy tire a few feet away, lies her dress with the kaleidoscope pattern and one of her red heels. I walk forward to pick them up, but Jimmy tells me to get in the truck. Okay. And then Crystal is right behind me and I'm sitting stiff in the front seat when I hear the sirens.

A month later, a detective will come to my school and talk to me in the empty cafeteria. She'll tell me that it was two men and the police think they used beer bottles. The girl is okay, she says, sort of.

Mary is not at the gates. The fair is closed down and I have no idea how long it's been. We drive around, circling through the empty blocks, calling her name into the dark. Jimmy says she probably got a ride home, but I want to keep looking. Finally, after what seems hours, I relent, and he turns the truck toward Mary's house. Jimmy talks to himself on the way home. Crystal is silent in the back seat. I'm frantic as we pull into the driveway. The lights are on in the house and I'm imagining Grace and Bob pacing around, one of them on hold with the police station and the other making a pot of coffee. I leap from the truck before Jimmy puts it in park.

They're all in there, totally oblivious. Grace and Mary are lying on the couch watching something on TV. Bob is in a recliner, reading a newspaper.

"Where the fuck did you go?" I scream at Mary, standing directly in front of the TV.

Mary scratches her head. She's wearing a large t-shirt with Kermit the Frog on the front. "Well, you decided not to show up, so I got a ride," she says, and motions for me to quit blocking the TV.

"What's wrong?" Grace asks, rising from the couch.

I realize that Jimmy and Crystal are standing in the doorway. I look at the clock on the wall. It's after two.

I'm incoherent. Screaming noises fill the small house. Grace looks from me to Jimmy and Crystal. "What the hell happened?"

"Where the fuck did you go?" I scream again. "We found this girl and she was bloody and you weren't there..."

And then Mary is on her feet, and she's got her big hand on my arm, pushing me back, but I could lift a fucking car right now. I start pushing too.

Jimmy, Grace, and Bob all start yelling for us to get away from each other, but I grab a chunk of Mary's hair and pull her forward. I've got my hand on her throat and I'm squeezing and I'm saying something but I can't hear it and don't remember what it is. For an instant Mary is so shocked that I get a knee into her belly and she goes down. But then she's a beast and I weigh 90 lbs. and we're rolling around. It takes all three adults to pull us away from each other.

They put Mary and me on separate ends of the couch while it all gets sorted out. Grace keeps her hand over her mouth as Jimmy and Crystal recount the events of the evening. Bob stands behind his wife, rubbing her shoulders. I don't look at Mary, so I don't know what she

thinks. Before Jimmy leaves, he leans down and hugs me. “You got a couple good swings in there,” he whispers. Then he and Crystal are gone.

We sit in silence except for the TV which is now a mishmash of infomercials and seems funny. Sweat drips down my back and I begin to push the images away but this is futile until I’m past 30 and they become jumbled up with *Law & Order* episodes. Until I sit down to write.

“I think it’s time for me to go home,” I say to no one in particular, feeling the adrenaline slip away as I lean my head back on the couch cushion.

No one argues.

The Beginnings of Money

Only in recent years have I been allowed inside the bank. When I was twenty-two, I sat outside in the car, smoking, and rereading *To Kill a Mockingbird* while my Grandparent's conducted their business. Four years later I am permitted to sit at my Grandfather's side, across the desk from his personal banker, a sturdy looking woman named Cindy who has been handling his finances since I was in junior high. The white legal size envelope on my lap is almost as bulky as the faded red leather case that sits in front of my Grandfather, next to his blue baseball cap.

"Alright, Mike, lets open it up," Cindy says.

She winks at me and I look over her head at the plaque for Outstanding Service to keep from laughing. Nonno smiles, shakes his finger at her, "You kids," before he slowly unzips the case. He spends the next five minutes trying to decipher the scratching he has made on each envelope before handing it off to Cindy.

"How's he doin'?" Cindy asks in a voice that she and I know he can't hear. Or chooses not to.

"He's okay. I brought everything you asked for."

I open the envelope stamped Phil Watson, P.C. and sort through the thick stack of papers for my Grandmother's death certificate.

"How are you doing?"

"Fine."

I find the death certificate, and the copies of Nonna's will, Nonno's will, and my General Power of Attorney, all stamped and signed and important looking. I thumb through each before handing them to her.

“He’s staying with us now.” I nod toward Nonno who is hunched over his envelopes, his lips moving.

I catch the word “Christ,” and wonder what he has forgotten.

“Good,” she says a moment later as she places each document on her desk, side by side.

“I was hoping he wouldn’t have to stay alone.” She looks up. “How’s that going?”

I feel the right side of my mouth lift. “I’m sure you can imagine.”

“Eh, Cindy, we pay this already?” Nonno’s voice sounds like gravel under a pair of Michelins. He’ll only admit to fifty years of smoking unfiltered, rolled-up cigarettes (cheaper than the pre-packaged ones) but I’m guessing he started sometime in his teens after he got off the boat.

She takes the electric bill from him and consults the register for his checkbook.

“Yes, Mike, we paid that on February 19th. This is just the receipt.”

Nonno shakes his head. “Forgot.”

Cindy spends the next forty five minutes paying his water bill, phone bill, and Veteran’s Hospital donation. She also helps him sort through a catalogue he received from AARP and completes the order form for two Bright Light flashlights that require no batteries and a faux leather jacket with an eagle patch sewn on the sleeve.

