Drinking up the moon: a novel

Melissa Ann Frederick

Iowa State University
Drinking up the moon:  
A novel

by

Melissa Ann Frederick

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Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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CHAPTER 1. SEEING GHOSTS

Julia

I knew it was real this time. From the beginning. I felt those eyes like crosshairs aim for the bridge of my nose, where there's still a long, pink dent. At night, I don't cover it with powder, since no one's around to see. But these eyes understood my face, its special routes, places to dig that would hit the most sensitive nerves. It was what woke me, the sense that I was being summoned, my brother shining a flashlight in my eyes the morning before a long drive, Mother shaking my shoulder between two newly-manicured fingers. Calling. I squeezed my eyes shut until it dawned on me that I was in my dorm room, and the last time I'd looked I'd been alone.

My eyes shot open, and I held my breath. Through the curtains, a finger of light from a streetlamp—which I could never keep out, no matter how I rigged my window—helped me translate the shadows: laundry bag, monitor, institutional chair and desk, heaped with papers. Book spines, like a crooked set of dentures. I could still feel that invisible set of eyes, though, making the hair on my scalp tingle like wire. So I got up and stood in the middle of the carpet. My sheet dragged behind me, a silky umbilical cord. It was no protection if one of the local perverts had broken in, but a show of strength was better than nothing. With fingernails biting into palm, I peered into every inch of shadow, listened for heavy breathing, and waited for a smell, a knife. Some sort of signal that I was under attack.
That’s when I felt the tap on my shoulder. Barely a nudge, just enough to let me know I’d run into something solid. A noise flew out of my mouth like Tarzan’s wail. I spun around, fists flailing. Nothing behind me but air.

My lungs heaved. I sprinted two steps to the light switch and let my eyes tear up in the white hot glow, because I knew I couldn’t shut them for a second. Gradually, the room materialized.

Empty. Not even the postcards on my door had been ruffled. It was impossible. After I checked to see that I was still breathing, I started pulling the room apart. I stripped my closet of everything except two tangled hangers. All drawers plus their contents wound up on my carpet, clothes and papers and hair trinkets finally rooting my feet to one spot. I flipped my mattress over to a cramped sea of boxes, meshed in with springs. There could be no more doubt. I was all by myself.

Facing my door—I could see now it was locked—I began bunching my nightgown into tighter and tighter wads. I almost expected the cotton to liquefy and trickle out, syrupy and blue, but the spaces between my fingers stayed dry. The heater sputtered on, and I found myself reaching toward my desk, finding the phone, punching in numbers. I caught myself in time. Dear God, I must be losing my mind. It had been two years, I knew Iris wouldn’t pick up even if I did get through. Biting one hand to wake myself up, I dug with the other through the pile of my possessions until I’d located my green notebook and a pen. The ball point worked steadily, carving hair-thin canyons where it used to be smooth.

A jogger found her body at 6:15 suspended (“dangling” too reminiscent of bait, “swinging” too gruesome) from the red oak in her backyard. EMT unit arrived 6:30. She was wearing a
pink cotton scarf under the rope, matching lipstick. Is this rumor only? Need to find out more.

The Amtrak coaches lurch around a bend, and I finally lose sight of the river. I manage to keep my head from banging against the window the way it did the last three times. But now I only have the cloud cover and waves of dead-looking branches to take my mind off the industrial train odor. I also picked up a seatmate in Harrisburg, some middle-aged businessman with a droopy mustache who I’ve already caught staring at my legs. I hate it when people sit next to me on trains.

The businessman has a receding hairline of fine, brown wool that bunches in a skinny mat, a hair peninsula, along the top of his scalp. Inside one inlet of skin, his forehead glows from a reading light overhead. He pulls a New York Times out of his briefcase, flips the paper open and bangs on the crease a couple of times to make it stay. The stench is repulsive. I also hate the smell of newsprint. Just as I’m about to turn back to the window and the white and gray landscape, I notice he’s smiling at me.

“Would you like part of the paper?” he asks.

“No thanks.” I shift my eyes to my lap. Caught staring again. My Bryn Mawr buddies would have fallen off their chairs. I have a knack for forgetting I’m not invisible when I’m observing people. Once I was watching a horde of Villanova pub crawlers parade down Lancaster Avenue, and before I knew it I had a Rolling Rock in my hand and a sticky arm over my shoulder, coralling me into the nearest Irish bar. Professor Emery gave me a
long, angry lecture after class about it. His fields are criminal sociology and gender studies, and claims I take too many risks by ignoring the fact that I’m 5’9”, size 7, and blond.

“Well, if you change you’re mind, just let me know.” He shakes the paper again, which sends another foul breeze toward my face. I rub my eyes. They feel brittle as tissue paper.

I really must be falling apart this time. These dreams—or what I thought were dreams—of someone standing in my room, scanning my face while I sleep, have cost me yet another peaceful night. When my alarm went off at 6am this morning, I found myself perched on the edge of my bedframe, face pressing into the wrong side of the mattress, the mattress against the wall. My notebook was open across my lap. A jogger found her body at 6:15... I remembered writing that line, I remembered all of last night, but it didn’t make sense, the way voices stop meaning anything and jumble and splinter apart the minute you start to doze.

Then again, you could say my life for the past two weeks has consisted of one long string of meaningless events, unwinding in spirals, like yarn. Running away from college doesn’t make sense, especially not at age 20. Neither does taking refuge with your old music teacher, one of your mother’s best friends, and trying to track down the cause of a death that’s almost two years old. To me, though, none of my actions seem trivial. For the first time in a long time, I feel like my life is putting itself together.

My obsession didn’t begin with a triggering event. Not the talk with Professor Emery, not the flight, not even the dream itself. I’ve been having nightmares off and on ever since
Jeanne sobbed the news to us over the phone. Oh, Grace, Julia, it's too horrible. Susan's daughter, Iris, hanged herself last night. It wasn't one thing, it was the combination, a mixture of catalysts and pressures that caused a minor explosion in some cramped corner of my memory. I just didn't notice the fireworks until the whole room gave way.

The dream happened in a hotel in Austin, Texas, the night before I was supposed to fly back to Philadelphia. My cousin had gotten married that day, and my parents insisted that I show up, since neither of them could because Dad had to entertain a visiting historian at Vassar, and Paul, my older brother, couldn't because he had his thesis research to worry about. I was supremely annoyed that I had to give up a good study weekend to visit relatives I hadn't laid eyes on since I was six. Who gets married in February, anyhow? I argued with my parents. They didn't feel like I should complain when they were footing the bill. I went.

My room at the Hilton came with a king-sized bed, because until the last minute my aunt and uncle had been expecting my parents, the world-renowned Professor Marshall Deslaurier and his elegant wife, Grace, apparently too important to receive anything less than four square feet of mattress apiece. I'm exaggerating, of course, but not by much. Sleeping on the broad stretch of sheets felt like sleeping on an island with hospital corners. White and crisp and sterile, a floating alter. I dozed off picturing the covers draped around me symmetrically, gleaming with my innocence.

That's where the dream began. The dark bloated the room until it was four stories high and the length of a banquet hall. A figure stood at the other end, opposite my bed. She'd been sent to watch me. Gradually, the weight leaked out of my arms and legs, and I began drifting toward the ceiling lamp. By the time my forehead bounced off the square
glass fixture, I’d picked up some speed. I billowed. Like a pool cue, the lamp knocked my body in a new direction. I tumbled. I was falling. My arms shot out to take the blow, but at the last second, someone caught me. Iris’s face dangled near my nose.

Don’t be late, she sneered.

I woke up to a knock at the door. Aunt Rose, ready to take me to the airport. By the bed, the alarm clock—which I’d neglected to set the night before—read 8:06. I was scheduled to fly out of Austin at 9:32.

My seatmate flips a page. “Where you headed?” His fingers are pink and sturdy.

“Lewistown.” I rub my eyes again. Outside, the river makes a brief appearance through the trees, a sliver of olive color and foam.

“You a student up in State College?”

He asks because he’s spotted my green notebook wedged under an arm rest. I drape my coat over it. “Oh, I don’t go to Penn State. I’m just visiting someone in the area.”

He grins at me, round eyes twinkling. “Are you a writer?”

I inhale and grit my teeth. I’m not up for a social interrogation.

“You really don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” he beams. “I understand if it’s a secret or something.”

“No, it’s no secret,” I blurt out quickly. The last thing I need is for some good citizen to think I’m acting suspiciously. “I’m just doing a little...investigative journalism.”

“Oh, really?” He folds the paper across his lap. “What story are you following?”

His eyebrows shoot up. He’s trying to look interested, condescending putz.
“Psychic biker romance,” I say.

He snorts. “You’re joking, of course.”

I stare at him blankly. Slowly, he inhales.

“I see.” He coughs and unfolds his New York Times.

I lean back, close my eyes. That was childish of me, but sometimes it’s necessary to play the blond bimbo to avoid getting into useless conversations. The train rocks, which makes my head wobble like a bird balancing on a wire. I’m restless. I crack my knuckles, one by one, a hollow pop for every finger. Since I have at least another hour to wait, I dig out my notebook and carefully angle the pages away from Mr. Aging Yupster, so that only the trees can read over my shoulder.

Iris’s mother is a bright blond WASP from Chicago, her father, Professor of Astronomy, an Indian immigrant. Iris and her two brothers are coffee-colored. In second grade, Jessie Malone and his band of snot-picking thugs decide to rough Iris up during recess. They surround her on a jungle gym, throw wet paper towels, shout Go home, nigger. Five black eyes and two kneed crotches later, Iris is sent home, not as punishment but to recover from the trauma. She escapes without a scratch.

Leaving Austin was like trying to flee the ninth circle of hell. No time to shower. Barely enough time to throw on jeans and a sweatshirt, put my contacts in, smear powder over my birthmark. My teeth felt mossy, and I desperately needed caffeine, but instead I had to stand in the check-out line for twenty minutes while the rest of the hotel loaded up luggage. In the car, Aunt Rose swerved through traffic and swore like a truck driver. It wasn’t enough,
though. Sprinting through the terminal with my garment bag, a paisley cape, flapping behind me, I showed up at the ticket counter ten minutes too late.

The airline could only get me a seat on a flight to Dallas that left at the same time my Dallas connection was taking off for home. Once I landed, they told me, I’d have a four hour layover until the next plane flew to Philadelphia. *Sorry for the inconvenience*, the woman behind the desk muttered into her blazer as she stamped my fresh boarding pass.

When the plane touched down in Dallas, I was wired. I’d drunk two cups of Columbian Roast in Austin and two cups of watery tin-pot crap the stewardess offered me on board. So when I emerged from the ramp and saw a crowd streaming past the gate, my first thought was that there was some sort of drill going on, a fire drill, maybe. Then I distinguished the layers of noise: moaning and muffled sobs mixed with a buzz of electric voices competing over the PA system, urging customers to remain calm. Ribbons of people flowed up and down the terminal, packed around gates, and I found my legs pumping faster and faster. I didn’t even bother to ask what was going on. There didn’t seem to be time for talk.

Following the crowd, I wound up at Gate 29, which was so jammed people were practically climbing over each other, like swarming ants. A woman in a black coat was vomiting into a trash can in the corner. Several circles of heads bowed in prayer or sang hymns quietly, without enunciating the syllables. Somehow I managed to shove my way to the check-in counter, where a red LED screen announced *Flight 415. Philadelphia.*
I grabbed the elbow of the nearest attendant, who had a phone pressed in one ear and his fingers in another. “What’s going on?” I mouthed the words carefully, so if he had to he could read my lips.

He put a hand over the receiver. “A plane went down about 30 miles from here. They were trying to get back to the runway. Someone leaked it to the rest of the airport.”

A knot began in my throat. “Which plane?”

With his thumb, he motioned to the screen behind him.

Quickly, I unzipped my backpack and started rummaging around for my old travel itinerary. Not that I needed to see the numbers, I remembered them, even though I still unfolded the green carbon paper, my eyes running down lines of brown print to today’s flight schedule. 415.

For a second, I stood there, swaying with the crowd’s perpetual motion. Then I grabbed the attendant’s elbow again. “Did anyone survive?”

I knew the answer to that question, too, but I had to hear it coming from my mouth. For what seemed like minutes, the man stared into my face. He cupped the receiver gently and took a deep breath.

“It doesn’t look good,” he said.

Gradually, a cold wave dissolved through my body. My insides began to feel insubstantial, like oil breaking up on the surface of water. I realized that to the rest of the world, I was sitting on that plane. I’d fallen out of the sky. I was dead. Another minute went by, and I focused on the air rolling in and out of my nostrils. The floor was solid under
the soles of my shoes, the balls of my feet. Working my way out of Gate 29, I scanned for a phone so I could call my parents.

Iris and I are best friends, 1st-9th grades. We are not best friends after that.

People to contact for answers:

Mr. and Mrs. Kansil, parents.
Matt and Bobby Kansil, brothers.
Louise and Rachel, friends.
Charlie (aka. Wanker, What the Hell Do You See in That Freak??) Stewart, boyfriend.

The week after flight 415 crashed, I didn’t sleep more than four or five hours a night. Part of it was catching up on class work, and part of it was the fact that I couldn’t shut my eyes without feeling the room spin, a face observing from the corner. Most of my sleep deprivation, though, came from running back and forth to different interviews. I’d become a local celebrity, the Mawrter Who Cheated Death. First, the Bryn Mawr Bi-Co News wanted to do a cover story on me, then Main Line Life heard about me through some intern, and they had to write their article. A day or two later, the Philadelphia Inquirer came knocking at my door. The City Paper. Philadelphia Magazine. Then came the t.v. reporters, NBC affiliates, ABC affiliates. No one could get enough of my story. I could never figure out why people were interested, if they wanted to feel what it was like to escape a plane crash, or if they wanted a good look at a 20-year-old woman who should have flown home in a wooden box.
I didn’t tell any of the reporters about the dream. Instead, I made the whole thing sound like dumb luck. I stayed up late at the wedding reception, so naturally I was exhausted. I forgot to set my alarm. Lucky for me. But Iris’s face wouldn’t leave me. Her dark eyes, deep and cold, sniggering at my puny achievements, my voice lessons, dorm single and 3.9 GPA at an expensive private school. Don’t be late. What the hell was that supposed to mean? Did she want me to die? I knew I had to get some answers before my sanity collapsed and I began scribbling on padded walls with a 64-color box of crayons, so I went to visit Professor Emery during his office hours.

Professor Emery is the closest thing in my life to a therapist. He runs our Modern Sociology class like a 12-step program. Every week, fifteen Mawrters sit in a circle and whine about the pressures of womanhood, while I watch and try not to gag. It’s gotten to the point where we’ve had to establish a Kleenex fund. I used to pride myself on not getting sucked in the angst-soaked morass—before flight 415, I’d had many a long-winded argument with Professor Emery about academic objectivity. So I had no idea what I would say when I knocked on his door at 7:30 Monday morning, a week and a day after the crash.

He opened the door a crack, then his whole lanky body jerked from the force of his double-take. “Julia,” he murmured, hand still wrapped around the ancient knob.

“Hi, Professor.” I cleared my throat. “Do you have time to talk?”

He stood there, blinking behind thick bifocals. “Sure.” The door creaked open the rest of the way. “I’m always available. Come on in.”

Within seconds, he cleared off an armchair in front of his desk and stuffed some manila folders behind a bookshelf. Most of the office was submerged under piles of these
folders, columns of yellowing paperbacks. “What can I do for you?” he asked, sliding behind his desk.

I stared at the dancing lines of his screen saver, glowing from a dim corner. “I don’t know.”

The radiator groaned softly. “Surely you have a reason for coming to see me so early in the morning.”

I shifted. “I suppose I do. I’m not sure how to phrase it, though.”

Professor Emery folded his long fingers and waited.

“I think I’m being haunted,” I said.

His eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

I launched into a description of the dream. I told him how it fit into my escape from flight 415, like a puzzle piece. How it made me oversleep. How it had followed me every night since.

Professor Emery leaned back in his chair. “That’s quite a story.” His face was empty, absorbing. “And who was the girl you saw?”

I took a deep breath. “One of my childhood friends. She died when we were seventeen.”

Again, his eyebrows jumped. “What did she die of?”

“Nothing. She hanged herself.”

The radiator shuddered.

“Why did she do that?”
I shrugged. "No one ever told me. I guess she was depressed. I wasn't living in the same town when it happened."

He blinked a few times, then rocked forward. "Julia, why do you think your friend would want to be back in your life?"

I stared at him. "You really think she's returned from the dead or something?"

"It doesn't matter what I think. It's what you're experiencing. What do you feel is going on?"

My jaw locked, but I tried not to show it. I forgot how I hated all his emotional psychodriver. Plus what I wanted to say I knew would never go into words. I closed my eyes. "I feel like...she wants me to repay her somehow. Like she scratched my back, and I have to find a way to scratch hers."