Nonno stands up, says “See you next week,” to Cindy and grabs the baseball cap off of her desk. He pauses, and then scoops a dozen or so mints from the candy dish next to the silver tray holding her business cards.

After he is through her door and heading toward the bathroom, I pull out Cory’s paycheck and ask to cash it with her instead of going to a teller. Even though I know she’ll do it, I still ask. At this point, I take nothing for granted.

“Of course,” she says, taking the creased slip of paper from me.

“We’re thinking of buying a new house. Ya know, bigger.”

She laughs. “Yeah, I imagine you are. What’s he think?”

I know she’s referring to Nonno. She’s seen my grandparents’ house. She knows what kind of fight I’m in for.

“Well, we haven’t really said a lot to him yet.”

The one time I did mention to Nonno that we were thinking of buying a house thirty miles away from the south side of Des Moines—his home for the last sixty years—he feigned deafness. Even when I tried to tell him that Cory and I are going to start having children soon, he puffed on his Nebulizer and said, “Then you buy a bigger house after you’ve had them, Angelina. Eh, would you call the people *mangiare* with no food on the table?”

Cindy nods, counts out the bills and puts them in a Banker’s Trust envelope. My transactions take three minutes.

“With me not working anymore, though, I’m kind of worried about doubling our mortgage payment.” I tell her the sales price for the Johnson’s’ home, and ask what she thinks. She looks at me with a strange little smile.

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” she says.

I stare blankly.

“Angie, you have power of attorney now—“she taps the ends of her fingernails on the stack of papers in front of her—“so I can discuss the accounts with you.”

“Oh, that’s right.” I already know this. I know what I’m supposed to do now, but it feels wrong, like I’m about to get caught sneaking though Nonna’s purse. “Phil told me I need to get copies of holdings at all of the banks for our records. He called it a—summary page?”

Cindy turns away from me, and begins typing at her keyboard. “I don’t think I know about all of the banks—you know how your grandfather is—but let me just print this.”

She stands up from her chair, and hurries out of her office. She returns in twelve seconds and hands me two sheets of paper.

“This is everything he has here. Now, just from the interest checks I deposit for him every month, I know he banks with all of the big guys...”

I laughed hysterically the first time I opened my medicine cabinet and saw Nonno’s can of Dollar General shaving cream shoved between my Ultimate Styling Wax and tampons. And then I sat down on the toilet seat and cried. Nonna dying and Nonno coming to live in our spare bedroom has brought Cory and I closer together. We hug more. Talk more. Spend more time huddled on the couch in the basement chain smoking and speaking in funeral voices. We moved into my mother’s house five years ago when it was made clear by the frowning police man who pulled Nonno over after he ran two red lights, that Sunday dinner wouldn’t cut it anymore. We needed to be closer. Mom’s house is a mile away from Nonna and Nonno’s, and we’ve spent these years in limbo, helping with their shopping, doctor’s appointments, sending letters and boxes to their nephew in Italy, mowing, shoveling, listening.

I’ve known since I was ten and I found a shoebox of bundled dollars in their freezer that Nonna and Nonno had money. Not that my assumption was ever confirmed. I think my grandparents were terrified of telling me. They lied their asses off whenever I had the balls to ask about it, but even as they shook their heads and told me to *zita* and eat my food, I knew that one day, I wouldn’t need to worry about balancing my checkbook. And that time is now. Nonno and I spend our days opening safe-deposit boxes, sitting in front of personal bankers at what seems like every bank in town, collecting summary pages. I keep a running tally in my head and go back and forth between sheer awe at their commitment to penny pinching, and resentment. They

raised me on generic everything, gave me a hand-me-down life, but sent me to school with the governor's kids.

Cory and I spend a lot of our time talking around this new reality. Our real life is now starting. But this is what we don't say to each other. What we do say:

"I had to wait twenty-five minutes just to get in the bathroom! I almost peed all over myself," I say as I slam the bedroom door and fall facedown onto the bed. "And then I had to spend five minutes just wiping it all down so I could use it," I say against the pillow so I know it won't be heard. Nonno's tendency to pee all over the toilet seat—and the vanity, rug, and trash can, really freaks Cory out.

"Go outside behind the garage like I had to last night." I hear him snap his sweat socks on. "It's like camping—"

"I hate camping."

"Or, go squat over the drain in the laundry room. I think there's towels in the dryer anyway." I can actually hear him smiling.

I know I shouldn't be saying this, but I do anyway. "If we get a new house—" I hear the doorknob stop turning. "We have to buy a place with trees. And a porch. Wooded area, old looking—"

I smell what's supposed to be Mountain Spring Tide on the pillow case, but has mingled with Cory's musty body wash. I flip onto my back, shove my legs down beneath the patchwork comforter. I haven't been able to sit still since the moment I left the bank.

"And a second bathroom." He butts in, excited.

"Maybe even a third, well, half, anyway" I say, thinking about Cory's hour-long routine in the mornings. "He's not gonna like it," I say, thinking of Nonno's reaction to change, which is always bad.

Cory says, “Nope,” and I throw a pillow at him. He throws the pillow back.

“How do we do this?”

He sits down on the bed. “We can’t do anything until we clean out his house. Then we start on ours, and maybe in a year, we’ll be ready to move.”

“Just as long as I don’t have to share a bathroom with him anymore, I don’t care,” I say, annoyed at how rational he’s being about everything.