Professor Emery nodded. "And how can you repay her?"

"I don't know. That's why I came to see you, I guess."

He smiled. "I appreciate your confidence in my abilities."

I looked down at my nails.

"Julia, what you need is some time off. Pick a day this week to make yourself scarce. No reporters, no school. Find some peaceful corner of campus and remember your friend. Maybe then you'll figure out what you can give back to her memory."

He chose his words carefully. He was avoiding what I knew we were both thinking. She saved your life.

"You could also try journaling your thoughts. Maybe that would shake something loose."
The room had turned stifling, and I realized I was sweating in my coat. I looked up into his blurry bifocals and grinned. “I’ll try that. Thanks for your help.”

We stood up simultaneously.

“Anytime,” he said. “I’m glad we had a chance to talk.”

We were both grinning as I backed out of his office.

I hadn’t intended to follow Professor Emery’s advice. But that day, against my better judgment, I bought a green spiral-bound three-subject notebook. I went to my morning and afternoon classes as if nothing had taken place. Over lunch, there was only one reporter from a suburban newspaper waiting to jot down my story. I stayed up late. I overslept. Lucky, lucky me. A couple of friends sat with me over dinner and invited me to a strawberry daiquiri study break, but I told them I was turning in early. After I finished eating, I raced to my room so they couldn’t talk me out of it.

For an hour and a half, I sat curled in my comforter with the green notebook lying open across my lap. The walls hummed with noises from my neighbors’ singles, blow dryers, competing CD players, one-sided telephone conversations that came and went like a call-and-response in a church service. God have mercy, Christ have mercy. The last religious ceremony I’d participated in was Iris’s funeral, and then I’d only been an onlooker, a dry-eyed trespasser who’d given up her right to understand. I’d broken off contact with Iris, along with practically everyone else I knew in State College, when my family moved to Poughkeepsie two years before her death. I didn’t know where to start remembering Iris. Finally, I picked up the pen.
Iris and Rachel and Louise and me.
The four of us. That's how we referred to ourselves. Four elementary school girls who shared everything, from Barbies to lip gloss and our mothers' old pantyhose. The four of us were an unbreakable unit that took in the world with eight eyes and forty fingers, some with chipping spring plum polish on tiny oval-shaped nails, others fat, pink, bitten. We never kept secrets from each other, we were like bricks in a wall. But one had experienced something and taken the story to the grave, beneath blue, swollen lips. It was a closed casket, so I never saw what exactly death had done to her face.

Iris dies on March 7, a Wednesday.
Suddenly, it struck me that the seventh of March was this Sunday. This Sunday, Iris would be dead for exactly two years. Had I gone down with flight 415, the days on our death certificates would have read two weeks apart.

I stared across the room at my Met calendar, where Placido Domingo as Sigmund stood with his foot planted over the March 7 tile. Gradually, as I peered into that white square, empty except for the number, an inverted check mark in one corner, an ache grew in my stomach. It was something like hunger. I had to know what was going through Iris's mind when she scaled the oak tree in the dark on the last day of her life. I had to know who she bought the rope from, where she found the lipstick and the scarf, why she thought the neck was the best place to break off her body's functions. My mind craved every detail there was left to be found—most importantly, why it had to happen on that particular morning, March 7.
Instantly, I sprang to my desk and began routing through drawers for my address book. I knew I had penciled in phone numbers for Rachel and Louise before I'd left Central Pennsylvania. If those numbers weren't right anymore, I could give Jeanne a call. Or directory assistance. Or I could hitchhike and start wandering the spotless streets of State College bellowing their names. It wouldn't make a difference, as long as I found them.

I realized what I had to do now. Professor Emery had been right, in part. I didn't just need to take time off. I needed to take off altogether. Bryn Mawr could wait for me till the end of the universe for all I cared. I had more important things to worry about. My sanity. Redemption. Iris's life and mine.

This is the afterlife, a voice whispers. I stand beside a concrete pit that leaks dirty water.

The day is cool and cloudless, which is lucky, since no one will leave their pillbox bungalows for a rainy-day performance. Sure enough, a crowd has gathered, their bonnets and parasols reflecting summer pastels.

Every face carries a smile. The teeth are long and white, bleached bone. I seem to be the only one who doesn't feel like smiling. Both pockets of my apron are empty, and I don't remember why. My apron, my pride and joy, has embroidered roses winding around the hem and along the top edge of the pockets, as if real blossoms are peeking out and diving in again in waves.

Suddenly, there's a trumpet fanfare, and a man in a top hat and a black Armani suit joins me by the pit. I know he's Iris's father, but he's also a magician, our entertainment for the evening. His gloves are famous because they light up without electricity. Tonight, they
glow a special deep blue, dyed in a comet’s gas tail, that follows his hands as they sweep the
air in circles, to show us there’s nothing up his sleeves. This act particularly tickles the
audience, and the gas light shows up well against the concrete backdrop. But I can’t help
scrambling in my pockets for whatever’s missing. Each time I reach in, my hands stretch
further into empty cloth. Maybe the magician can tell me where I’m going wrong.

I try to catch his arm, but now the man has launched into his main act. Reaching into
his jacket, he produces a pink rose, so fresh it gives off ribbons of scent. A garden of bare
arms shoots up to touch the floating odors as he shakes the bloom like a censer above their
heads. Finally, satiated, the crowd takes their seats. The man cradles the rose to his chest.
He sniffs, he sighs, then with a flourish he tosses it stem-first into the pit full of dirty water. I
commend you to the ground. The people applaud. I condemn you to the ground. The crowd
cheers. This is your end stop, your here and now, your afterlife. The audience is on its feet,
stomping, roaring. A riot erupts, coursing toward the pit, so I can’t get near enough to find
out what’s really inside.

My eyes open. A hand is wrapped around my elbow.

“Miss?” a voice calls, deep and soft. “I think this is your stop.”

I bolt upright. The balding businessman beside me smiles and motions out the
window, where a line of people are filing out of the coach, dragging suitcases and embracing
onlookers on a weather-beaten platform. The sign hanging from the awning reads Lewistown
in fat, blue letters.
“Conductor!” The businessman calls down the aisle. “Hold the train, please. You have one more passenger to disembark here.” He stands up and scans the luggage rack above my head. “Is this little paisley bag yours?”

I nod, then turn back to the window. Jeanne is there on the platform, too, like she said she would be when I called her last night. Her short, dyed black curls bounce as her head snaps back and forth, between train and platform.

I know I don’t have much time before I forget this latest dream completely. I reach for my notebook, which slipped between my feet while I slept, and write in block capitals.

What did Iris’s father put on her coffin???

I don’t remember much about Iris’s funeral, but the dream brings back one detail. That pepto-Bismol-colored rose. Iris’s father had something that color in his hand by the graveside, he sheltered it against his chest, as the crowd shuffled past the coffin. He and his wife were last in line, so there were bodies between us. Arms and legs, elbows, collarbones, wrapped in shades of black, charcoal, gray, onyx, like waves of shifting chalkboards. There were no other colors aside from the white coffin and this square of pink, a tongue clutched in Mr. Kansil’s stiff fingers. In an animal way, it caught my eye. I strained to see. But then I was caught by the elbow, led away from the awning and down a hill, where cars made an uneven checkerboard, hard in the sun. By the time the mourners reached the bottom, Mr. Kansil was carrying an empty briefcase. I assumed whatever had been pink he’d left with the coffin, but it bothered me. Something was out of place and it bothered me.

“You’d better hurry, Miss.” The businessman hands me my suitcase. “Train’s about to leave for Pittsburgh.”
I struggle into my coat and out of my seat. “Thanks for waking me.”

He smiles again as I squeeze past him in the aisle. “Not a problem. You must have had a hard night last night. For a minute there, I didn’t think you were going to wake up at all.”

Again, I nod, then turn and hurtle my way toward the exit.

Jeanne is a lead-footed driver, so we make the forty-five minute trip over the mountain in less than half an hour. Her living room still smells like beeswax candles. I set my bags in a pile by her aging Bosendorfer, while she hustles to the kitchen to put her copper teapot on the stove. It’s nice to know some things never change.

I flip open the keyboard and run through a few quiet scales. My fingers are rigid, but the notes from the Bosendorfer are warm and smooth. Jeanne’s baby grand is notorious for making anything you play sound like a million bucks. She would always have to deprogram me for recitals. Remember not to get flustered when your piece doesn’t feel the way you’re used to. This hall won’t have a Bosendorfer.

“That’s a little rough, Jule, sweetie. Jasmine or Bengal Spice?” Jeanne is monitoring my performance from the kitchen. Her ear misses nothing. “Are you finding time to practice at school?”

“Not much.” I close the lid on the keys. “Bengal Spice.”

“Well, maybe we can fit in a few lessons while you’re here.” She sticks her head out and winks. “Only if you want, of course. Honey in yours?”
I nod. "Cream, too. I’m not sure how much time I’ll have to sit behind the piano this visit."

She hurries into the living room with two stoneware mugs and a worried wrinkle in her lip. "I’ve been meaning to talk to you about this. Have a seat, dear."

We sink in her linen sofa. "Is this not a good time for you?" I ask. Jeanne sometimes has emotional lows over the winter.

"Oh, no, you can always stay here for as long as you want. In fact, I can tell I’m going to get spoiled having you around." Her round eyes begins to tear up, and she pats my leg. "It’s just...how long do you intend to stay out of school, dear?"

I take a sip from my mug. "Not long." It’s a lie, but I don’t want to worry Jeanne right now.

"Do your parents know where you are?"

"I don’t think they need to know yet." My finger traces the mug’s glazed edges.

"They’re not even due to call me till the weekend."

"Jule, honey, don’t you think they’d want to know about this?"

I roll my eyes. "They’d probably pack me off to a psychiatrist. No, I’ll call them when I’m ready. Promise me you won’t call first?"

"Julia, I..." Her mouth opens and closes a few times, while I stare at her hard.

Finally, she throws up her hand. "All right, I’ll leave this to you and your parents. But you have to promise me you’ll call them soon."

"I will."
She lets out a long sigh. “Julia, are you sure this is a good thing? I mean, you and Iris weren’t even speaking when you moved away.” She giggles a little. “You told me yourself, remember?”

“Yeah, I do.” The spices in the tea gnaw at my throat. “I have to know what happened, Jeanne. I don’t know why. It’s just something I have to do.”

Slowly, Jeanne nods. “I think I understand a little.” She squeezes my shoulder. “Just remember I’m here whenever you need to talk. I mean it, day or night. My guess is you’ll want to do a lot of talking about this before you go.”

We spend the rest of the night catching up and watching Met videos. We stay up past midnight, then Jeanne takes me to her white guest room. Jeanne has three spare rooms, since she has no husband or children of her own to put in them, although she likes referring to my brother and me as her surrogate babies. Grace had to have my kids. I’d never have been able to produce any with such beautiful blond hair. I help Jeanne make up the bed, and she gives me a good night kiss and a worried half-smile before she leaves.

“I’m right down the hall, remember.” She drifts through the doorway. “I’ll be sure to turn the night light on.”

“I think I know my way around.” I shake my head and laugh. In eighth and ninth grade, I probably spent more time in Jeanne’s white spare room than I did in my own.

Jeanne finally bustles out, and the room is silent. I can’t remember the last time I was in a place where no sound filtered through the walls, and I’m left feeling altered, almost dizzy. My scalp starts tingling. There’s someone watching me through the window. I jump up to get a closer look at who it is, but the only thing I see in Jeanne’s backyard is a square of
light, my own shadow on the grass. I could have sworn two seconds ago, there was another face. Quietly, I close the curtains.

In seconds, I strip down to my underwear and brush a tissue across my nose to get the last of the powder off. I'm too exhausted to go through a full bedtime ritual. The only thing I pull out from my bag pile is the notebook, pen still jammed in binding. I crawl under the covers and open to a blank page.
On the morning of Iris’s funeral, Mother woke me before dawn. She had my
shoulder between two newly-manicured fingers, and every time she called she gave me a
shake. Julia. Julia, we have to leave soon.

She pulled me out of the first of many dreams I’ve had about telephones.

The first happens on a stage. I’m auditioning for the lead in a play I know by heart. An open
script, gleaming in my spotlight, drapes over my knees as I sit in a folding chair and wait for
the director to give me my cue. Though the house is dark, I sense I have a substantial
audience.

Suddenly, a phone starts ringing. I glance stage right and discover someone has set
up a 50s black rotary model on another spotlit folding chair. Vibrations from the ringer make
the metal seat drone in sympathy. Soon the stage begins to catch each jangle, aggressive as
rattling teeth, and shoots the sound into the crowd until the whole theater resounds from one
long chime. My concentration breaks. I can’t even hold my ears against the noise.

“Answer the phone,” orders a voice from the front row.

“It’s not in the script,” I protest.

“It’s a last-minute addition. The lines are in there, look them up.”
Terrified, I flip back and forth through the open book. How could I have missed a new scene? The staples come loose, and page after page of my role slips down the orchestra pit, a murky, moist throat. I know I will never see the lines again, but I tell myself it doesn’t matter, since every page in my script is blank.

"Are you going to answer the phone?"

For a second, the house falls silent, and I have a chance to think.

"I don’t know how," I say.

Jeanne dusted off one side of an LP with her sleeve and slipped it on her turntable. Maria Callas. The music, smooth and dark like the surface of a record, drew a screen across Jeanne’s living room, the warm wheats and golds, her favorite colors to decorate in. The light seemed dimmer around her face. She closed the stereo cabinet and walked, arms folded, to the picture window that faced the backyard, although all she’d be able to see was her reflection against a night time pane.

"The dishwasher’s full, Jeanne." I finally called from the kitchen doorway. "Want me to turn it on?"

She shook her head vaguely. "Wait a while, Julia."

The music swelled, then faded. Another track began. We both knew why she’d put on the Callas album she kept in the back of her record case. She was missing Harry, her second husband. Callas was his favorite, or so she’d told me. It had all happened well before I could remember. He left her for a cellist at the Curtis Institute during his semester there as guest conductor. Jeanne had never forgotten, refused to forget, so every winter
around the time when he’d moved out the last of his things, she dug out Maria Callas or Solti or Glenn Gould and stared out the window for hours on end. I could never tell if she was looking for something, a star or a porch light through the trees, or if she was just looking at her own face.

“Can I have a friend over tonight?” Usually, if I was staying and wanted to invite guests, she could be persuaded to take her records to her room. That evening, I knew I couldn’t put up with one of Jeanne’s dark moods. I’d just suffered utter humiliation at Iris’s birthday party the day before, and I had to figure out why it happened.

Jeanne smiled in a sad way. Without turning her head, she murmured, “I don’t see why not.”

I slid across the linoleum in my socks to get to the kitchen phone. My fingers flew over the buttons. One ring, two rings. I bit my lip and hoped Charlie wasn’t over, and if he was over, he wouldn’t answer. I didn’t know what I would do if I heard his gravelly bark on the line. Probably slam the receiver into Jeanne’s wall.

“Hello?”

It was definitely Iris. Shivering, I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans. “Hey, it’s me.”

“Oh.” I could hear breath blowing across the mouthpiece. “Hi, Julia.”

“Listen, I’m over at Jeanne’s house tonight, and she says you can come. If you want, that is.” I coughed. I didn’t want to come right out and say it, but something was obviously wrong. After a few seconds of listening to Iris’s breath, I began again. “We can bake banana bread or something. Jeanne’ll let us use her awesome blender.”
More light breezes. "Tonight's no good, Julia." Iris's voice took on her most patronizing whine. "It's Saturday. Charlie and I always go out by ourselves on Saturday night. You know that." She separated each word sharply, like bullets.

Normally, I would tell her to shut her snobby little mouth or I'd come over and shut it for her. But that night was different. I cringed. "Yeah, I know, I know, but, well, I feel like we haven't seen each other for a while, and—"

"You were at my party."

"I know I was at your party." My teeth ground together. "And that was yesterday, I know that too, but—"

"So what's the big tragedy?" Iris liked to use words in dramatic ways when she was in control.

"But we barely even got a chance to say anything to each other, and we haven't done anything by ourselves for practically a month, and and and I want to talk to you."

She snorted. "What do you think you're doing right now?"

I shut my eyes. "Okay, fine, let's talk." I kept my voice under the music in case Jeanne tried to listen in. "What the hell were you trying to pull last night? You think you looked so cool in front of your new track jock friends?"

This time she laughed out loud. "I looked a lot cooler than you and big fat Louise. I mean, god, Julia. Glow in the dark stars? What grade are you in, kindergarten?"

Tears sprang up, but I swallowed them back. "I turned fourteen seven months before you did. And you're the one who likes the stars, bitch."
"You have got to be kidding. I gave up stars a long time ago, like, seventh grade maybe? I scraped ‘em all off my ceiling this summer. You just can’t handle the fact that I have real friends now, and you’re just a pathetic geek girl."

I thought my heart would stop. "Real friends?" I whispered.

"Yeah, real friends. People who know what I do on Saturday nights. God, Julia, you don’t even have a boyfriend. You hang out with your music teacher and you think baking banana bread and listening to opera full blast is some sort of wild and crazy party." She laughed again. "You know what I think, Julia? I think you’re a loser. I think you’re the lamest excuse for a ninth grader I’ve ever seen."

My bottom lip started shaking. I took a deep breath. "So what do you want me to be?"

"Nothing. Gone. Finito. Out of my life, that’s for sure." She was still laughing, somewhere between a giggle and a cackle. "God, even Louise has better taste in sweaters than you—"

I hung up the phone. My hands were trembling. I brushed a few blond strands behind my ears and wondered what shape my hair was in. If blue socks, blue jeans, and a navy blue sweater didn’t match a little too well, if I looked like some desperate clown.

Out in the living room, Jeanne still clutched her arms to her chest. Every winter, she acted like an Arctic explorer watching for boats as she froze to death on a glacier, and all because of a man who left her ten years ago. Pathetic. I felt like I should knock her down and laugh in her face, for her own stupid good.
“Was that Iris, honey?” She spoke slowly into the glass. “We haven’t had her over in a while. When will her folks be dropping her off?”

I stood directly behind Jeanne so she couldn’t see a reflection. My eyes should have started forest fires in her nest of dyed black curls. She was a curse, the house, the music. No way could she force me to join the Jeanne Stanley club for losers.

“Julia?” She turned around and caught me glaring. Her eyebrows came together in a hurt question mark. “Sweetheart, what happened?”

Swallowing hard, I ran up the stairs and slammed the door to the white spare room. My mouth tasted sour. Jeanne kept calling me from the first floor, but I wanted her to rot for making Iris hate me. All night long, I stayed up, watching the white walls scar with light that streaked across. Headlights disappeared fast. Marks that lingered came from the moon squeezing through pale venetian blinds.

A voice burst through the band room. “Hi, Julia.”

I jumped, dropping the music stand I was trying to adjust. The stiff, metal face fell elegantly, like a redwood in a Sierra Club commercial. As it clattered against the floor, my audition music launched over puddles of tracked-in mud. Jeanne’s perfect copies that I’d worked so hard to keep out of the rain on the way to school began to bloom with brown stains. I took a deep breath and turned around.

Iris and Charlie, both drenched, leered at me from the doorway. I’d forgotten when I was supposed to hide from them. They always crept through the empty music wing at the end of fifth period, so they could avoid lunch monitors who’d busted twice them for sneaking
off school property. Charlie beamed like a big game hunter, but Iris’s eyes, a black velvet firing squad, locked on with total satisfaction. Only she’d known me long enough to understand how artificial I looked singing in character, arms swaying to the melody, body rigid as a stick up the ass.

“Hello, Iris.” Each syllable shot out of my mouth precisely. I had lost any way of preserving my dignity, she’d made sure of that. Slowly, I sank to my knees and began peeling ruined sheet music off the floor, which made Iris and Charlie explode in hoots. Their laughter bounced off the risers, the stands and folding chairs, then down the hall. Of course, I didn’t give them the pleasure of feeling my eyes on their backs as they left.

But I could hear them. I listened closely to Iris’s squeals, which, horrifying as it seemed to me then, didn’t sound that different from mine.

“Getting to know you, getting to know all about you.” Her voice, accompanied by hits of Charlie’s laughter, rolled gradually away from my ears, as if Iris were lingering over the poison needle.

When I was in tenth grade, I got the lead in the State High Thespians’ spring musical, *The King and I*. This was a pretty remarkable feat, even for me. Our directors had never been known to cast against seniority. But that was also the semester I dropped out of Thespians, the year before my family moved to New York. The directors were livid, even though I told them I was failing math and my parents had forbidden me to get involved in any extracurriculars besides my music lessons. I even dredged up some tears, I was so desperate. Obviously, they wouldn’t have let me go if I’d told them my real reason for quitting. I had to
lie for the sake of principle. I refused to participate in any organization that invited Iris Kansil to join.

It wasn’t that I thought she’d upstage me. She couldn’t get people to believe her if she yelled “fire” in front of a flaming theater. The way I heard it from my Thespian friends, she’d been added to the cast list at the last minute, because the directors had decided they’d need more Persian children for the King’s harem. At 4’11” and one of maybe thirty State High students who could trace any genes back to the Middle East, Iris fit the role perfectly.

I remember biting a nickel-sized welt into my cheek when I saw her name scrawled at the bottom of the cast list. Pain from the raw skin felt easy enough to cry about, since I certainly didn’t want to think I was wasting tears on Iris. Like a virus, she was everywhere, airborne, an infection no one in the school could escape. Even with me killing myself every day to keep her from getting at me, she’d invaded. I knew what I had to do. I would not be singing “Getting to Know You” into those evil eyes that would laugh at me through some made-up childish charm. Screw that. Thespians meant nothing in the real world, and I knew how to sacrifice a little for the long haul.

Mrs. Kansil broke through the crowd and caught my arm. “Well, fancy meeting you here!”

The last time the lobby doors opened, I thought my nose had registered a hint of her Tea Rose perfume, but I’d been hoping it was a nasal hallucination. Iris’s parents had plenty of time to get to the high school before me, I’d made sure of that. Still, I gasped and laughed
as if I thought bumping into her at the school play was such a funny coincidence, like a play in real life.

With one set of Spring Plum fingernails wrapped solidly in my sleeve, she reached into the thronging Reserve Ticket line and plucked out Dr. Kansil and Charlie. "Manish, look, Julia came to the show after all." This was fast becoming my worst nightmare.

Charlie, in blue Oxford and penny loafers, sunk bent-necked back toward the wall of bodies. His eyes desperately tried to stay focused on a point three inches above my head. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Iris's dad glowed at me behind a half a bush of long-stemmed pink roses, which he shifted to the crook of one arm so he could shake my hand with the other.

"Julia, you look beautiful as ever!" He pumped my hand about twelve times. "It has been such a long time since we've seen you. When your mother comes for tea, she says, well, you're here, you're there. These girls are like airplanes anymore, they only stop at home to refuel!"

I laughed, leaning in to understand. His Indian accent was constantly getting garbled in other people's conversations. "Well, it's been hard keeping up with my work this semester." For some reason, Dr. Kansil had never picked up on the fact that Iris and I had both been ducking out of our families' get-togethers. But that was the danger of having parents who liked each other after your best friend decided to hate you.

"Yes, I heard about your difficulties in math." Immediately, he looked serious. Word travels fast, I thought. I wondered if Iris giggled about that behind my back, too. "I was very concerned. Have your grades begun to improve? Are you still looking for a tutor?"
I could smell where this conversation was going. "My brother’s tutoring me," I lied. "He’s really good at it, too. He went to Governor’s School for Science with your son, remember. And as far as my grades are going, well, some tests are better than others. I think I’m almost in the clear, though."

Dr. Kansil took a step closer. "I am very glad to hear that. Math is a skill that can take you far, especially if you are a young lady. Susan and I have always encouraged Iris to do her best in both math and the sciences, because we feel so many more of you intelligent young women are needed in the scientific community." Grinning, he turned to his wife and gave her hand a squeeze. "I believe we have already convinced Iris to study astronomy as a career, and maybe one day we will convert you as well!"

"Oh, I don’t know about that!" I laughed again, pinning my arms behind my back. With me straining to hear better and him edging his way forward, Dr. Kansil had finally hemmed me in to the point where his coat buttons brushed against my shoulder. I had to think of a way out. I knew Iris’s dad—he’d interpret my proximity as a signal that I’d joined his entourage, then he’d expect me to sit with them, right between Mrs. Kansil and Charlie, and maybe he’d ask me to hold the flowers or else send me backstage to deliver the package. Then he’d get carried away by the moment and want to take pictures, the happy showgirl and her sweetheart, the aspiring actress and her favorite childhood companion. I pictured myself afterwards, heaping insults on my friends, all Thespians, who’d insisted I come to the last Thespian production I could ever see, then left me with no one to sit with. It seemed inevitable that Dr. Kansil would get his wish.
Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Charlie sharing a smirk with a passing buddy, then trying to cover it up by coughing. My jaw clenched. I refused to endure for Dr. Kansil’s sake. Lamely, I began to stutter, “I...I have to go...meet some friends. I think they’re inside waiting for me. So nice to see you again.”

“Well—wait just a moment.” Dr. Kansil grabbed my shoulder before I could bolt. “I want to give you one of these.” He wrestled with the bouquet to draw out a single flower, which he held out to me in two gallant fingers. “For you, Miss Julia. For good luck with your math exams.”

Blushing, I took the rose and thanked him. It didn’t help that Iris’s folks were so nice.

“Tell your mother I’ll drive her to Choral Society this week.” Mrs. Kansil had to shout as her little group joined the push toward the auditorium. “It was nice talking to you again, Julia. Too bad we couldn’t have come to see you both...”

Her eyes hesitated as soon as she said it. That’s when I knew for sure she’d figured us out. It seemed impossible by then that Mrs. Kansil hadn’t realized Iris and I weren’t speaking. Mothers seemed to know all their daughters were up to.

Memory is a tricky beast. Why is it that I can picture every detail of every second that passed before the play began and have only one mental image of what happened after the curtain went up? I know how corny this sounds, but I feel like it was only yesterday when I went barreling down the auditorium in mad search for a friend to meet. My heart still leaps out of my chest as I see myself, in an ocean of red upholstery, finding three girls I recognized from
Social Studies. I must have years off their lives when I bounded up to them like they were immigrant relations I’d left in Romania. I didn’t even mind talking to them about Yearbook and teen magazines and other boring topics while the house continued to fill and the light began to fall.

But after that curtain opened, nothing

Except one image, like a Polaroid shot: Iris in a spotlight. Laughing. Her teeth look perfect, pure and white. Her hair is pulled back in little girl barrettes.

My mother needs me to bring her something. I think it’s a bottle of medicine, but it could also be her reading glasses. I open the door to her room—which isn’t the real thing, just some strange dream composite—and begin searching through drawers. The mahogany dresser is ten feet tall and seems to sprout new drawers every second so I can’t keep up. As I scan the hundreds of wooden handles, I catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror wedged between the mammoth dresser and the ceiling. For some reason, I’ve styled my hair in a hideous pageboy that makes me look like Pollyanna. I scowl at my reflection and vow to get a haircut ASAP.

There’s a drawer I didn’t notice at first. It’s closest to the floor and runs the length of the dresser, which now runs the length of the wall. The drawer feels like it’s full of boulders, but when I finally manage to drag it open, I see it’s packed end to end with photo albums, the leather-bound, gilt-edged kind you buy in fancy stationary stores. Immediately, I forget about Mother and feel the urge to open one. My back wrenches as I lug a reddish-brown volume into my lap.
I open the cover. Pictures and pictures of Iris. She’s six years old on these first pages. The images have started to yellow, but I can still make out her perfect black eyes, big like a deer’s, brown skin, waist-length hair, also black. The pictures look like portraits. She’s smiling in each one. I can see she’s missing teeth, two up, two down, just like I remember. Her clothes are formal, but I knew her mother dressed her on every occasion. She always hated skirts. Bows. Anything with lace.

As I turn the pages, the Kodak paper gets newer. Iris’s face stays the same except in the finer details. In second grade, she insists on bangs. In third grade, she’s growing them out. The fourth grade shots show off a pair of pink studs, only one in each lobe, since the double-piercing fad doesn’t hit until grade six. More and more, I’m lingering over these elementary school pages, because they make me feel like I know Iris so well. Every feature matches up with my memories. Also, I keep getting this anxious feeling that the next time I turn a page, I’ll be staring at a different face, one I won’t recognize.

I don’t get a chance to look at the Junior High snapshots, because as I hoist the book up to the light, pictures start to pop out. The glue must have dried up long ago, I reason, so all I need to do is get a glue stick and start pasting photos back in place. But I have no memory of which pictures went where, and there are so many loose ones now. They’re spilling the way lettuce leaves squish out of an overstuffed sandwich, even after I close the covers and set the album on the carpet. Thousands and thousands of Irises. My hands don’t work fast enough to catch them all.

To top it all off, the phone starts ringing. “Mother, can you answer that for me, please?” I shout down the hall. I’m too embarrassed to mention the fact that I’ve just ruined
a photo album and made a mess of her room. "Mother, can you answer the phone?" I think I can make out her voice under the steady current of sound, but she’s turned her ringer up so loud it’s the only thing I’m sure I hear. "Mother, please, I can’t get to the phone right now."

More pictures come loose from the pages, and the phone shows no sign of stopping. Did she disconnect the answering machine again? "Do you hear me, Mother? I said I can’t get to the phone. Hurry, Mother, please!” Now the photos have blotted out every square inch of carpet. The ringer blares in my ears like an alarm. I stand up and scream, "Mother! Answer the phone!"

Iris wouldn’t hold her father’s hand as he tried to escort her into the first grade. While a kneeling Mrs. Miller tried to coax her in, I saw him bend and reach, over and over, and each time the top half of the little girl’s body jerked away, like a gear in a machine. The whole thing looked like a machine from my desk. A big fear generator. The little girl stood sideways in the doorway and stared at the hole where the latch went. Her body braced. At six, I knew what scared looked like, and she was scared. She was wearing a green velvet dress with a satiny sash, and her black hair was wrapped in a tight bun balanced exactly on the top of her head. From this, I decided she must be one of those pantleg-clinging, crybaby little doll girls that couldn’t handle leaving Mommy or Daddy’s side to get on the bus. Still, I couldn’t figure out why she wasn’t crying and why she wouldn’t hold her father’s hand. I couldn’t completely write her off without knowing.

At recess, she came out last, right behind Mrs. Miller. It took her a while to detach herself from the teacher, but when I saw her head off by herself toward an empty swingset, I
decided it was time to make my move. I ran right up to her and positioned myself like a road block, crossed my arms, and waited. She stood there staring up at me, and that's when I noticed, boy, was she ever short. Even though I was the tallest in the class, I was head and shoulders taller than she was, if not more. She didn't really present much of a problem for me, except for the fact that she wasn't talking, and her eyes were locked right on mine in a funny way that made me antsy. I waited forever, but she still didn't talk, so I decided I couldn't wait. I took another step toward her and said, "You sure are a crybaby."

I didn't care if it wasn't true. It didn't have to be. I kept looking her straight in the eye. She didn't do anything for a couple of seconds. Then her face scrunched up, and I thought she was going to cry for real, but instead, no, she was squinting. She got up on her tiptoes and kept squinting right in my face. I knew exactly what she was squinting at, too. My birthmark, like a pink lemonade stain on one side of my nose. This little brat had some nerve. I balled my hands into fists and bent down to give her a good look see. "Wanna take a picture?"

Then in a flash, she grabbed my nose between two fingers and yanked so hard I had to drop to my knees if I wanted to keep my face where it was. It took a few seconds to realize I'd been tricked. After I stopped bleating like a donkey with a cold, I plunged my fingers into her perfect little bun, and into the grass we rolled. We rolled and yanked and shrieked down the hill, but by the time Mrs. Miller and the rest of the teachers on the playground had caught up with us, we were lying in two grass-stained heaps by the jungle gym and laughing our heads off. The fact that my nose was throbbing like a stopwatch made
me laugh even more. There was really something to this new girl. Any kid who looked like she belonged in nursery school and could still beat me up was okay in my book.

We skidded through Iris’s living room, careful not to trip on our gowns, which were really full-length slips from Mrs. Kansil’s underwear drawer. Iris said her mom wouldn’t care as long as we didn’t rip. Our life-size phasers with decals whined like dentist’s drills as we fired at the ninja space pirates chasing us. Naturally, we exploded them all and saved Han Solo, Buck Rogers, and Captain Kirk, who we’d left cowering under the couch. Boys couldn’t help being dumb, we agreed. Today we were Princess Leia and her twin sister, Princess Uhura. Our hair bobbed in side buns, held together with snarls of black bobby pins.

From out of nowhere, Iris’s eleven-year-old brother, Matt, appeared in the doorway to the dining room. His arms folded menacingly across his long chest. “What the hell are you supposed to be?”

Iris trotted out to meet him and crossed her arms, too. “We’re twins. Wanna make somethin’ of it?”

This made Matt pop with laughter. “What universe are you living in? Blotchy’s about a foot taller than you.” He pointed in my direction, teeth bared, yellow and sharp. Immediately, I slouched and rubbed my nose.

“Don’t you make fun of my friend, puke face.”