His house, Cory called it. Not *hers*. Only a month ago, I still went to *Nonna’s* in the mornings to drink coffee before going to work. For years I walked in to *her* kitchen, and found her sitting at the table, hand under her chin, watching Katie Couric interview that day’s celebrity. The smell of burnt coffee wafting up from the cup in front of her. The last few months before she died, I found her more often in bed than in the kitchen. I think it was the cooking. Nonno’s COPD makes his sense of smell really acute. He started complaining whenever she cooked anything in oil—which was everything—and she was dead three months later.

I hear *Nonno’s* oxygen tank in the living room start the long sequence of beeps indicating that the filter needs to be changed. I pull the comforter up over my head. I can’t stand the idea of disrupting his life any more than I already have in bringing him here to live with us, but visions of him falling down the stairs again allowed me to ignore his complaints when we packed him up and installed him in the spare bedroom. I feel a sharp pain, my chest sinks. The dogs have nosed their way in to the room, and one of them jumps on me still covered by the heavy blanket, and burrows beneath to find me. He licks my face, nibbles my ear. I push him away.

“Land!” I shout, knowing it’s out of place to be yelling in our quiet bedroom at ten-thirty on a Wednesday morning, but so what? This is an adjustment period, I remind myself. Cory is now rolling over on the bed with both dogs, and I am pushed onto the floor.

I stand up and repeat, “I want land. Like, acres. No neighbors ten feet away!”

“Well, yeah, it’d be nice, but-“he looks toward the door.

I nod. “But-“

“*Quanti Vuoi?*” I ask Nonno, although, I already know the answer. The steak knife is poised in my hand, ready to cut two bananas away from the bunch in the wooden bowl that used to hold the mail until Cory caught *Nonno* peeking inside the credit card bill. We now keep the mail in our bedroom.

“*Tre.*” He holds up three fingers and wiggles them, just as he used to do when I was five years old.

I grab one more banana and slice roughly through the stems.

I should know better. We go through this every morning. Some things are Gospel: spread a section of yesterday’s newspaper in front of his place at the table; get two pills from the container labeled _ a.m.; peel two oranges; nuke a cup of instant cappuccino; make two pieces of toast with peanut butter, cut in half; wait until he sits down and watch him take his pills.

“Big day today,” he says in between mouthfuls of orange.

He looks out the window and sees Cory’s truck in the driveway, and then squints at the clock on the stove. He shakes his head.

I smooth out the front page of the paper a little harder than necessary. Nonno chops a banana into thumb-size bites, and presses a white pill into one before popping it into his mouth.

“*Si, grande giorno,*” I say, my eyes scanning his horoscope in case there’s anything that would be of interest to him. Anything about “coming into some money” makes him giggle.

Vega and Lizzie come bounding into the kitchen and head straight for Nonno.

“Down! Come on, Angela-“

I am already out of my chair, yanking the bigger of the two away from Nonno. Vega, the seventy pound puppy, whines, and tries to lick his face. Lizzie is “intelligent” as Nonno says and requires no admonishment. She sits beside his chair, staring adoringly up at him until he tosses her a piece of the banana.

“There! You happy now,” he tells her. “She’s good, not like the *pillooc!*” He nods toward Vega who is still trying to jerk out of my grasp and get any stray bits of banana Lizzie might have dropped. “You should get rid of him.”

I put my laptop on the coffee table and tuck my legs underneath me. I turn Judge Judy off just as she really gets rolling on a slack-mouthed truck driver who, “Should have known better than to get involved with a woman whose children were taken away by social services.” Maybe the new house will have a room I can use strictly as an office. I try to concentrate on the travel piece I was supposed to write almost a month ago for the magazine writing class I’m taking. What I did over my spring break vacation. Well, Nonna was admitted into the hospital a week before break started, so my vacation began a little early.

They loved her in the emergency room. Italian comes out pretty no matter what you say, and had they known what “*grasso*” and “*pazzo*” meant when they were taking her blood pressure, they probably wouldn’t have laughed and said, “Awww, thank you!”

“She’s very lucky to have you,” they said to me as they pumped more blood from her arm. I only smiled shyly in response. I always did when people said that to us. What was I supposed to say, “Yeah, she’s sure lucky she’s got me to cart her around? Too bad my mom died, or she could do it!”

Two days later Nonna's heart rate dipped into the low thirties and took five minutes to stabilize. The neurological damage was done, however, and the jerking of her eyes and hands wasn't a good sign, as I had hoped in moments of pure denial—the first stage of grief; it was her nervous system dying.

I walked into the room while they were intubating her. I couldn't help but think of a magician as he pulls miles and miles of brightly colored scarves from his mouth.

“What's that for,” Nonno asked when we were alone in the room. I sipped coffee, hoped he would forget he asked the question in the first place.

“It's keeping her alive,” I told him when, fed up with my silence, he asked the janitor who was trying to get around him to empty the trash.

Nonno said nothing, but looked at Nonna as though he couldn't understand why she was there, instead of at home making him a dish of pastina.

“Don't tell no one about this,” Nonno said after they removed her IV and respirator and we were left standing on either side of her bed, holding a hand.

“I won't.”

“We tell everyone her heart attacked. Nothing we could do.”

I nodded. Her hand, swollen purple from the fluid retention, curled tightly around mine. I tried to count all of the times in a normal day I would have held her hand. It was Sunday, so I would have reached for it at every grocery store—3 to 4 depending on her stack of coupons—times two.