“Lame brain.”

“Puke face.”

“Lame brain.”
By now, Iris was almost standing on Matt’s black leather nikes. Her head lay on her tiny shoulders, like an egg in a cup, so she could stare him in the eye.

“You’re gonna get in trouble when Mom sees you in her underwear.” Matt shoved her back a step or two.

She rocked forward, smacking him in the gut. “Nuh-uh. I’m allowed.”

“And, hey, is that my phaser?” Again, his arm aimed between my eyes. “Hey, you damn little thief, you took that out of my room!”

He lunged, but Iris got in his way, blocking the blow. I hunched over on instinct. I knew how to knock the wind out of my older brother, a manageable eight-and-a-half, but this sixth grade giant was like a long-limbed sea monster, brown tentacles ready to wrap and strangle. Iris had told me about his favorite grip, the head vice. I sunk my head as far as it would go into my chest.

Matt’s arms whipped back and forth as he tried to get around Iris, who blocked as effectively as a defensive end. “It is not your phaser, it’s Bobby’s. He said I could use it.”

“Yeah, you can blow that story out your pants. Now, gimme back my phaser, eraser nose.”

As he dove for my neck, his legs got tangled in Iris’s gown, and he sprawled across the carpet. When he reached up to grab me, the ball of my foot flew up and socked him square on the forehead. I was amazed. I hadn’t intended to kick. A second later, his face crinkled, and his mouth opened to let out a wail, but before he could make a sound, Iris was on top of him, shouting, “MOM! MATTY’S PICKIN’ ON US!”

Another voice, muffled, from upstairs. “Matthew! Get up here this minute.”
“But Mom, Mom!” Matt darted past us and disappeared up the main steps, while we slipped up the spiral staircase in the back. That was the nice thing about a house with two sets of stairs: escape was always an option.

With a hand wrapped around my wrist, Iris led me into her bedroom, propped a chair under the doorknob. “Nice work, Uhura.” She pitched and twisted to get the gown over her head.

I listened. Through the walls, a mixture of whining and words, *But Mom but Mom what did I tell you about bothering she kicked me in the I don’t care what she did you are not to.*

“Don’t worry, Mom won’t be mad at us.” When her body re-emerged, naked from the waist up, a curl wound from her right bun past her collarbone. She dumped the gown in a corner. “I called first, so she won’t listen to Matt.”

She could tell how I felt, but I had a cold lump in my stomach for another reason.

“Iris, am I really a freak?”

Iris gasped. “No, oh, no!” She seemed truly horrified. Her eyes opened wide. Slowly, she floated over, one finger stretched out to stroke my pink mark. “It’s a nebula. You trapped it on your nose. That’s how I knew you were my friend all along.” My eyes shut, I couldn’t watch, while she painted my skin with a fingertip.

Iris taught me about space what she learned from her father.

“See, the nebulae are baby star factories.” Iris shifted, making ripples in her rose quilt. With a yardstick, she was tapping out a few pictures on the wall near her bed.
"They're like moms, which is why most of them are pink. The supernovas—these bluey-green ones here and here—they're star graveyards. Stars come to the supernovas so they can die."

"How do the stars move?" I asked. Iris had tipped the shade on her lamp so the wall glowed in glossy swatches and the rest of the room stayed dark. Squinting to see through the glare, I scanned the delicate patterns, like streamers of ink, for signs of star corpses.

"Gravity. It's all done with gravity." She chucked the yardstick across the room decisively.

"But I though gravity is what sticks us to earth. Falling apples and Fig Newtons and all that." Even though Iris thought she was the third grader with all the answers, I was the one who aced last week's science quiz.

"Well...that too, dummy! You think gravity just sticks to things like a refrigerator magnet or something? Of course not! It's way too important. See, when it comes to planets and stars and big things like that, gravity shoots out these strings that lasso onto some other big thing, stars, asteroids, you know what I'm talking about, and then the star uses its gravity string to slingshot around the galaxy, so it doesn't have to stay in one place all the time. That's how stars wind up at the supernovas. They know when it's time to die, so they go. That's why the moon stays close to the earth, stupid! Why do you think the moon sticks around, because it loves you?"

"No, because it loves you." I gave her a shove, then rolled over on my back. My eyes had to adjust before I could begin tracing the faint, green paths around shadows and ceiling cracks. Since she had to pay for materials out of her allowance, Iris's glow-in-the-dark
galaxy only covered about three pillows worth of space over her bed. Long ago, she and her
dad had penciled in the map—it took up the whole ceiling—but stars and allowance money
were hard to come by. I counted up the fat five-pointers Iris hated because they didn’t look
realistic and tried to locate the patterns she’d drilled into me for the past year, but, as usual, I
could only see little dots on top of big dots on top of little dots, just like in the real sky. That
night, I did make out a new feature, though—in between stars, a row of tiny speckles like
someone had salted the ceiling. “What’s that funny spotty stuff?” I asked, pointing.

“That’s supposed to be the Milky Way. I made it out of cut-up big-ugly stars I had
leftover from my last pack. It’s a real rip, the way they stuff a pack full of big-ugly stars.
Anyway, it doesn’t really look like the Milky Way, exactly. Sometime you can sleep over
here and I’ll show you the real one.”

I propped my head in my arms so I could see the graveyards again. “So, Iris, if stars
die in supernovas, where do they get buried?”

She started sucking on her hair and didn’t answer me right away. After a couple of
minutes, I’d given up on her saying anything for the rest of the night, until she murmured,
“They don’t get buried, they explode.”

“Oh.” For some reason, her voice made me shiver.

“It’s like being cremated, I think.” I could tell she’d wrapped hair around her tongue.

“Yeah. And it’s also like...exploding. Like in a bomb or a plane crash.”

A car engine roared on the highway. Suddenly, Iris started laughing. The hiccup
giggle filled the room and gave me another chill, because Iris didn’t sound happy. I couldn’t
put my finger on what she sounded like. When I propped myself up in her direction, she was definitely smiling, but the color of her eyes looked flat.

"Explosions aren’t funny," I told her.

The sun shines brightly on my flower garden. Carnations, roses, daffodils with broken petals. I have a pail of gasoline, and I’m picking Japanese beetles off my plants so I can drown them in chemicals. I have quite a collection. The tiny bodies ricochet off the walls of the pail and, once killed, clank to the bottom like pennies.

Gradually, I think I hear the phone ringing inside the house. I stop humming and listen. Sure enough. I know no one’s supposed to be at home but me, so I hurl the pail aside, fling off my gardening gloves, and sprint for the porch on the slim chance the person won’t hang up before I get there. The house, trimmed perfectly in white shingles, looms large and menacing. I don’t want to look at it but I know I have to keep running forward. The phone, I remind myself, the phone.

My feet slap up the wooden steps like a knock at the door. The ringer, muffled by insulation and siding, is still blaring. I’m in luck. Calmly, I reach for the back door, but my palms have gotten so sweaty from running they slip off the shiny knob without budging it an inch. I try again, and again, with no effect on knob or door. No amount of wiping my hands on my jeans helps. Sweat has drenched me from head to foot. I reach out for the knob with both hands, but that helps even less. Gradually I realize the house itself has clenched the back door shut, like a jaw or fist.
The abandoned phone continues to ring. Through the pane in the door, I can see the damn thing sitting on the kitchen counter. I’m only two feet away. Frantically, I start pounding on the glass. I’m right here, I shout, I’m not gone. I’ll be there in a minute. My fists strike faster and faster until they plunge through the window, blood flying. That’s when I notice the ambulance units parked in the driveway.

I’ll take care of that, a man says. He winds my arms in a mat of bandages and starts to lead me to the paramedics, two of whom are Rachel and Louise. Everything’s going to be fine, he says.

Wait a minute, I beg. Please, I have to answer the phone. I try to pull away but discover I’m paralyzed.

You won’t be answering anything with those wounds, the man chuckles.

Easterly Parkway Elementary School, one of six K-through-6th branches in the State College Area School District, was built on a hill. Directly across the street stood a complex of medical buildings, while land surrounding the school was developed into a series of residential areas, from modest-income apartments to upper-middle-class family housing. A one-story brick church bordered the northeastern corner of school property, but I only ever heard of people going there for girl scout meetings.

Because the school sat on land that sloped to the street, and because the amount of land the district had purchased for the school was sizable, Easterly Parkway Elementary had two playgrounds, upper and lower. It also had a soccer field, baseball diamond, basketball court, and four-square blacktop, but, of course, those features never could generate the
excitement of two spacious, fully-equipped play areas. An average Easterly student could choose to play on six different swingsets of varying heights and colors, three sliding boards, two sets of teeter-totters, and four jungle gyms, including one in the shape of a fire engine. The combinations of equipment were limitless, or, at any rate, many more than a kid could try out in one day's recess.

By far, the most imposing piece of equipment in Easterly's menagerie, which could be found in the lower playground near the street, was a swingset. Unlike your run-of-the-mill neighborhood park setups, this grand creation stood half a story tall and held four swings, a ring set, and a trapeze, of all things. The queen of swingsets challenged any schoolboy to sit on her round, red spine, if he had the balls to shimmy up one of her six legs, polished smooth by the sweat of failures. I never saw any kid, boy or girl, crazy enough to make an attempt, but then shimmying did not interest me as far as that swingset was concerned. As a climbing tool, it was treacherous, but for swing-jumping, it was perfect.

Fifth grade recess. Finally, the sun had decided to shine. We plodded single-file out of homeroom, then broke ranks when our feet hit the four-square blacktop.

"I call the outside swing!" Iris dove down the hill, tiny legs pumping like a drum roll. Since Iris did gymnastics, her body was conditioned enough to get her first dibs on any seat she wanted. I always gave her a run for it, though, since I had the longest legs. Louise and Rachel, the other two girls in our group, never got a chance to call for swings. Some afternoons, it seemed to take them half the recess period to huff and puff their way down the slope. It could be a pretty pathetic sight: a skinny, elf-like redhead with a fear of falling
shuffling sideways on tiptoe, followed by a chubby asthmatic in brown braids staggering as if she’d just swam the English channel and run a marathon to get to school. Iris and I tried not to make fun of them. They were a part of the group, of course, and they could both be fun, even if it didn’t always show.

That day, as usual, Louise and Rachel straggled, while Iris and I made it to our swingset, grabbed a seat, and pushed off.

“Hurry up, you guys, we’ve got to talk,” Iris called as she began gaining height. The key to swing-jumping, as we had it figured out, was to match your elevation on the forward sweep with your level of gutsiness. Executing the perfect jump meant maintaining a swing that took you as far off the ground as possible, but if you were too scared to think about lifting your butt off the seat, three inches of altitude wouldn’t do you any good. Strategies fell apart the instant the wind hit your face and you saw how solid and unyielding the grass looked below. Past experience didn’t count for much, either. In the end, the only thing to see you through was brute courage. If you had it, you could perform. If you didn’t, you got a big purple bruise on both knees. If you were lucky.

By the time Louise and Rachel finally scrambled onto their swings, Iris and I had climbed to a good cruising plateau and silently began the process of talking ourselves into a jump. Louise took off as soon as her rear end flumped onto the rubber seat, but as usual, Rachel had to kick off her Chinese slippers and adjust her purple barrette before she could move. It was a very precise ritual—right slipper, left slipper, yank hair, yank hair, swing. Seeing the whole ceremony every day was like fingernails on a blackboard, so I tried not to
watch. I also didn’t think about how much that purple barrette clashed with Rachel’s red hair.

“Okay, okay, everybody watch me!” Louise hadn’t been moving for more than ten seconds, and as her arms uncurled from the chains, she relaxed and let the swing drift even lower. I glanced at Iris, who shook her head sadly. Louise was just too nervous to make a good jumper.

After the swing had lost practically every ounce of momentum, she jolted off the seat—a leap of maybe two inches—and released her leftover energy by trotting down the hill, arms flapping. This was Louise’s typical jump. We called it The Butterfly.

“I can never stop running down that hill!” Out of breath and giggling, she climbed back into her swing and shifted to get comfortable.

“That’s because you never get high enough, dummy!” Iris’s gravely voice rang out.

“You’ve got to pump for as long as you can.”

Louise nodded, giving a few vigorous rocks to show she meant business. “So, what party are you guys talking about now. Is it a sleepover?”

“I guess it could be.” Iris tilted back on the forward sway, and her hair billowed into a silky fan. “It’s going to be a Lunar Eclipse party. On Friday, the moon’s going to disappear completely, and this year my mom says I can stay up for the whole thing. So I thought it would be even more fun if we could all get together and see it.”

I curled my bulky legs underneath me and accidentally glanced off the dirt. “We’ll need some place good to watch. Would your mom let us sleep over, Iris?”

“Of course! It should definitely be at my house.”
In a burst, Iris began pumping strong and fast, then catapulted out of her seat. For a few seconds, she hung in mid-air, arms stretched out like an Olympic diver, then slammed both feet into the ground unevenly. Shaken, she had to stagger around 180 degrees before regaining her balance.

"Wow, that was phenomenal!" shouted Louise.

Iris wrinkled her nose. "No, the landing was bad. Let me do it again."

No matter how perfect her jumps, Iris could never get the landing right. She always came down too hard. We called her landing The Brick.

Suddenly, Rachel piped up. "Hey, wait a minute. Iris always has sleepovers at her house. Why can’t we have the Lunar Eclipse party at my house?"

"Maybe..." I thought for a minute. "Rachel’s house is closer to most of ours than Iris’s."

"If we had the party at my house, we could watch the eclipse from here." Rachel lived across the street, two houses down from the medical buildings.

"Yeah!" Louise’s round eyes got wider. "We could swing while we watch the moon!"

"Would your mom let us come here by ourselves?" Iris asked abruptly.

"I think so. I’ll ask her." She didn’t sound that sure, but Rachel never was.

Iris sighed, obviously annoyed. She didn’t like it when she wasn’t in charge. "Well, we can have the party at your house, but only if we watch by ourselves. It won’t be any fun if we have babysitters."
“I’m sure Rachel’s mom isn’t that bad,” I reason. “In the end, everything’ll work out fine.”

I let go of my chains, leaned in and pushed. My stomach jolted as if from a pin stab, but I managed to remember my arm and leg positions as I dropped. Air currents lifted and twisted my blond pageboy until I had a hair curtain in front of my face and I couldn’t see the ground...

I landed low, fell forward on my hands with my knees sticking up. This was my trademark landing. We named it The Frog.

“Pretty good, Jule, but you still aren’t arching your back enough,” Iris’s voice coached from above. “You’ll do better next time.”

I’m in a living room, and the phone starts ringing. There’s a clear path between me and the end table where the phone sits, so I make a run for it. My legs pump in healthy strokes. Through my feet, I can feel the ground I’m covering, and yet I notice I’m not getting any closer to the end table. It’s like the way Elmer Fudd tries to catch Bugs Bunny by tying a carrot to a string and jerking it along the forest, inches away from Bugs’s outstretched fingers. The only problem is, the rest of the room sits quiet and pristine right under my nose. No lamps are rattling. No dishes in the china closet start to fall. Nothing’s disturbed, except me. Gradually, my legs feel heavy, and I know I’m never going to reach the receiver before the person on the other end gives up.
Iris met Charlie Stewart in seventh grade, two weeks after she went out for track. As far as I could tell, Charlie should have dyed his buzz-cut blond and tattooed a swastika above each pec. That way, people could do a spiritual spot-check on him. You lift the shirt, see there are no redeeming qualities, and move on. This method might have worked on Iris, though she might have been too goofy in just to care.

Over the years, I've given myself a thorough jealousy check, and I'm 100% sure I loathed Charlie long before he and Iris hooked up. Just looking into his eyes, bloodshot and animal-stupid, while he spit chewed-up chunks of red licorice down Rachel's blouse on the bus one morning was proof enough for me. I didn't need to hear about how he stuffed Rodney Wilkins's head in a toilet full of pee, or about how he beat Todd Bromley up so bloody the school had to rush him to the dentist to have his teeth sewn back in. He'd failed three classes in a year and had at least one suspension under his belt. That was plenty of evidence to write him off my list, if not the planet's.

To Iris, though, Charlie had beautiful muscles and was a soccer champ, too. If he'd had problems in the past, well, there's nothing that can fix a man like the love of a good woman. The first time I saw the two of them together was at the mall, where the three of us had planned to meet. Charlie stood in the doorway of Orange Julius, well-chiseled jaw grinding up a hot dog. He didn't seem to know us as we came up to him, and when he finally did open his mouth, a beery cloud wafted out.

"Care for a suck, babe?" Smirking, he took the dog out of its bun and held it out to Iris at crotch-level. Charlie Stewart and I were mortal enemies from then on.
“I can’t believe Iris cut her hair,” I whispered to Louise. For Iris’s old friends, it was truly horrific: that perfect black silk shaped in a mushroom cut, permed, shaved at the nape of the neck. Across the dining room, under her parents’ crystal chandelier, her hair lay sprayed in a mass of tangles, stylish but, to me, dead as roadkill. None of that Middle Eastern sheen I adored had survived the 14th-birthday trip to the salon. The perm alone seemed to have fried away any hint of personality.

Louise freed up her arm long enough to smack me on the leg. “Shut up, she’s about to open our present.” As I craned my neck over the sea of bodies, including many high school track stars wearing Guess jeans with big, spongy hairdos, I did manage to catch a glimpse of the glittery wrapping paper Louise and I had picked for the occasion. I hadn’t believed our luck. In a novelty shop, we happened to bump into a display full of glow-in-the-dark star packs—not only Iris’s favorite brand but also one we’d thought had been yanked off the market. Louise and I were so ecstatic, we bought the entire case for a mere $80. We both knew we’d have to pay back our parents into the next millennium, but it was small potatoes compared to the truckloads of unlimited gratitude about to come our way. The last corner of Iris’s ceiling had remained unfinished for two years. Within the next five seconds, she’d have enough materials to complete her masterpiece and wallpaper her room with the leftovers. Cramped in our corner, I waited to see the look on her face with my heart pounding against my knees.

Iris took a few seconds to glance at the card, then searched the room for our faces.

“Wow, this is really heavy, you guys.” She smiled, and I nodded back, not caring about the goofy grin plastered on my face. The big moment had finally arrived. With a pinkie
fingernail, Iris tore off an edge of wrapping paper, unwound the box like a mummy, and finally shook off the last shreds to reveal the best gift of the evening. Iris just stood there, speechless.

The room fell silent except for the dance music throbbing on the living room stereo. I was all ready to bolt up and wade through the crowd to get my bear hug, when I realized she wasn’t tongue-tied from overwhelming joy. First, her cheeks went pale, then green, then pink, and I saw her shoot us a glance of black hatred from behind her star-studded box. Finally, after taking a deep breath, she dropped her shield, sprouted a mean grin, and chucked the stars carelessly in the gift pile.

“Really, guys, you shouldn’t have.” She rolled her eyes, and the whole house exploded in hysterics. As a unit, the crowd performed an amazing feat of flexibility to catch a glimpse of the dorks in the corner. Louise and I were Iris’s freak show. Trying to bounce back, Louise laughed along with the track jocks, but all I could do was bury my head in my lap.

On February 28th, a Wednesday, one week exactly before Iris’s death, my father picked up the phone in his study. For the past week and a half, he’d been working on a manuscript for an upcoming conference and rarely got up from his computer. But he was waiting on a call from a colleague, so instead of letting the answering machine kick in or my mother interrupt dinner preparations, he answered the phone personally.

The voice on the other end introduced herself as Iris Kansil, his daughter’s old friend.

*What a surprise, Miss Iris. I thought you’d fallen off the face of the earth for good! After*
chatting for several minutes about the Pennsylvania weather these days and her father’s astronomy research, she asked my dad if she could talk to me. It was kind of urgent, she told him. *Well, unfortunately, she’s at play practice right now.* Dad rustled for a piece of paper, *would you like to leave a message?* Iris gave him her number—which both my parents knew already, since my mother and her mother were old Choral Society buddies and still exchanged calls every month or two—and asked if I could get back to her ASAP. *I’m sure Julia will return your call as soon as she can. Good to hear from you.* Before dinner, Dad made his way to the kitchen, scrawled *Call Iris* on our fridge wipe-off board, and forgot the entire conversation.

The morning Jeanne gave us the news about Iris, no one mentioned the fact that I hadn’t bothered to call her back the week before. At the time, I’d figured with the senior play and homework and planning my 18th birthday bash, I had too much on my mind to worry about someone like her. *If Dad had thought to mention Iris’s insistence on talking to me immediately, I’m sure I would have had the same reaction.*

I’m in a dimly lit room with nothing but a table and a phone. I realize this is the room I’ll spend the rest of my life in, and I’m resigned to it. Fate never changes, especially when it’s mine. The ringing begins, but I can only bring myself to stare, since now there’s no point in counting how many ways I can fail to respond.

My mother steps out of the shadows. “Aren’t you going to answer that?” She looks shocked that I haven’t even gotten up off the floor.

“I can’t,” I tell her. “I have no luck with telephones.”
“Oh, stop being silly! Just stand up, walk to the phone, and pick up the receiver. Is that too difficult for you to comprehend?”

Even in a dream, I refuse to let my mother insult me. Cautiously, so I don’t attract hail or lava or bullets to my skull, I push up off the ground, take a few steps toward the table, wrap my hand around the receiver. Letting a few rings rumble against the angle of my palm, I take a deep breath and lift. Nothing happens.

“Perfect,” Mother says, and steps back in shadow.

With a rough swallow, I cradle the receiver against an ear. My lips are shivering.

“Hello?” I whisper.

Instantly, the caller hangs up.

“Countdown!” We’d had five false countdowns in as many minutes, but this, Iris promised, was it. For a solid hour, a red stain had consumed the moon’s face like cheese on a cracker. Only a fingernail sliver remained. Squealing, we tumbled out from our seats—no swinging, Iris insisted—and began our chant. Louise alternately made huge, wet slurpy noises and shouted, “Look at me, I’m drinking up the moon!” The rest of us had another system. For each number, one of us jumped. As the numbers descended, we tried to jump higher. Finally, when our numbers ran out and the moonlight died—this was after we’d had to repeat “one” twelve times like a broken record—we let out a roar and all at once let our legs launch us into the air. At that moment, the power in eight sets of muscles seemed to teeter on the infinite; we rode on needle-sharp beams of darkness and sound waves. Call me crazy, but I still believe, if we’d had an ounce more willpower, we could have knocked gravity right on
its ass and dived like missiles into those red sea juices, completely ours and completely free.

It's too bad, really. We might have had a chance to show the whole damn universe that every action hinges on will.

Iris began to howl, and we joined in until our throats got scratchy, at which point we raced back to our swings and started to fly. Rachel and Louise seemed possessed by demons. Every other second, one of their bodies was bouncing against the grass, and they didn’t seem to mind landing on elbows, bellies, or chins. It was like watching a pitching machine.

Beside me, like a paper lantern, Iris glowed silently, her eyes doing pirouettes around the new stars peeking where the moon used to be. As I watched her in the dark, she seemed colossal, like a hot air balloon. I thought how awful life was to create something so beautiful and immense, then squeeze it into a miniature frame and force it to go to school.

Iris caught me staring, but she didn’t seem mad. Instead, she adjusted her sway so we’d be in sync and asked, “Wanna live with the stars and me, Jule?”

“Sure, someday.” Wind burrowed in my coat, and my teeth chattered.

“No, I mean now.”

“You’re crazy.” I searched her face hard for signs of a joke I was missing.

“I mean it, Jule. I’m totally serious. Someday is never, and I’m sick of waiting around. Look at what someday does to grown-ups, Jule. To our parents. You want to wind up like them, smiling and sipping tea and having to kiss other people’s butts? We need to escape now while we’re still kids. We can live in the mountains and count stars every night so we’ll know when one goes away to die and we’ll never have to worry about anyone else. Come on, Jule, let’s run away while we still have the chance.”
“Rachel! Girls!” A voice behind us called. “It was time to come in ten minutes ago.”

Everyone froze and glared at Rachel, whose lower jaw dropped in her lap. “Mom, you said we could stay out as late as we wanted,” she whined.

“I most certainly did not. Anyway, all your hollering has been keeping this neighborhood up for an hour. Now come on, girls, back across the street or the party’s going to end right here.”

Beaten, Rachel dragged her swing to a stop and shuffled toward the break in the fence. Louise trundled behind, rubbing her elbows and wincing at the sore spots.

“This is the last time we ever have a party at your house, Rachel.” Iris hissed before she lifted off her swing and dropped. When she reeled to face me, I noticed she was back to her usual size. It must have been a trick of the light that made me think she’d grown.

“Come on, Jule, I’m not leaving without you.”

“One minute.” Relaxing every muscle, I slid forward, arms lifted, back arched, legs pointed like a compass needle toward that all-important warehouse of gravity. When I landed, my feet hit firmly, weight evenly distributed, and I managed to straighten up without a wobble. This time, I got to see Iris’s jaw fall on her feet.

“Jule,” she whispered when she could talk again, “That was...perfect. Wow, I can’t believe it, Jule, you did it, do you hear me, Julia Grâce Deslaurier, you did it you did it you did it!” Eyes gleaming, her voice crescendoed to an all-out scream. She grabbed my hands, she swung them, then she did crazy somersaults around the lawn and hooted as if we’d both won the lottery.
“Girls, back in the house now!” I turned to face the street. Rachel’s mom still waited on the sidewalk, but Rachel and Louise must have disappeared behind a hedge. Neither of them would believe what had happened, but at that point, I simply wanted to soak in the moment. I had attained perfection.
CHAPTER 3. LUNCH AT THE AUTOPORT

Julia

It was a big controversy. A manager handed my father the message as soon as he stepped up to the check-in counter: Terribly sorry, but we cannot invite your family to the reception dinner after the funeral. We have many friends, as does our daughter, and certain inconvenient decisions had to be enacted during this hectic time. Definitely Dr. Kansil’s handwriting. Also his style, formal and heavy but scientifically precise, carefully jotted on a green note card with Asian-looking cherry blossoms on the cover. Not a good way to begin a trip that was inconvenient to begin with.

The three of us wandered around the lobby, stiff and motion sick after sitting in a car from upstate New York to Central PA. That’s six and a half hours straight. The note card meant we might not even get to see the people we’d dropped school and work and Senior Class Play practice to console. Paul arrived about half an hour later, and we read through the message again, amazed and irritated at once. Mother called Jeanne, her other Choral Society chum, and for two hours squeals and nose-blowing erupted from the receiver. Apparently, Jeanne got cut from the short list, too.

The whole fiasco made the funeral itself hard to concentrate on. Jeanne whispered and sobbed until her face looked like a giant mood ring, as Dad dutifully rubbed her shoulders. A neon-yellow Kleenex box kept on getting dumped in my lap, someone mumbling over my head to pass it on. I tried to focus on following the program, because I couldn’t stand to watch my former classmates with mascara dribbling down their faces,
hands clasped, all saintly and mournful when I knew what these bitches were really like. Iris had hanged herself, which was very tragic and exciting. They might keep talking about her until final exams and graduation took over their walnut-sized brains. Eventually they’d forget, but I never would.

After the graveside service, Jeanne was still bitching about dinner.

"I don’t see why they couldn’t have made space for me. Or for you, either, Grace." She tried to wrap an arm around my mother’s but could only squeeze her fingers through. "We’re Susan’s closest friends, for God’s sake. Manish should let us be there for her. This is the worst day of her life."

Jeanne and Mother had tried to talk to Mrs. Kansil on the receiving line at the UU church. Iris’s mom gave everyone a hug and a smile, but the smile looked plastic and she simply would not open her mouth to say anything besides “God bless you” and “thanks for coming.” I think she said “thanks for coming” twelve times at Jeanne before Paul, my older brother, dragged her off.

We tramped down the steep path toward cemetery parking. The sun, way too bright for a funeral, highlighted the cheery, low-cut grass, sliced down the middle by asphalt. I could tell Mother was tense because Jeanne kept trying to touch her. “They had to draw the line somewhere, I suppose.” Mother gingerly patted Jeanne’s nails. “We’ll take Susan out to dinner while I’m still in town.”

Mother shot a glance at Dad, who shook his head and grinned. I knew what both of them were thinking: poor, twice-divorced Jeanne, of course she’d blame Dr. Kansil. My parents always got their jollies from predictable people, especially Jeanne.
Suddenly, Jeanne realized she'd left her blazer hanging on a folding chair by the graveside.

As Jeanne took off, Paul glanced at my parents and stifled a giggle. "I'll run and make sure she doesn't get trapped in one of her endless conversations."

"Tell her we're about to expire over here!" Dad chuckled as Paul jogged easily through the crowd. The finish on the rows of headstones gleamed like enamel. "So, ladies, where do you think we can grab something edible in this town?" He rubbed his hands together in a spasm of energy.

"You remember the Penn State culinary offerings as well as I do, Professor Deslaurier." Mother rolled her eyes teasingly. "Surely it hasn't been that long."

"For that snide remark, young lady, you lose your vote." He winked, blue eyes twinkling under his square frames. "Julia? What's your suggestion?"

"Anything's fine. I'm not that hungry." The wind picked up and blew my hair into my mouth. A bitter hairspray taste spread over my tongue. As I turned around to spit, I caught the last of the black rental fleet progressing solemnly down the hill, each orange flag furiously waving before it disappeared. For a second, I knew how Jeanne must have felt being left out of the total experience. On the receiving line at the Unitarian church, I only exchanged a handshake and an "I'm so sorry" with Mrs. Kansil before the steady current of mourners swept me out the door. There was a lot I wanted to talk to her about that I knew I'd never have the guts to mention later. Of course, Mother and Dad would also look down on me if I brought the subject up again. To them, painful topics were not polite.
In a few minutes, Jeanne and Paul came wandering down the lawn. Paul had his arm around Jeanne’s shoulder, and Jeanne, once again, was routing through her box of tissues. Mother and Dad began shuffling uncomfortably, checking watches and yanking on sleeves. For the fourth time, Mother tied her blue silk scarf under her chin. Among other things, Jeanne was also the only family friend who cried in public, an act that came the closest, in my parents’ minds, to the traditional idea of sin. Paul, who considered himself an actor, could fill his big blue eyes with concern and pretend to be gallant, but Mother especially wouldn’t put up with blubbering even to pat a person on the back.

“Well, Leonard got me started again.” Jeanne laughed, then blew her red nose loudly.

“You know Leonard, don’t you? Tenor, social studies teacher, girls track and field coach at the high school? At any rate, here I am bawling again.”

Paul patted her shoulder and looked concerned. Trying to grin, Dad held his hand out to her halfway. “We were just trying to think of a place with a good lunch menu. What are your thoughts, Madame Townie?”

She sniffed. “Let’s go someplace that has a bar. I desperately need a gin and tonic.”

“Don’t discuss alcohol around virgin ears.” Mother smirked and touched my arm. “We have to set an example for our schoolchildren.”

I gritted my teeth. Mother had an obsession with pointing out the fact that I was still in high school even though I looked older.

Jeanne stared into my face. Her eyes looked puffy and tired. “Julia’s seen me drunk before. I hardly think she’ll be scandalized by one more show.” She grabbed Paul’s arm.
“And this beautiful blond scholar is practically legal! So we have nothing to worry about.”

Paul laughed heartily, flashing his freakishly straight set of teeth. He seemed destined to be a politician. “Don’t rush me, Jeanne, I’ve got a couple more years to go on that legal thing. But I’ll tell you, I’ve been covering up a dangerous desire for some Autoport chocolate cake ever since I went away to school. Think we could try there? As I remember, they have a pretty well-stocked bar.”

Dad nodded decisively. “It’s definitely not the Taj Mahal, but we might be able to get some nice grub. Sound good, kids?”

“I’d go anywhere to get out of this wind.” Mother readjusted her scarf.

“Take me to the booze,” Jeanne groaned.

“The Autoport it is.” Dad clapped his hands and headed for the car. “Good choice, Paul. Would you care to take the wheel? My back is bothering me from all that sitting.”

Paul drove across town to the Autoport, with Dad as navigator—naturally—and the women squeezed into the backseat like dolls in a baby carriage. Our heads bobbed back and forth silently. Though I’d had my driver’s license for a year, Dad preferred to have his son behind the wheel of his Lexus, because he found Paul more “level-headed.” I’d stopped complaining, since it didn’t seem worth the effort.

The Autoport dining room was dark and practically empty when we walked it at 2:30 pm. I told Mother and Dad they probably weren’t serving anymore, but Dad somehow managed to shmooze the host into seating us. As my family followed the waiter past the garden of folded napkins, Jeanne caught me by the arm and whispered, “Come help me put
on fresh mascara.” Waving to my parents, she led me toward the glowing Ladies sign in an
unlit corner.

Inside, the restroom was yellow and immaculately clean. “Honey,” Jeanne began, diggin through her purse. “I noticed you seemed a little tense during the funeral. Do you want to talk about anything?”

My throat tightened. Mom had warned me before we left New York that Jeanne would corner me at some point. I managed to smile very sweetly, like I’d practiced in my mind, and say, “No, actually I’m feeling fine. But thanks for the offer.”

“Are you sure, dear?” Staring hard into the mirror, she brushed powder onto her nose with heavy strokes. “I only ask because I remember when you and Iris were best friends, and, well, you haven’t shed a tear since I’ve seen you. Are you positive you’re not...holding anything in?”