“*Capisci, Angelina? Nessuno.*”

“*Si. Nessuno...*”

I've seen *Steel Magnolia's* enough times to know that when you remove artificial respiration, the person is supposed to die. Quickly. They aren't supposed to linger for five days

while you shuffle back and forth from the Critical Care Unit to the cafeteria, eyes sore, stomach knotty, clothes too loose from wearing. They aren't supposed to take so long the nurse has to enter your room somewhere around the sixth day to ask you gently if you would mind if your grandmother was moved to a different floor— they needed the room and no other care beyond pain relief was being administered so she really didn't belong there anymore.

Hospice was called, and Nonna was moved there. Nonno didn't want to come to the hospital anymore. I began to hold my breath every time I entered her room. Her mouth slackened, lips dried out, the coloring in her face went from beige to pale blue, and still her chest shook as breath escaped. Nonno leaned against the side of her bed, muttering, "*copatoste*" and, "*mula*" when he thought he was alone with her.

Once, a few weeks before she died, Cory and I sat in the basement, a little drunk from a night out with friends, and I told him, "When she goes, my heart will be broken." I was thinking about that night, about saying those words, as Nonno and I sat hunched over the narrow hospital tray, eating Wendy's baked potatoes and I looked over at her. She wasn't breathing. The pamphlet said that it takes a few minutes to actually die. That the heart doesn't just stop, it slows first. She took a breath and then stopped. Ten, maybe fifteen seconds went by, the rhythm of her chest punctuated with stillness. I held her hand and touched her cheek and tried not to listen to Nonno cry. I wondered how long I needed to wait before telling someone.

Her funeral was held on the day after classes resumed, the first day of spring, marked with an ice storm that kept most people away. But my vacation trickled on, finally arriving here, now.

We are ushered into an office at the back of US Bank by a blond woman wearing a company sweatshirt and jeans—must be casual Friday—whose name tag says “Lori” underneath the bank’s logo.

“What type of loan were you considering? Thirty-year fixed? One of our Home Equity interest only specials we’ve got running this month?” She looks from me to Nonno expectantly, and I see her pause at the hole on the top of his sneaker.

Nonno and I look at each other. He winks at me.

“Is Marcy here today?” Nonno asks. It comes out like “Marshy” and Lori looks to me for translation.

“Marcy,” I tell her, and tap Nonno on his shin with the bottom of his cane.

“Ooooh. Marcy. Sorry, with the accent, I wasn’t sure—“

“Is she here today?” I ask quickly.

When she comes back with the branch manager, Marcy herself, I make sure to keep my eyes on Lori.

“Mike!” Marcy walks toward Nonno with her arms stretched out.

Nonno struggles to stand and he and Marcy embrace slightly.

“I was so sorry to hear about Marguerite.”

He nods, “That’s life.”

She rubs the top of his arm with her bony hand, and smiles at me. “How’s he doin?” She asks in the same voice Cindy from Bankers Trust uses.

I shrug.

“Well, what are we here for today?” Marcy sits at Lori’s desk and clasps her hands together.

Nonno removes a thick, worn envelope held together with a rubber band. His hands tremble as he slides the rubber band off, and opens the envelope. “These certificates needs renewed.”

He removes a few sheets of blue paper and hands them to Marcy. Lori’s eyes—an aquamarine not seen in nature—are fixed on the hole in Nonno’s shoe again. I try not to smile as I place my hands in my lap, and cross my ankles. Marcy glances at each sheet and places them in a row in front of her. There are six in all. The legal size envelope is with me again, and as she starts typing away on Lori’s computer I search for the necessary documents.

“Marcy, I have Grandma’s death certificate, and a copy of my Power of Attorney. I also need a summary page for all of their accounts.”

“Ah. Yes. Mike—“

Nonno is studying the picture of Lori and her family at the beach on her desk—

“We need to take Marguerite’s name off of these.” She gestures to the papers in front of her. “Do you want to renew the certificates in your name only?” She looks at me.

“No. Put Angela on, too, so’s if she needs anything, she no need me to get it,” he says.

I remain silent. I am seeing my unborn children going off to college, my grandchildren doing the same. I’m seeing land and trees, a long winding driveway leading to a house I can’t see yet. But it’s there.

Nonno asks to keep the fancy gold pen Marcy gives him to sign the CD’s with, and she nudges it back toward him with another smile. Lori stands in the corner of her office, arms folded in front of her chest and chokes out a “thank you” as Marcy guides Nonno and I from the office toward the outer doors.

“Where to sir?” I ask when we’re in the car, my hands on the steering wheel.

He pulls the oxygen mask over his head and presses it into his face, taking a long, deep breath. Then he pushes the mask up, lights a cigarette and rolls down the window.

“Just drive,” he says. “I tell you when we get there.”

Check Your Records

Yesterday I discovered my mother's name was not my mother's name.

I look at the words. It's true but it seems like a lie and I realize that even when I'm telling the truth I worry that no one will believe me.

Nonno and I went to the courthouse for a copy of Mom's birth certificate to send to the lawyers for the estate and after waiting fifteen minutes the woman came back to the counter and motioned me over.

Are you sure she was born in Polk County?

Yeah.

She showed me the printout and there was no Maria Anastasio born at Mercy Hospital in 1953. My mother was not my mother, or she was born in Italy and they smuggled her into the US, like Nonno when he came through Quebec and not Ellis—

I scratch this last bit out. Nonno came here like everyone else; six weeks on an ocean liner. He is not a mobster but for some reason I like to imagine he is—

I started to imagine that my real mother was actually Countess Carmella, and I had been stolen as an infant from Capri.