Clenching my fists behind my back, I tried to keep smiling. Jeanne was good, I had to hand it to her. Even when she could barely speak between sobs, she knew which buttons to press to transform any given situation into a live soap opera. Her vision of life had no boundaries, no public or private, present or past, fantasy or reality, subject or object. She wanted me to fling myself onto her shoulder and burst into tears, so that she could have another good cry and feel like she’d done some good that day. I had no intention of joining her pity party. Iris was dead, we hadn’t spoken since junior high, and if I’d felt even one ounce of grief, I certainly wasn’t humiliating myself in front of Jeanne.
I kept my eyes glued to the back of Jeanie’s head. At that point, I was loathing every frosted black curl. “Yep, I’m sure I’m all right. I promise, Jeanie. You don’t have to worry about me."

Suddenly, Jeanie looked up at me with her warm, dark eyes and laid a hand on my cheek. I was instantly sorry I’d just been cursing her hairdo. “Oh, Jule,” she sighed, “you can read me like a book. Just remember I’m always here if you ever need to talk.” Her compact clicked shut. “For anything at all, I mean it. You know you don’t have to hide things from me.”

We walked out of the ladies’ room to the sound of Dad’s echoing belly laughter. Two older couples had sat down at a dark brown booth along the wall, but their group presence was vastly outshined by my parents and Paul. Framed in an oval window, their silhouettes rocked lightly as they performed their social arabesques, two garnet-colored glasses held in elegant hands. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I could see Mother had taken off her scarf but not her gloves, so that her gray-gold curls carried the eye down in a single sweep over her dancer’s neck to the smooth texture of her hand. No one could take away the spotlight like Mother could. Even at fifty, she was breathtaking, in a way no one I ever knew had been.

Taking a sip of wine, she saw Jeanie and me advancing on the table and waved with her free hand. Wine never failed to warm up both of my parents. Dad looked our way and got a big, goofy grin on his face.

“Say, Jeanie, where’d you pick up the beautiful blonde?” He cackled loudly at his own joke.
I scowled at him while Jeanne scooted onto the booth bench. “Oh, I think she comes with that fancy car in the parking lot,” she said, straining to sound cheerful. “How’s the menu looking today?”

“Quite acceptable, thank you.” He pointed out the glass on Jeanne’s placemat. “We took the liberty of ordering you a double gin-and-tonic.”

Jeanne gasped. “Marshall, you’re an angel. If your wife weren’t here, I’d kiss you.”

Laughter swirled around the table. Only I didn’t crack a smile. Jeanne’s failed counseling session had shaken loose a gear inside my mind, and gradually I realized I was feeling queasy.

“Ah, I see our waitress has arrived.” Dad nodded to the chubby redhead in a faux maroon tux who’d appeared, without a smile, at the end of the table. “Ladies first, of course.”

“So many intriguing-looking entrees,” Mother spoke up, delicately enthusiastic. “Tell me, how is the filet of salmon prepared?”

I didn’t listen to the description, because the thought of food was bringing on more sickening twinges. I wished Jeanne had never mentioned Iris. The funeral had been rough, but I’d managed to stomach the whole show, altar boy to gravedigger. I knew I would have made it through the rest of the day if Jeanne hadn’t touched that memory vault. Iris and me, best friends forever. Iris and me playing Barbies. Iris and me dunking cookies after school.

“Wake up and order, Sis.” Paul joggled my arm.

“I wasn’t asleep.” I sat up and glanced over the menu. “I’ll have the salad bar.”
“What, only that?” Jeanne cried. “Surely you want something else. You haven’t eaten since five o’clock this morning!”

“Darling, you might find some chicken you’d like if you look under Poultry.” Mother tapped my menu then turned back to the waitress. “I think she needs more time to decide.”

“No, I don’t need more time. I’m having the salad bar.” Smiling as pleasantly as I could, I handed the woman my menu. “Really, I’m just not that hungry.”

Jeanne clucked anxiously. “You’re going to waste away to nothing, dear.”

“Oh, stop worrying,” Paul said. “She’ll be packing it away like a horse once she hits Bryn Mawr. The same thing happened to me my first semester at Penn. I went way over my Freshman Fifteen. Remember, Mother? I must have gained thirty pounds in two months!”

Mother groaned. “I couldn’t believe it. He’d outgrown his entire winter wardrobe. I thought we’d go broke replacing all those oxford shirts. Honestly.”

Of course, I didn’t need to listen to Paul’s Ivy League Tales while my parents swigged their wine. I could listen to the same stories, even smell the same booze, during any college vacation. From age ten, Paul stopped experiencing life and started cataloging. Thus, his little anecdotes never changed in substance, only in the details he tweaked here and there to cover up the fact that he was embellishing. I excused myself to get my food—another salad bar bonus. Like air rushing out of a burst balloon, my memory cells had flooded, and I wanted to concentrate on rubbing them out before I could handle any more chatting. Iris and me pitching sticks to my dog, Missy, tickling Paul during a wrestling match, sticking a glow-in-the-dark universe to her ceiling. My eyes began to sting as I picked up my glass lettuce plate. This was all wrong, I told myself. Iris was not a good friend, in the end. When she
found the cool people to hang out with, high school guys who guzzled beer and girls who bought grosses from Guess, she dropped me like a hot coal. I couldn’t live up to her expectations, I was a nerd. She’d probably call me that from beyond the grave. Some night, I’d see her in a dream chanting insults, laughing at my clothes, my haircut, and knowing I couldn’t get at her anymore, because if I reached out to yank her hair, my hand would sail through her forehead. She had me, big time. I couldn’t lay a finger on her.

So it wasn’t worth getting worked up over ancient memories, even if they were happy. I immediately felt better as I scooped up potato salad and some creamy-looking pineapple with marshmallows. The vegetable sat snug in dishes, nestled among the leafy greens and ice, metal plate trays, the sneeze shield. It eased my mind to see everything in place. That’s what I needed to learn from Mother and Dad: how to compartmentalize. Behind one door, your grocery list, behind another, your friends. Hang up aspirations on a coat rack, to be looked at, and box up the taste of bad potato salad where you can’t reach it in the closet. As I stood alone in front of the three-bean salad, I conjured up a vision of a lockable drawer, still open but with no key, and saw myself stuffing picture after picture of smiling, eight-year-old Iris and me, until the sides bulged with Kodak paper. I shoveled the drawer in its slot, heard the lock click, and walked away, my limbs feeling loose and relaxed. I took a deep breath.

The whole process had left me with a sinus headache, but I knew I was ready to face society again. I stuck a big hunk of french bread on top of my cottage cheese and sauntered back to our table. Dad waved at me with his fork. The salad course had already arrived, and I realized out of the corner of my eye, I’d seen the redheaded waitress assembling the lettuce
at the salad bar. Some choice they give you, I thought. Smiling through my headache, I sat and prepared for a dumb joke.

"Shoot any bunnies while you were at it?" asked Dad with a smirk.

"Hey, it takes time to pick out the perfect lettuce leaves!" I came back. "When you’re discriminating, you don’t have to be fast."

Dad raised his wine glass. "Touché, young damsel. A toast to Dame Julia, who’s got her old dad beat."

Toasted was definitely where the adults at the table were heading. Luckily, Paul didn’t need directions to get back to Jeanne’s place. I clinked my water glass around, then concentrated on chasing croutons around my plate. I didn’t want to witness my parents making fools of themselves at the Autoport.

"Marshall, you have such beautiful children." I felt Jeanne’s fingernail brush a strand of hair from my cheek. "I don’t know how you ever did it."

"Well, I married a beautiful woman, that’s how!" Dad tried to kiss Mother’s hand, but she swatted him away with her napkin.

"Marshall, please, I’m attempting to enjoy my iceberg lettuce."

"I remember when I used to babysit for Julia." Jeanne’s voice sounded distant. "Dear little serious Julia. She never had a smile on her face. Life was too important, I suppose. She and Iris used to trot over for a piano lesson every once in a while."

My entire family shared a cringe. Jeanne rambled on, “They told me playing by yourself was too hard, too confusing. So, they decided they were each going to learn one hand of every piece, Iris on the right, Julia on the left. That way, they would never have to
be alone on stage. It was so dear. I remember their sweet heads bent over the keyboard...just like little birds..."

Jeanne’s voice finally broke up, and she brought her napkin up to her face, muffling the sobs. My dad, always a gentleman, reached over and took Jeanne’s hand, but the rest of us sat like ice sculptures waiting to melt.

Finally, Mother spoke up. “Jeanne, please, let’s try to get through lunch as painlessly as possible, all right, dear?”

“I can’t help it.” She shook her head behind her veil. “I just feel so...awful.”

“We understand, Jeanne.” Dad sighed patiently. “We all feel terrible, the same as you. But we can’t wear our hearts on our sleeves at all times, now can we? Think of the rest of our feelings for a moment.”

“Jeanne, darling, please try to calm down.” Mother searched her purse for stray tissues. “Really, you’re disturbing Julia, I can tell.”

I dropped my fork. Once again, my name gets batted around to help in untangling their mess. “No, she’s not, Mother. I’m perfectly all right.” I try to keep my voice level.

“Well, why should she be all right?” Jeanne shot back at Mother. “Isn’t she allowed to have feelings?”

“She is eating her lunch.” Mother’s face hardened. “She has a right to chew her food in peace.”

“Mother—” There was no hope of my voice ever reaching them. Their ears blocked out any opposing frequencies.
“But she said she wasn’t hungry,” Jeanne flung down her napkin, smeared with clumps of beige powder. “Show a little compassion, can’t you? Her best friend just died.”

“She was not my best friend!” I finally exploded. “She hadn’t been my friend since junior high. You keep making up these happy-dreamy pictures of me and Iris as little kids, that we were birds—what crap! When I moved away, Iris was a mean, alcoholic slut who wore see-through shirts and no underwear and liked bopping her boyfriend in the girls’ locker room more than pretending to learn how to play piano. Okay, Jeanne? Does that clear everything up for you?”

Every movement around the table froze. I think I may have stopped the entire dining room, including the kitchen staff. No one at the table said a word, they just stared at my face, maybe waited for horns to grow out of my forehead. Trying to collect what was left of my pride, I tucked a few hairs behind my ears and took another bite of salad. “I haven’t had a complete conversation with Iris since we were in ninth grade.”

Gradually, heads began to lower and silverware clinked against plates or glasses. Dad let out a breath after finishing the last of his wine. “That’s strange.” He wiped off his glasses. “I thought you called Iris just last week.”

Once again, the table stopped. Suddenly, I felt heat rise through my neck, as if a spotlight had landed on me. “I didn’t call Iris last week.” I thought I sounded stupid enough.

“But I took down a message from her.” His eyes were bleary. He couldn’t have known the faux pas he was walking into. “I remember it distinctly. ‘Call Iris,’ I wrote it on the message board. Surely you saw it, you’re gabbing on that phone every hour, practically.”
A weight dropped through the lining of my stomach. I couldn’t act dumb anymore, Dad made sure of that. So the soap opera would begin, on cue. “I saw it. I didn’t have time to get back to her.”

“Oh my god!” The napkin Jeanne stuffed into her mouth mangled her high-pitched squeal.

Mother held her head in both hands. Dad wouldn’t give up. “But I was confused!” he whined to the back of her hand. “I didn’t know. I thought she and Iris talked just last week.”

“Oh, Julia, how could you?” The tears were gushing at full-blast now. Jeanne had given up on decorum. “Your last chance, and you threw it away? How terrifying! I can’t imagine what you’re feeling right now.”

“Jeanne.” Again, Paul swept up her soggy hand. “I know this is going to sound bad, but I would have done the same thing if I’d been in Jule’s shoes.” Jeanne’s eyes flew open, but Paul cut her off before she could open her mouth. “Please, let me explain this to you. Iris had not been any kind of friend for, what, four years. She made fun of Julia—I can remember this—she called her names, she tortured her at parties, all the things a grade-A, stuck-up bitch did in the school we went to. At one point, she may have been cute, but the last time we knew her, she’d been sucked in by that expensive-clothing, big hair, brainless culture that a lot of worthless girls fell into. I mean, I find it hard to believe, the way I’m sure you do, that Iris could turn into a bimbo, but it happened. She did get wasted every weekend, she did wear slutty clothes—heck, I even heard she did the whole football team one night, right down the line, like a vending machine. So why would Julia want to call up a girl like that?”
Gradually, I began to feel my fists gripping the edge of the tablecloth, my nails clawing ferociously, until the seam gave. Paul was piecing together one of his stories on the spot, I could tell. Never in his life had Paul kept track of Iris. He didn’t even look at her when she came over after school, unless she had something he could accuse her of swiping from his room. She was just a girl, just a friend of his little sister, and Paul couldn’t waste his brain cells on her since he had more important things on his mind, like what sort of career to shoot for, which Ivy League was good enough for him. His world loomed rosy and bright, while Iris would lie in a six-foot hole forever.

Paul stopped, I thought for good. Instead, he only had to catch his breath.

"I think Ayn Rand’s philosophy fits this situation best." Paul patted Jeanne’s trembling fingers. "Some people just aren’t worth the trouble."

A red sheen dropped like a blanket across the room. Something took control of my hand—it must have been instinct—something that made me grab my water glass and deposit the contents in Paul’s lap. My eyes started to fill. I had to leave before anyone saw. As I flew through the aisles of empty tables, I heard Paul shout, “But I was agreeing with you!”

My whole body snapped around like a cobra. “Kiss my ass!” I shrieked.

Lucky for me, the ladies room was still empty. I would’ve hated sniveling in a stall, surrounded by ripples of hovering voices and black pumps. Arms braced around the sink, staring at the drain so I wouldn’t have to see myself in the mirror, I locked my jaw against the gurgles and moans echoing against spotless tiles. I was worthless. The bottom dropped out of the drawer, and I couldn’t stop it. Iris and me, best friends forever. Iris and me, exploring the stars.
The door swung open. I jumped, then spotted Mother’s open-toed white heels on the carpet. Hiding was pointless. Before, I’d quickly wipe my face and nose to try to save the situation, but now that I was older, I couldn’t see the use.

Her heels stayed planted on the carpet for a long time, and I held my breath for almost as long. Then her voice came floating out of nowhere. “Do you have something to say to me?”

Drops of water on the drain caught the light. “I’m not apologizing to Paul. He deserved what he got...those awful things he said...he lied—”

“I’m not referring to Paul.” Mother’s voice pushed. “I’m talking about your behavior, which was very, very poor today. You’re almost an adult now, Julia. I expected better.”

I could feel her turning her back on me, so I glanced up, ready to hurl a stone.

“Mother, I went to a funeral today!” I screamed to her curls, perfectly set.

Before I could take a breath, Mother’s gloves had clamped my face like a vice. Her face was gray porcelain, drained of human features. “Julia, you will be to many funerals before your life is over,” she whispered, “and they will all be as hard as the one you just attended. Life is hard. Life is one cruelty after another. But that does not mean you can let your emotions fly apart in public, do you understand me? Show respect for your family if you have no dignity. Have you ever seen me lose control the way you just did? We can never show the world our weakness. We mustn’t lose control ever.”

Her fingers gripped tighter and tighter until I had to screech for her to stop. She released my face. For a second, she looked as surprised as me. With mouths hanging open,
we both turned to the mirror and watched five welts grow rosy beside my pink birthmark.

Eventually, Mother took a deep breath.

“Clean off your face and come finish your lunch. It’s wrong to waste food.”

She strode quickly out the door, and this time I felt too drained to speak. When I turned back to the sink, I found my puffy face in the mirror again. Except for the finger marks, I looked exactly like an infant who’d just given up a screaming fit for its bottle. The water I splashed over my cheeks did nothing for the patches of broken capillaries, miniature wounds from an invisible war. Slowly, I pulled my compact out of my purse and began slathering my cheeks with powder. When I was finished, you could still see hints of red where Mother’s fingers had been, but it was the best I could do without real liquid cover-up.

Then running a hand through my hair, I opened the door on the outside world and hoped I’d remember to smile.
CHAPTER 4. NIGHT AND DAY

Louise

The pavilion roof turned over. It was like a steam roller on stilts, fat as a fist, barreling down. We were rocks under the falls. I knew it was the vodka and the dark and the slapping sound the creek made. But try and tell your brain that when it’s so messed up you have to bite your fingers to make sure they’re there. So instead of hearing what Carrie said, I flattened against the picnic table, nose in rotten wood, and my drink flew into Luke’s lap. Luke screamed, then there was hissing like a bunch of gas jets turned on at once. Shhhhh. That shut him up.

Luke whispered, “What the fuck was that for?” I felt the ice on my neck and his clammy thumb, so I rolled over. Then he tried to shove his hand down my jeans, but they were too tight for his fist to fit. We laughed until we couldn’t breathe. I poked Brian in the thigh to get me another.

“Why can’t Louise drink from the damned bottle?” John whispered, brushing a Carrie curl under his chin. She was little bird bones and vanilla soap, and he could tuck her in the space between groin and pecs. Which is where she wanted to be. “She scared of spit?”

“Ice, you asshole.” Carrie jabbed him in the ribs. “Louise needs ice. Didn’t anyone hear what I said?”

“No.” Brian handed me a dixie cup, and I was sitting again. The roof had sturdy, triangular beams.
"I said I dreamed about her again. Last night. This time she knew me, and she didn’t have a gun or dirt in her hair."

"So she’s not a snot-green zombie from hell." Luke pulled me into his lap and the vodka puddle. The wind started to blow and my pants were soaking through to the undies, while he dug to find the crease under my size D bra. His nails climbed me like a ladder, all those stomach folds.

"Shut up, this is important." Clanking glass against teeth. Deep breath. "She was in this long flowery dress, or it might have been a sheet, I couldn’t tell, and she was sitting on the steps of her house, sort of staring into space as if I wasn’t standing right in front of her, and I said, what’s wrong, Iris? just like she was okay and nothing happened, it was like both of us forgot, and she didn’t say anything to me, she just got up and walked into the house, and somehow I knew I was supposed to go with her."

"Can we not talk about this?" I groaned.

"Yeah, come on." Luke nicked my bra with his thumb. He worked up. "The girl was fucked. She got dumped and strung herself up by the neck. Case closed."

"No really, you guys, we can’t ignore this," Carrie whispered. "It’s real."


"My mom says it happens all the time."

"You’re mom’s a new age pantywaste."

"Hey, shut the fuck up." John popped Luke in the back. The Gospel Twins hadn’t been getting along. Carrie and I called them that because of the Sunday School chant,
Matthew Mark Luke and John...and because they were best friends, but not so much since Carrie. They were both on the basketball team. “Keep going, Carrie.”

“So anyway, it was like a ghost town inside her house, there was nothing left but carpets and curtains and a picture here and there, and Iris wasn’t looking at anything, she was taking me up the spiral stairs into the hallway by her bedroom, and then she stopped and turned around and said, I left you something, and she shoved open her bedroom door and the walls started glowing but the noise was so loud, it was like a dump truck breaking, it woke me up before I could see what’s inside.”

“Oh, God.” I stuffed my head between my knees. Everyone knew Carrie was dense. She was so stupid Iris used to say Carrie better not turn her hair dryer up to maximum, or else the air in her skull’ll get hot and she’ll float away. But this was about the dumbest trick she’d ever pulled. First it was the dirty hair dreams, then two days ago, at the memorial party, she got this bug up her butt that she had to get into Iris’s room. Like her parents were hiding buried treasure or trafficking drugs. Three times she tried to get Mrs. Kansil to unlock the door: she asked, then she tried to pick the lock with a credit card, then she said Iris had borrowed her blue mascara last week, and could she route around in her daughter’s makeup bag, but Mrs. Kansil went looking for it herself. They’d just had Iris’s carpets cleaned, she told Carrie. They didn’t want people tracking in dirt.

So now Iris comes back from the dead to tell us there’s a mercedes double-parked in front of her dresser and she can’t get to her clothes. How dumb could Carrie be. Through my knees I stared at the dark beside Brian’s right shoulder where Iris would have sat, curled in Charlie’s lap, a soft brown C, where she would have sent me a wide-eyed snort then
pretended she was having an attack of nasal drip. Carrie never noticed how bad Iris’s nose got when the three of us were together. Iris and I would laugh for hours.

“Hey, lean back, things were getting good.” Luke towed me in by my braid. His nails were pinching now, he was desperate, his boner stabbed the small of my back in slow dance time. Iris used to say I was lucky Luke had a fetish for fat girls. She didn’t use the word “fetish,” but that didn’t matter. My vodka went down warm like a hug.

“Listen, you guys,” Carrie squeaked, “I’m telling you it’s a sign. Iris left something in that room for us, something she didn’t want anyone else to find—not her parents or her brothers or those other phonies at the party. We’re her real friends, right? So we’ve got to find a way to infiltrate that room and soon.” I heard her licking her lips, a sick dog sound.

“Who knows what’ll happen to her if we don’t get there first?”

“What’dya mean, what’ll Happen. To her?” Brian was so sloshed his mouth wouldn’t fit more than two or three sounds at once. He picked them apart. “She’s. Dead. Innt she?”

I started rubbing Iris’s charm bracelet, biting into my wrist, but I didn’t care how it fit. Mrs. Kansil gave away piles of Iris’s stuff at the party—clothes, shoes, watches. She said she’d rather us have it than the goodwill store. I remembered the charm bracelet because I’d given it to Iris for her tenth birthday, back when she liked space junk. The bracelet was silver with tiny green suns and stars. I never saw her wear it. In the dark, I ran a fingertip around one way and back, over the bumps, hanging one per quarter-inch, and then I would stop and try to figure out where I was. It wasn’t working. “Can we please stop talking about this?”
"I'm talking about her spirit, you moron." Carrie's voice dropped when she got mystic. "Karma. What if she needs us to get to the next life?"

"Oh, Christ, here we go again." Luke stopped twiddling my nipples so he could polish off the bottle. "There's NO God, NO next life. Definitely no motherfuckin' KARMA. We all go poof and that's it. My dad used to be a priest, he knows. The only life Iris's gonna get comes from the little white maggots chewing on her eyeballs."

"Shut up." Carrie hissed. "What does he know about God? You're father fucked his confirmation class."

"You TAKE THAT BACK, or I'll TEAR OFF YOUR TITS."

An airy scream, stop. Beats against the table, tumbling. Luke's hands launched me, and I landed in a sideways heap. The dark rocked, the loose beams, I rocked. My bracelet was caught in my palm. One star one planet two stars two planets.

"Shut up shut up shut up you wan someoneta callacops?" That was Brian. He'd already spent two nights in jail on a frat party bust. He knew how to shut people up.

The stream slapped. A pair of arms, I guess they were Luke's, slid under my stomach and hauled me upright. Which was good because my body had no tension, no shape.

"I happen to think Carrie's right." A whisper, John's whisper. "Why didn't they let us go in Iris's room? Their kid committed suicide. They shouldn't have anything to hide."

Wind, branches. Luke slowly spoke up. "Do you think that's all it was? Suicide? I mean, we only have their word for it, right?" His pelvis pressed hard into my tailbone.

"Exactly. Some Penn State professor's kid winds up in a tree, and who's gonna tell the police? The parents. Cops probably thought it was an open and shut case."
Carrie twittered, “Guys, um, listen, I don’t think we should...”

“Oh come on, Carr, think about it.” John’s voice rises like a steam cloud. “Nobody believed it when they told us. She wasn’t ever down about anything. Well, Charlie dumped her, but she was bouncing back. She could’ve had any guy she wanted. She was going to motherfuckin’ Yale. Yale, for chrissake. Brian didn’t even get into Yale. It doesn’t make sense, Carrie. Except if it wasn’t...”

A quick shift. Carrie was sitting up like a pole. The outlines of her shoulders showed up as a blacker shadow on black, eggshell knobs, thrown back and stiff.

“Shit, and I bet it was her father, too. The Indian guy.” Luke began to squeeze handfuls of my stomach flab. I could barely feel the pressure. “You know, he’s always been just a little too interested in his daughter, don’t you think? I mean, he’d pick her up from practice and he’d kiss her on the mouth. Right in front of the school, too. I can’t believe Charlie put up with it.”

John’s voice was getting closer and more choppy. “And did he show up at the party? No. Has he been seen since the funeral? No.” Long inhale. “I think we’ve got something here, folks. I think we’re really onto something.”

Rushing water, or car tires sweeping the highway. Or both at once. Two stars two planets three stars

“What about the jogger?” Carrie squeaked. “The jogger that found her—”

“Hasn’t been available for comment since it happened. God, Carrie, think about it. They paid...him...off. Jog by around 5:30 on whatever morning, tell the police what you see, and disappear for two weeks. He only gets the money after he gets lost.”
"And, come on, it's not like he couldn't have strung her up after he killed her." Luke throws me forward. "Perverts love ropes and whips and stuff. You know, he could've even poked her with the stake he used to pound the rope into the branch."

"Or scissors, or his big brown Paki prick. Hell, for all we know, he could've been up there with her banging away, some kinda bondage fantasy, but then something happened they didn't expect. She slipped, he got a little too hot. All over in a second."

It sounded like Carrie was choking. "Oh, God."

"Stop it. Stop it stop it stop it stop stop stop stop"

My fingers were in my ears. I didn't think I was yelling, but then the hissing started and a hand wedged over my mouth.

"Quit worrying, you two," said Luke, rubbing my spine up and down. "We'll protect you from that psycho."

"Yeah, there are three of us, Luke and Brian and me, and only one of him. He wouldn't even try to touch you two. He knows what he'd get."

I peered over at Brian, who was lying on the table bench. I couldn't tell if he was conscious. His body looked like a used hamburger wrapper.

"So what we have to do is, we have to break into that room. I'm thinking tomorrow night around dinnertime. That way we can act fast, and they won't be ready for us."

Luke nodded. His chin hammered my scalp. "She did say to come over any time. Whenever you need to talk, she said." He talked in a high pitched whine to imitate Mrs. Kansil. "The murdering cunt. We'll get it out of her."
"Yeah, and the easiest way to do that is to break into the room. No one's gonna confess until we have the evidence. You free tomorrow night, Carrie honey?"

I didn't hear an answer, but I did hear a lot of smacking and licking. Which meant yes.

"Louise. Louise, wake up." Luke jabbed me in the armpits, his version of tickling. I didn't pretend to giggle. "Think you can get out of seeing your grandparents?"

I tasted a trace of vodka vomit. The picture I could see of Iris, Charlie's lap, pillowy sweater, round brown eyes hooking mine for a secret laugh, was leaking away.

"Come on, Louise." I got a shake. "We all gotta do this."

I could see Dr. Kansil, beaming and shaking my hand. Sparkly brown eyes. Fixing pancakes with little red blossoms of currant jelly, whipped cream tufts, powdered sugar. Iris would never eat them when Carrie was around. He didn't care that she was getting chubby.

"LOUISE."

I took another jab, this one to the rib cage.

"Okay, okay." I groaned. The taste was awful. I could hardly stand opening my mouth.

"Told ya she'd come around." He rubbed my stomach vigorously, then started working down.

"Quarter till five, then." More smacking and sucking. The lower half of my body turned warm, like a water balloon filling up with chicken broth, but then I realized it was Luke's hands. Two pounds of meat, dried, unzipping the fly, jammed in the undies then
flattening, pinching, rolling the flaps into a soggy pink cigar. Usually Luke moaned about needing rubber gloves to get through my sticky crotch, but not tonight.

I couldn’t talk because I had to think about breathing. I was worried I would stop. I wanted to yank those wiggly sausages out of there and tell him, Not around Brian, what if Brian’s watching? I stared hard at the crumpled body on the bench, but I couldn’t make out which way his head was turned, or which end a head should be on. There didn’t seem to be an end, just a never-ending knot, like a tangle of pipe cleaners.

Suddenly the pipe cleaners flew together and sprang up. Brian was standing, his head jerked side to side as if he were a homemade puppet. Then he disappeared before I could blink.

“Luke,” I mumbled, “where’d Brian go?” I leaned forward. No noise came from outside the pavilion, no footsteps. Brian must not have been as drunk as he seemed, or else he could fly.

Then there was a faint noise, gravel grinding, and a knife of white light began crawling toward us from the park entrance.

“Cops! Fuck! Fuck!” John tried to yell quietly, but instead he squeaked. Limbs flapped, the bottle broke and dixie cups bounced against the concrete like ball bearings. Luke lifted me up, pulled his fingers out and left me stumbling in the grass with my jeans hanging open. I could see their backs, Luke’s and John’s and Carrie’s—hers was smoky and pencil-thin—and I tried to fire my legs after them, but no good. The last I could see of them they’d almost made it to the road, toward Carrie’s house, while I lurched toward the covered bridge over the creek.
The white light was almost touching the pavilion, so I didn’t bother balancing on stones. I waded in the creek up to my ankles, and since I had stay low water splashed under my jacket and onto my cotton undies. I didn’t feel it at first, but soon I noticed the tiny cold teeth, staining my skin silver.

Police radios buzzed back and forth. I tried to block it out with the water lapping against the pillars holding the bridge over my head. One star one planet. I could see Mr. Kansil, his dead brown eyes, fiddling with his belt buckle as he opens the bedroom door. Two stars two planets. His dark fingers stroke the knife. Bruises on her brown neck. Water lapping. Three stars three planets four stars four planets clasp.

The sun was bright for so late in the day. It made Brian grab his head as he climbed out of the car. He’d been doing that the whole trip over. John would hit a curve, and Brian would throw his hands around his temples. Like his whole head was going to fly off. Luke and John had been planning in the front seat.

“So what do you think we’re looking for?” Luke adjusted the sun visor so he could stare straight ahead. “Bloody sheets? A condom?”

The Gospel Twins were best friends again, so Carrie got stuck in the back, squashed against the door by my thighs. Carrie refused to sit next to Brian when he was hung over. I held my breath over each bump in case he barfed.

John tapped the break at a stop sign, then shot through. “Nah, the mother could clean up blood easy. I’m thinking more along the lines of a message scratched in the wall or some equipment the perv couldn’t part with, cuffs, cleats-”
“I hear you.” Luke pulled out a pair of sunglasses and spat on both lenses. “Could even be a body part.” He smeared the spit with his thumbs.

“Could even be the whole damn body. Closed casket funeral, remember.”

Brian groaned, his forehead mashed against the window. “That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard.”

“Excuse me? I didn’t hear that.” John yanked the rear view mirror around so his grey eyes aimed at Brian and me.

“I said, that’s the dumbest thing I ever heard.” Brian peeled his head off the glass and smirked at the eyes in the mirror. “Who the fuck do you think you are, the Hardy Boys?”

“Oh, that’s it.” John slammed on the brakes, and we all lurchcd forward.


I ducked, but Brian just giggled. He caught Luke’s wrist and started twisting as if he wanted to snap it off. It took Carrie what seemed like ten minutes of shrieking to get them off each other.

“Stop it, you assholes!” She even gave Luke a backhand across the face. “We’ve all gotta do this together.”

Brian and I rolled our eyes but didn’t say a word.

None of us said a word, not even when we got to Iris’s house. John held the door for Carrie and squeezed her shoulder. Luke made a face in the wind, unfolded his sunglasses then stuck them in his jeans pocket. Over and over, he reached into his windbreaker and adjusted something. That morning at Carrie’s place, there’d been talk about borrowing Luke’s dad’s
357, but Carrie said she wouldn’t ride in a car with a gun. Bad vibes, her mom had told her.

I tried to sink my fingers in Luke’s back pocket, but he jerked away and glared at me. It was back to the daytime routine for us.

We’d parked at the bottom of the Kansils’ enormous driveway so we could take them by surprise. Above us on the hill, the big white house glowed in the last of the sun, and we were walking toward it. I knew I wanted to turn around. I stopped trying to picture what was in that room, a weapon, a confession in blood, a finger. It shouldn’t matter, because Iris was dead anyway and would still be dead even if her sweet-smelling, twinkle-eyed father had wrapped the rope around her neck. The black-shuttered windows watched us like eyes as we invaded, Luke and John setting the pace, Carrie close behind, Brian swaying and rubbing his eyes, me bringing up the rear. A platoon marching to the front. Turn back, turn back.

Mrs. Kansil’s eyebrows almost flew off her face when she answered the door. “Well, my goodness, I can’t believe, it’s--” she swallowed and open the door wider. “Well, it’s everybody, isn’t it? What a nice surprise! Come right in.”

She had on a yellow apron over a sweater and slacks, and it looked like she’d gotten a fresh haircut. The blond curls stuck tight to her head, nervous-looking. But as usual, she was smiling with every inch of her face. “You’ll have to excuse me for a moment, I was just putting roast in the oven. But maybe I can get you kids some tea?”

She hurried into the kitchen as we filed in, so she didn’t see how John looked at Luke or what Luke mouthed back. Roasty toasty, the perfect way to hide a body. I thought Carrie would scream or Brian would hurl, or both, but then Mrs. Kansil called, “I didn’t hear who wanted tea.”
"No thank you, Mrs. K, none for us." John said quickly.

"I'll have some!" Carrie chirped, then mouthed to us, we can't look suspicious.

"No one else, are you sure?" Pans clanged in the back. "Well, I'll bring in a pot with the cookies, just in case someone changes their mind. Please have a seat."