I told the woman, But I've seen her social security card, her checkbook. Her name was Maria Anastasio.

The woman flipped the pages. Said there was a Marguerite Anastasio born in 1953. No Maria's.

Marguerite is my grandmother, I told the woman. She died last month. And she wasn't born in 1953. Or even in this country. My mother was born in 1953. She was born here.

I looked at Nonno. He shrugged, pulled his newsboy lower onto his forehead, and told me in Italian that all government agencies are run by crooks and ignorantas.

I am my mother's. I know that. Even the stranger in the casket all those years ago still looked like an older done-up version of me. And Nonna. Mom was Nonna's. We three are the same. It's the eyes.

In the car on the way home, I figured it out. Sort of. I think. It was the English. It had to be. I envisioned the scene. Nonna, a new mother in a bustling hospital in a country full of strangers, holding my mother in the bed. The nurse came in with the form for the birth certificate.

What is your daughter's name?

Nonna looked at Nonno. They didn't understand. Che dieci?

The nurse was impatient. Her name? Your baby's name? What will you call her?

Name? No'me? Nonna asked, exhausted.

Her name. The name of the baby.

Mi llamo Marguerite Anastasio, Nonna said.

The nurse smiled then. Marguerite. Something she could pronounce and spell.

Fine, that's fine. Marguerite will be her name.

But even this isn't true.

My mother's birth certificate says Marguerite Anastasio. At home, in Nonna and Nonno's house, she was Maria. My father and all other *cazuna Americani* called her Mary. If I'm talking to white people, I call her Maria; to Italians, I call her Maria. But never, even while I'm driving alone in my car and I'm praying to her, do I say Mama.

The Bridge

“...and so we carried on as though nothing happened. As though Mother was still in her rocking chair, and carefully, every day, we swept the dust from her seat.”

Willow finishes reading what I call her dead-mom-essay and sits. The flush starts somewhere near her pale eyebrows and travels down to a spot I can't see. Maybe all the way to her toes, but I hope not. She swipes at the long strands of hair in her face, and keeps her head bent forward. She's twenty-two years old and always seems to be apologizing for herself. I want to tell her to stop.

We point our eyes toward the table, or begin shuffling papers, or frantically writing comments we should have written before Workshop—mine are illegible on purpose, I really don't know what to say about this essay anymore. So without reading, I scribble marginalia, underline a sentence or two on every page, the obligatory, “Keep going! I'm really intrigued by this!” on the back. The professor sits at the head of the table, also writing comments on Willow's manuscript.

“Alright, guys,” he says, “let's talk about what's working here.”

Silence. Oy. I almost open my mouth, just to say something, anything, but don't.

At Workshop, we sit in a sepia tone. For some reason, writers don't like talking about their work under fluorescent lights. The conference table is oval shaped and long enough that the professor can't see what's in front of me. And it's not Willow's manuscript. It's my son, Vinny's, preschool application, still blank, except for his name filled out in purple ink by the director on our visit last week. It was the only time she could give a tour, so I had to cancel the freshman comp class I teach in exchange for free tuition in my Master's program. My students

cheered. Underneath the application are fifty student papers, a few gum wrappers that perpetually fall from me ever since I quit smoking, and somewhere, probably at the bottom, are the other short stories/essays/poems I only half read last night while making out invoices for Cory's construction company.

I'm sorry Willow's mom is dead, that Newhall is destroying local farms, that an alien with a conservative agenda and six tongues is taking over network news, that a bullied gay boy hung himself from a college Campanile in Oakland, but a lot of people have dead parents, fighting corporate farms is futile until the next revolution, and it's hard feigning interest in aliens, or the exploitation of current news events. And Cory, Vinny, the dogs, and my always messy house care even less than I do. I keep my feelings to myself, and pull the stack of papers onto my lap to begin filling out the application, until, finally, someone talks about Willow's essay. She's "muzzled" as we like to say, until we've told her, specifically, where she's gone wrong, or right, depending on how fast we want to move on to the next author.

Bearded Braxton talks first, as usual. I know he's going to talk before he opens his mouth. And I know what he's going to say because it's the same thing I say when I have no idea what to say. I get a gurgly feeling in my gut when it plays out the way I expect. Or maybe I'm just hungry. Workshop starts before, and ends after, dinner time.

"I'm really intrigued by the voice here," Braxton says, and because he has a master's in some field unrelated to writing, we're supposed to take him seriously. "—the last line on the bottom of seven—he pauses and the rest of my colleagues turn to seven while I flip the page on the preschool application—"is really tight, really well crafted."

I look around the room. Some are nodding. Others would rather be at home watching dvr'd episodes of *Mad Men*. Braxton looks to the professor, clearly calling on the big dog for back up.

The professor clears his throat, pulls at his collar, scratches at his stubble. He pauses, and makes a small notation on the front page. Willow waits for the verdict. Is her voice compelling? Or, does she really have nothing to say?

After Workshop, I take old Hwy 17 home. A north-south shot out of campus town and into my subdivision, Twin Eagles Point. No turns. Thirty-seven minutes from the entrance ramp to my driveway. If I get stuck at the one stop light in the high-school-football-obsessed-town of Madrid (Go Tigers!), add another three minutes to my commute. I hate driving home in the dark. I keep getting emails about perverts who put police lights on top of their unmarked vehicles and dress up like cops to pull young women over on deserted country highways. But I have a plan. In the off-chance that I ever get pulled over out here, I'm not stopping. Instead, I'll call 911, tell the operator that I'm a woman, alone, in the middle of nowhere, and if the cop who's attempting to pull me over is legit, he can wait till I get to Madrid, where, in addition to the stop light, they have a bowling alley, a Casey's General Store, and a well-lit parking lot. I'll pay the extra fine. As I drive, the dark settles around me and all I want to do is sleep. I turn Jay-Z up. This is the point in my day that I really really want to smoke.

It's October in Iowa, and I married a hunter from North Dakota, so as I pull myself toward home, I scan the ditches for deer, or other nocturnals. They grow bigger on this highway than anywhere else on the planet. A raccoon totaled my Hyundai three years ago. I was having contractions, and not paying attention to the road, but I knew enough not to swerve. "Just hit the fucker," Cory always says. So I did. And the fucker cracked my radiator. But I continued to drive that Hyundai until the engine seized up. Which happened on this highway, in the dark, and immediately after that I came up with the plan for the perverts and the 911 call. Some nights, especially after I pass Madrid, when I'm on the bridge over the Des Moines River—four minutes

from home—I'm convinced I'll die out here, somewhere between campus and home. Or maybe I'll just run away.

I turn into Twin Eagles Point and the anxiety recedes, slightly, as I count my way to the fifth tan ranch on the left. My neighbors are in their houses. Their porch lights illuminate autumn displays of scarecrows lounging on mini hay bales, carefully arranged pumpkins and gourds tucked inside metal buckets, ceramic black cats placed just so on the concrete steps leading to the front door bearing the Harvest Wreath. All of this holiday fun purchased at Hobby Lobby last year on clearance. The front porch displays will change in a few weeks when the Santa ads start running on TV—my neighbors cue to pull out the plastic totes in their basements labeled “Christmas-Outdoor.”

Their garage doors are decisively—eternally—shut, like mine. Nothing distinguishes my house from theirs—except maybe the life-size foam deer Cory uses for bow practice in the backyard. At first I was embarrassed when I saw him out there assembling it in full view of the accountants and stay-at-home moms, but then I remembered that we don't really live in a subdivision. “It's temporary,” is the adage offered up in slightly resentful prayer at our house when we're lamenting space—each lot in Twin Eagles is .33 acres, or less if you were duped into buying one of the cheaper lots that butts up to the highway. At least we knew enough to buy the lot behind our house, too. My husband said it was necessary. No way in hell was he gonna walk out on to our deck and get smacked in the face by some paunchy tax attorney toweling off in his bathroom. So no one lives directly behind us. But they're beside us, in front of us, ringing our door bell to buy candy for their kids' never ending fundraisers. Vinny's future playmates. But this is what you want when you grow up on the south side of Des Moines and you discover toxic mold in the basement of your mother's house and it puts your eighty-eight year-old grandfather in the hospital for two months. You'll forgo dreams of land and trees and space move into a

brand-spanking new house where everyone gets their own bathroom because, really, that's always been priority *primo*.

I click the button to open the garage door, and pull in extra slow. I'm still not used to the bulk of the SUV and I'm convinced I'll lose a side mirror if I go faster than 2 mph. I grab my cell phone from the passenger seat, but leave my school bag, purse, iPod, and empty coffee mug. I don't really need the phone. I have no one to call at 9:40 on Tuesday night. But the light on my touch screen is blinking "plug me in moron or you'll be on that highway again in the morning and you'll blow a tire and then what? You've seen *Deliverance*." so I always take my phone in to charge.

The garage is a source of temptation. We created a second living room out here. For smoking. Because no one in this neighborhood smokes inside their houses. Or smokes at all. The Michelle next door (They're all Michelle or Melissa, banana blond or orange blond) came to the door with a petition two years ago to make the parking lot at the elementary school in town nonsmoking. I asked what she would do about the folks smoking in their cars, and apparently this was the wrong response. Or maybe she could smell the smoke coming from the open garage door. Either way, no May Day basket from her twins, two years in a row.

It's a 3-car, my SUV in one stall, my husband's Toyota Tundra taking up one-and-a-half-stalls, and the "living room" is crammed into the space next to the door leading into the house. Two chairs, a four-channel TV that sits on a shelf crammed with lumber and various metal tool boxes. Between the work lights hanging from the ceiling and the smoke, I feel drunk. If Vinny is in bed—as he should be at this time of night—Cory will be in the garage, pulling on a Captain and diet, followed by a Marlboro Light. If the garage is empty, that means bedtime has been postponed until Mommy has come home to enforce it. I breathe a sigh of relief as I see tipping his head back, and draining the last few drops from his cup.

Workshop comes after a day of teaching back to back sections of freshman comp. Vinny is asleep when I leave in the morning, and (mostly) asleep when I return. Tomorrow morning when I enter his room he will announce that he is going to be mean to me since I wasn't there to tell him his bedtime story about our hero, Billy the Dump truck—I don't know where Billy came from, all I know is when I tell my son about him, he falls asleep faster. Cory doesn't do bedtime stories. In exchange for Vinny's forgiveness, I will allow him to have a Transformer's Fruit Snack with his breakfast.

I hold my breath in the garage. Even smelling the smoke from Cory's cigarette is enough to make me gag, or ask for one. I sit down next to him anyway, and drop my phone on the plastic milk crate we use for a coffee table. It's covered in ashes and palm-sized laminated NFL football schedules, because Cory loses things almost as much as he forgets things. He's wearing a purple parka over a dingy t-shirt and boxer briefs. His facial hair grows in jagged streaks across his cheeks and chin, just like his dad. None of the men in my husband's family can grow real facial hair, which seems like a bad joke as most of them spend entire seasons outdoors in North Dakota killing, planting, and riding. He tips his now empty cup in my general direction. "Hi babe."

We watch *Everybody Loves Raymond* and I try the counting exercise. 1-I don't want a cigarette. 2-It will kill me. 3-It makes me smell bad. 4-It costs us thousands of dollars a year. 5-I don't want my son to ever smoke. 6-My teeth are yellow. 7-I can't remember.

Cory turns to me during a commercial break. "I was back at the loony hospital today," he says and raises his eyebrows.

He means the juvenile mental health clinic. He's been remodeling their padded room. It's in pretty bad shape. The juveniles are in worse shape. But it's the parents he'd like to smack around. He can't believe the conversations he's overheard.

“This nurse,” he says “nurse” like I say taxes, “is talking to this little kid, he’s gotta be like 6, and she’s tellin him to get his bag packed because his worthless mom is coming—she doesn’t say worthless, but I’ve seen this fat bitch in the parking lot, you can just tell, you know—so the nurse is tellin this poor kid, ‘pack your bag, cuz your mom’s coming to get you today.’ And the kid looks her straight in the eye and says, ‘bullshit. That’s what you said yesterday.’ Then he just walks away. Jesus, it’s sad.”

I nod, trying not to stare at the cigarette in the ashtray. He keeps waving the smoke away from me, and when he exhales, he turns his whole head and flaps his arm. This is his idea of quitting. Because we’re both supposed to be quitting. That was the deal. I don’t say anything because I’m trying this new thing out from one of my quit smoking books: I can’t control other people.

“It’s hard not to say anything,” he says with his head turned away from me. “You just want to grab these parents, and shake the shit out of ‘em, you know. I saw that kid later, just staring out the window. We should do something.”

This is a shocking statement coming from someone who keeps the dial in his truck tuned to conservative talk radio, but I’m exhausted. As I sit in the garage, two seconds away from tapping a cigarette out of his pack, I try to remember if I’ve ever told him about Spectrum. We’ve been married for nearly ten years, we have one child and are trying for a second, it seems like I would have said something about that place where the nurses used to tell me to pack my bags, too.

“What do you want to do about it?”

“I don’t know. Somethin’.”

“This is what I’ve been telling you! Don’t you see now, these kids don’t have a chance in hell?” This is my way of trying to reason the conservative out of him. It’s an ongoing debate in

our house. Are we responsible for our actions period the end? Or, does where you come from really determine who you'll be as an adult? He says the former, I say the latter. *I don't want a cigarette.*

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"Those kids, their parents never gave them a chance. What would surprise you more, if that kid becomes a crack dealer or a—I don't know—professor at a college somewhere?"

"Professor, I guess."

"See? So...what do you want to do to help them?"

"I don't know. Somethin." And this is as far as it will go because *Everybody Loves Raymond* is over and that means *Sports Center* is on—no cable in the garage.

He stubs out the cigarette, grabs his toddy cup, and I follow him inside. I stand in the entryway—its supposed to be a formal entryway, but since we don't have a mudroom it's cluttered with camouflage coats, dog kennels, blaze orange hats and vests—contemplating my next move. My brain works between 10 and 11 but my body says enough already. I stand, statue-like, in the entryway for no less than four minutes. I'm still wearing my black wool coat, cashmere scarf in classy colors, black leather boots that make me 2 inches taller, hair pulled up into a teacher knot, silver hoop earrings so I feel younger. I'm too thin—this is not false modesty, it's a goddamned medical condition that I can't seem to overcome because I'm perfectly content subsisting on coffee and used-to-be-cigarettes but is now sugar free gum. Cory won't say it, but I know he thinks this is why I can't get pregnant, and maybe he's right. I see all of this in the mirror that hangs in the entryway. Except my face. Cory slings blaze orange vests loaded with slugs over the corner of mirror where my face would be. I push all of his hunting crap off the bench so I can sit down and take off my boots. I'm going to bed.

I take Vinny to my cousin, Joy's, house when I go to campus. It's hard to describe my cousin. Think Martha Stewart meets Cheech and Chong. OCD-cleaning-obsessed-craft-making-hippie. She does the Coffee and No Food diet, too. Joy has two small children close in age to Vinny and she stays home while her husband handles the marketing for a local insurance company. I didn't even ask her if she would watch Vinny when she moved into Twin Eagles last year. I just told her. I was desperate. Daycare was no longer an option after I witnessed one of the "teachers" sitting on her big floppy ass while her obese one-year-old pummeled a smaller child with a closed fist—the director of the daycare actually asked *me* why I didn't step in and tell the teacher to do something about it. Thank God Joy's got this incessant drive to make everyone else happy, she didn't fight it. She just hugged me.

We walk into Joy's fifteen minutes late and her children come screaming from opposite sides of the house to greet us. "Viiiiinnnyyyy'sss heeerrreeee!" Vinny sticks close to me. We go through this everyday. He acts like he's never been here before. His cousins try to hug him, or push him over, or yank him away from me so they can go play. Vinny needs at least ten minutes sheltered between my coat and legs before he feels comfortable enough to be led away by his cousin who's wearing a Spiderman costume this morning. Spiderman's younger sister is having an identify crisis. She's wearing Tinkerbell's shoes, Batman's mask, and Wonder Woman's leg warmers—but no actual clothes. This is a real house with a real family, I think.

"Yeah, man, you like that?" Joy says from the kitchen counter, pointing at her children. "They woke up this morning—4:45 of course—and demanded I find their Halloween costumes!" She laughs and I wonder if I look as tired as she does. She's got yesterday's pajama pants on.

She pours two cups of coffee and measures a thimble full of Bailey's into hers. I envy her. I don't drink. If I had even a sip I'd be weaving all over that highway. It's hard to concentrate at Joy's house. The TV is going—a *Shrek* Halloween special is on the DVR, her kids are running laps through the kitchen, dining room, and living room and screaming at Vinny to join them. Joy's got new paint samples on the living room walls. I notice a new play table with built-in cubbies next to the buffet in the dining room that wasn't there yesterday; it's organized by gender and age group. Everything has a label. The kitchen table is covered in various colors of yarn, paper sacks, felt pens, plastic shapes. She sees me looking at the mess. "We're going to make Thanksgiving turkeys!" she says. I told you: Martha Stewart.

"I wish it wasn't Tuesday," I tell her after I've drained my first cup, and poured a second. "I've got workshop tonight, but Cory should be here to pick him up before five," I say this like an apology.

"Oh, don't worry about it," she says. "Get your shit done. Did he eat yet?"

"No, he just woke up."

She simultaneously pours juice, tells her kids to get in their chairs, and listens to me whine. There's a stack of homemade, multi-grain Mickey Mouse pancakes on the counter. I'm about to grab one when I realize that Vinny has started to pull away from me. He's now watching *Shrek* with only one hand on my coat. In a minute, he'll let go entirely and I can escape out the front door, unnoticed.

I don't hug Vinny, or even say goodbye as I walk out the front door. It's easier this way.

We take a break during Workshop and I head outside with the other smokers out of habit. I regret this as soon as I step outside and am met with temperatures better suited for January. I

hear a screeching sound, which sounds exactly like a crow being attacked, but it's only a simulation broadcast by the College of Agriculture to keep real crows from invading campus. You almost get used to it. The smokers are cold, too, but that doesn't prevent them from asking each other these questions:

“How many pages you up to on your manuscript?”

“What kind of feedback are you getting?”

“Sending any work out?”

“Get any publications?”

I answer silently. No, not enough, but sometimes, too much. No, No. Their answers are significantly different.

They don't talk much more before putting the butts out on their shoes and throwing them away in the trashcans. You can really only smoke on campus at night, when it's too dark to see the No Smoking signs tacked to every building. I used to pretend I couldn't see them.

They head back inside and I try to keep my breathing normal. I pull my phone out of my pocket to call Cory, but no answer. I amble back inside, then stop in the bathroom to splash cold water on my face and chest where I get really red. I'm being work shopped tonight. After I've read an excerpt—the first few pages of this—I sit down and pull out Vinny's preschool application which I still haven't really looked at. As they dissect this, and me, I try to remember the last time Vinny had his immunization shots.

“Alright, guys,” says the professor from his place at the head of the table. “Let's talk about what's working here.”

The Daughter Returns

Cory and I sit in the dark room, waiting. The ultrasound tech smears gel on my stomach, pokes at my belly button.

“Okay, okay, let’s see here. Let’s see,” she whispers, her eyes on the monitor.

Our eyes on the monitor.

Months ago, I dreamed of another boy, a small, olive-skinned boy, a replica of my Vinny, this one called Dominic. I dreamed him, so real, so full, before he was a seed, he was my son.

We wait as the ultrasound tech clicks on a device that reminds me of the laser pointers used in business meetings to advance power point slides. We wait as she points to an arm, an ear. The heart beats, and for minutes at a time, this is the only sound we hear.

“Do you want to know the sex?” she asks, smiling bright in the darkened room, her teeth illuminated by the images on the monitor. She turns to me in the stirrups, to Cory next to me in a hospital chair, his hands folded on his lap.

We know we’re having a boy, but we say, “Sure,” simultaneously anyway.

She clicks and steps over to point with her real finger. “There,” she says. “It’s a girl.”

An hour later, Cory and I stare at each other across the table at the Okoboji Grill. The noise is nice, all the TV’s, the business lunches, the pop music drumming through the speaker system. I’ve ordered fries and two pieces of cake. Cory sips his lemonade.

“What do you do with a girl?” I ask, quiet.

Cory looks up, offended. “She can still hunt!”

“I don’t want her to be too girly, you know, Barbie’s. No cheerleading,” I say, already planning her life. As she turns in my stomach, I turn her into an MBA from Harvard. “She needs a strong name, nothing wimpy.”

“Not too strong,” Cory says, pulling one of my pieces of cake toward him.

The waitress is at our table. “Do you need anything else?”

“Yeah, a penis,” Cory says under his breath and I kick him.

She puts the check on the table and walks away.

“She’s going to learn Mandarin, and the piano,” I say. “I don’t want her to be like me.”

He gives me a funny look. “Why not?”

In the car on the way home, I text Dad one word: Girl. He immediately calls, but I put him to voicemail. I pray for my mother, dead half my life, I pray for Nonna and Nonno, who lie beside her in the mausoleum. I roll the word around in my mind: Girl. And only when I hold her five months later and see my mother’s and my grandmother’s eyes, do I dare even whisper the word, “Daughter.”