There was no trace of the memorial party in the living room. Every inch was spotless, warm beige upholstery. We sat across from each other on two long sofas, butts touching as little of the cushions as possible, and stared into the glass coffee table for about ten minutes. Three Architecture Todays spread over the top in a fan. The room reeked of Lemon Pledge.

Luke finally elbowed John. Do you think they're covering up the stench?

"Here we are."

Carrie jumped, almost into my lap, as Mrs. Kansil rushed in with a silver tray. On it were plates and cups, a heap of ginger snaps and lemon bars—those were from the party—and a teapot in a beige and burgundy cozy. Mrs. Kansil pulled up a wooden chair from beside the door and sat down to serve. "I can't tell you how glad Manish and I are that you kids feel you can still come over. Gosh, the house has been so empty lately. Our boys are away at school right now, and...well...it's just nice to see everyone's face again."

She said the last part in a singy sort of way, then laughed, glancing at each of us around the circle. I think she was expecting a sympathy giggle, but no one was in the mood. Brian's eyes had practically rolled back in his skull, Carrie was shivering, and I had to think about blocking Mrs. Kansil's view of Carrie, so she wouldn't be noticed.
Luke and John looked like twin statues, their buzz cuts lined up exactly at the hair line. “And where is your husband right now, Mrs. Kansil?” John sounded like a cop in bad t.v. He was loving it, too.

“Oh, he’s in his study right now.” She kept her eyes down as she filled six teacups.

“He has an...enormous grant proposal he’s putting together. It’s that season, you know. I’m sure he’ll be very disappointed to hear that you came to visit when he couldn’t get away from his typewriter.”

“Was he working last weekend, too?” Luke’s voice was even more flinty. It was a contest now, which Gospel Twin could make her break. “At the party?”

Carrie shuddered. Mrs. Kansil took a long breath. “Oh...no...no, he wasn’t...available for other reasons. You have to understand, kids, a death in the family can be a terrible blow, and people go about their mourning in different ways. You and I, all of Iris’s friends, needed our party as a time to let go. Manish prefers to do his grieving in private.”

“Ah, is that what it’s called?” Luke smiled ferociously.

“I know, it’s difficult to understand.” Mrs. Kansil sighed as she passed him a cup. “I told him myself, the boys will want to hear from you. They’re hurting, too, over this whole mess. They have lots of questions, and I can’t answer them myself. I know all of you have always looked up to Manish, I know you like him, and he cares about you, too. But right now you have to be patient. He needs a little time to himself.”

“Yes, but why hasn’t he been seen since the accident?”
Luke blurted it out, and everyone froze. John eyes bugged, he looked ready to bite the coffee table in half. Mrs. Kansil’s head popped up from sorting the cookies, her thin brows wrinkled. “Excuse me?”

Carrie sprang off the couch. “Would you mind if I use your restroom Mrs. Kansil?” The words ran together in a string.

“Well, of course dear, there’s one at the bottom of the stairs.” Before she could finish, Carrie was racing around the corner, and we heard her feet pound up the spiral. “Didn’t she hear—about the bath—goodness, she seems awfully upset.” Mrs. Kansil’s voice stayed completely level, as if she’d watched the whole thing on a soap opera. “Do you think she’s all right?”

“She’s been a little shaky since it happened, ma’am.” John stuffed a whole gingersnap in his mouth.

“Oh, dear, do you think someone should be with her?” Mrs. Kansil began to fidget with the cozy then stood up.

“I’ll go.” I got off the couch and started walking. My body was on automatic. I didn’t even look back to see where my napkin landed.

“Yes, you do that, honey.” Mrs. Kansil called after me, “Make sure she’s okay.”

Everything looked the way it always had, the rubber fruit on the dining room table, stairs carpeted a foot thick, hallway lit by an orange-tinted globe. I could be coming up to see her, I told myself. She could be sick and I’m bringing back her track gear so it doesn’t rot in her locker all week. I was always the one who took care of things. Out of all her friends.
Carrie was standing by Iris’s door. Even from far away in the weak light, I could see where they’d taken down her posters and her rainbow name plate. That she’d had since we were sixth grade. I’d always envied her—she had a monopoly on rainbows, because that’s what her name meant. I tried to remember what my name translated to. Dog, probably.

“I can’t go in, Louise.” Carrie’s whole body was moving. Her cheeks were red and there were tears on her face, but she wasn’t crying. Just shaking. “I know I have to go in, because she wants me to, she came to me...in the dream...”

My fists tightened. Carrie had finally bawled her way over the line. Iris hated her. Iris had always hated her. She would never choose Carrie, never haunt her, never even bother to spit ghost hockers down her back. Iris liked me the most. I’d known her the longest. And Iris had told me all about Carrie.

“Louise,” Carrie held out a tiny shivering paw. “Help me open the door.”


“Louise,” Carrie whined, “I never did anything with Charlie. Iris knew that, she was just...”

“Just what, Carrie?” I drew the sound over my lips.

“Just mad at me, that’s all! She was pissed about, something I don’t know...she got pissed at everybody last month!”

My chest burned. I leaned in tight and flattened Carrie and her pretty curls and vanilla bean perfume against the wall. “You go back downstairs. I’m going in.”

Carrie’s eyes flew open. “Louise, no, no, please, I’ve got to—-”
"You don’t deserve it, and you know it. Iris hated you."

Carrie gasped, a sharp gulp. She got out from under me and ran down the hall. Of course she was crying, she was such a little priss. No backbone whatsoever.

I reached for the knob, but the door fell open with almost no pressure. Every lamp was on, so the yellow walls gleamed and burned my eyes. I walked in, my shoes smothered in bright canary shag. It was like a forest where no human had ever walked. I wasn’t even sure I was still alive, my stomach felt unzipped; and I wandered around the room searching out her make-up bag, the stuffed panda Charlie gave her, stacks on stacks of romance novels over her bed, the spines cracked and crawling with red script. The drawers in her dresser were hanging part way open, all bare. I walked to the mirror and saw my own face, my braid winding down my chest. Nothing at all.

I sat down on the bed, still covered with her fluffy comforter. The room smelled like warm lavender, and suddenly I had to think about breathing again. I knew I shouldn’t stay when there was nothing here, but I didn’t want to take off, either. The room was spotless, much cleaner than Iris had ever kept it, and that made me feel like the room itself needed someone to stay.

For a while, I stared at my reflection on the big, empty bed. Then something caught my eye. A little brown patch in the yellow beside the mirror. I thought it was a crack at first, but instead it was writing, minuscule, like a doll’s would be. I knelt on the carpet to read.

So long, farewell, auf wiedersein, goodnight.
“Bitch!” My fists flew at the wall. She did this on purpose. I loved that musical, but now she’d left me alone with John and Brian and Luke with his sausage fingers and stupid, stupid Carrie. Now I could never forget.

I noticed I was shivering. I got up. I turned around. A dark shape was leaning in the doorway, Mr. Kansil, still in his bathrobe at 5pm, his face dull and tight. I shuddered, then tried to say something, but the look in his glassy eyes stopped me cold.

He didn’t seem mad. He stared at me for a few seconds, nodded, took a deep breath, then sat down on the bed where I’d been sitting, across from the mirror. His arms hugged his chest as if he were holding his body together.

I felt like going downstairs and knocking the snot out of the Gospel Twins. It wouldn’t do any good, though. Nothing would. Silently, without looking back, I walked out of the room and shut the door behind me.
CHAPTER 5. RACHEL THE PROPHET

Rachel

It was during sixth period lunch when I discovered I was a prophet. I was skeptical at first, but you never can predict how the Holy Spirit will appear. An angel touched a live coal to Isaiah’s lips to make him ready to speak God’s word. The voice from above came to me, a meek and scrawny eighth grader, while I was eating taco salad.

Buying a school meal was a rare occasion for me. Gram usually packed peanut butter and banana sandwiches in a grocery bag, because we needed the extra money for the station wagon, forever in the shop. Taco salad was my favorite, though—I loved those refried beans. So that Wednesday I treated myself with the money Mom sent.

Nobody in my Bible study group had sixth period lunch, so I ate alone on Wednesdays. I took my tray to one of the round tables with the colored plastic chairs. The colors seemed cheery and you didn’t look as alone as when you were at one of the long tables built for ten. While I chewed and stared at the orange and green faces peeping up from the table edge, I kept my mind tight and closed. Along the curve of my jaw, I could feel the eyes watching, fingers pointing, the giggles and whispers in that singsongy tone that jabbed as much as a box of straight pins. This happened every day, but I was never ready. I tried to squeeze my thoughts onto one happy topic, like the hike Uncle Jim promised to take me on Sunday. Doing this kept my spirit patient and kind. Persecution, as Nathan our Bible group leader said, was something you frequently had to swallow.
Well, my ears must have filled with crunching from my corn chips, because when I looked up from my plate, suddenly I saw Scott Madison’s stubbly chin hovering in front of me. Scott ran around with a pack of obnoxious town boys and never passed up an opportunity to bother me. So there was his pimply face, leering above my head, and I didn’t have time to say a word before he choked up a hocker and spit it right in the middle of my taco salad.

My mouth dropped. Around me in a wave, Scott and his buddies started hooting. None of the teachers saw what happened, but two other sets of eyes did. Iris Kansil and Charlie Stewart, sitting at Scott’s table in the corner, stomped and held their noses for fear of snorting milk. Iris was my friend in elementary school, but last year her heart had gone black, and now she and Charlie were my scourge. She’d probably been the one who told Scott to foul my plate. I gritted my teeth against a horrible feeling in my stomach. Acid ran through my mouth, and I wished my head would explode and splatter all over those disgusting rich pigs, so at least my brains would mess up their alligator shirts.

That was the moment when I first heard the word of God. The words came small, not in a munchkin’s squeak or cartoon twitter, but more unassuming like a drop of water gliding down a pitcher. In my head, I noticed a voice, not different from my other thinking voices but one I knew wasn’t mine because the words just sprung into my head, unasked for. The meek shall see the evil man fall, the voice said. While I heard this, more heat flashed through my shoulders, arms, legs, stomach, and I felt my eyes focus on Scott’s smarmy grin as he walked back to his table.
Before I could start wondering what the voice meant, his body whipped forward and back, like a Chinese yo-yo, then up flew his tray and his tan docksiders and down fell his rear onto the glazed concrete floor.

Of course, his tray came down, too—on his head. A direct hit. For a second, all noise in the cafeteria went dead, then every mouth in the room exploded in the loudest laughter I’ve ever heard from a crowd in junior high. Scott, with his big slimy fish-eyes, peered around in a daze as he got up. Then the laughter got even louder when everyone saw the thick globs of coleslaw coating his head like a doily. I think even the teachers were howling.

At least a third of the school had witnessed this event, and it was sure to be remembered. The image of Scott Madison trying to look smooth while he scraped chocolate pudding out of his hair was a hard thing to put out of your mind. I could hardly believe what I was seeing, but there he was. My heart beat so fast under my laughter it almost launched across the room. I realized I’d been vindicated, and the words I’d heard came directly from God and none other.

Lucky for me, our youth group met after school that day, because my mind was still whirling from my triumph at lunch. My next-door neighbor and fellow group member, Janie, walked with me to our church, an eight-sided, sandy-colored building Janie had nicknamed God’s Big Yellow Cupcake. She said that’s what it would look like from above, if you ignored the steeple—a gigantic dessert that someday God would pluck from the earth and gulp down because we were so tasty, like frosting on his fingers. Janie and I joked around this way a lot when we were on our way to youth group, although we never talked about
more serious stuff. It was understood that in school or at home, we kept our deepest ideas about God to ourselves, even though our ties to Him were always there.

By the time we got to church, the heaters were turned on, so the room didn’t feel quite so much like the inside of a Siberian fridge during a blizzard. Our pastor kept on saying they’d get the radiators fixed, but October had come and gone and still all sixteen of us had to huddle around the big brown space heater. Of course, we endured the whole thing with Christian patience and, I think, had even more fun sitting in that tight circle with Nathan and his guitar, surrounded by chilly cinderblock. It made things much more cozy.

Nathan was tuning up when Janie and I came down the stairs. “Welcome, girls!” He flashed an enormous smile. “Pull up a chair, we’re just getting started.”

“Oh, no, not you again!” James smacked her forehead and giggled. Nathan had been out sick last week, though today he looked as cheery as ever. I noticed his hair, which was thick and black and usually hung down in a bowl-shaped cut, was now shorter and trimmed in the back, which made him look very sophisticated. On days like this, I wished I would age seven years instantly, so I could go to college with men like him.

Nathan raised his eyebrow at Janie’s comment, but he was still smiling. “Just you wait, you smart-aleck. I’ll give you my flu germs.” Pushing up his glasses, he turned back to the rest of the group. “Now, let’s start with a word of prayer.”

Nathan’s prayers sounded like poems, so I never got bored with them. We bowed our heads, and he began:

“Dear Father, thank you for your presence within our circle as we sit together today. Thank you for the last of the leaves and the oncoming snow. Please cleanse our hearts and
our minds and our ears so that we can be pure as the snow, so that we can let go of the pressures and temptations of the world and truly hear your word. Amen.” Soft guitar notes overlapped on the tail of the prayer. “Now, folks, how about a song?”

A chill snapped through me when Nathan had prayed about hearing God’s word. For that second, I wanted to be alone with him. Only alone in that drafty room could I talk to him about my contact with the voice and what it meant to be blessed like this. The song’s words pressed in over my thoughts: “The name of the Lord is a strong tower, the righteous run into it and they are saved.”

Nathan’s lesson that Wednesday was about getting ready for advent. He gave us the history of how the Israelites knew Jesus was coming, which was where Isaiah’s prophecies came in—the stuff about “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” that’s in the Hallelujah Chorus. “God spoke through Isaiah so that he could warn the Israelites and give them hope. He wanted them to prepare, to stop living the way they were living. In those days the Israelites were becoming very wicked, like in the days of Sodom and Gomorrah. They weren’t listening to God anymore. God used Isaiah’s voice to tell them what their punishment would be and what grace they would eventually receive—because they were still God’s people—through Jesus.”

I have to admit I was only listening with half-open ears, I was so busy remembering the voice that had been revealed to me. Our close circle of bodies seemed like the only thing besides the darkness taking over the flower posters on the blue walls. Emily, an older girl sitting across the room from me, spoke up after a few seconds of quiet. “Wow, do you think
the Israelite’s society sounds a lot like life in the US today? I mean, with everybody sleeping around and ripping each other off and all.”

Nathan raised an eyebrow as he tuned his guitar again. “Could be.”

My mouth couldn’t stay closed any longer. “If God wanted to warn us today the way He did in Isaiah’s time, is that the way he’d do it? Through somebody’s voice?”

The entire group looked thoughtful. Nathan paused over each face, like a teacher expecting an answer to a math problem. Finally Janie elbowed me and said, “I think he’d put out an ad in the Centre Daily Times.”

We all laughed, but Nathan was more serious. “No, I think that’s a very good question, because I believe God would choose a sort of modern-day prophet if He ever needed to tell us something now. He’d have to choose someone whose faith was very powerful and whose life was free from all types of sin. You know, that’s one of the big differences between other religions and our true Christian faith. Christ tells us to look at the purity of someone’s life before we let that person tell us how to live ours. Very good, Rachel.”

He smiled and gave me goosepimples. Just from that look I knew Nathan would understand—he might have even guessed already, because he could see how pure my life was, how persecuted. I decided I would pull him aside after youth group and tell him everything.

We closed with a favorite song of mine. Nathan’s voice sounded especially deep and gentle as we sang it: “I will trust in You, I will trust in You, let the weak say I am strong in the strength of the Lord.”
Youth group ended late, so the basement cleared out quickly. I walked up the stairs with Janie, then pretended I forgot something and left her waiting on the steps for her mom to pick us up. My hands kept slipping off the railing as I walked back into the dim basement. Dear God, I prayed with all my soul, please send your word again. But this time I heard nothing.

Reverend Patterson, our youth pastor, had joined Nathan in stacking up chairs in the basement. At this point I stopped and watched the two men, laughing and joking in booming voices that took over the basement for them alone. I felt my being in the room would break the beauty of their laughter, but the urgency to know about God’s message finally drove me to step onto the brown carpet, in their view. Nathan turned around just as I came out of hiding.

“Rachel, hello!” He looked surprised but gave me another big smile. “Can I do something for you?”

Beaming in return, I took another step forward. Although I didn’t really want Reverend Patterson to hear my story, it didn’t seem to matter since Nathan had invited me into the men’s circle. As I gathered up all my strength to speak, suddenly I heard Janie calling, “Rachel, my mom’s here!”

I could have kicked over a chair. This was the first time Janie’s mom had ever taken less than half an hour to pick us up. Nathan and the Reverend were waiting to listen, but all I could do was blurt out, “I’ll talk to you next week,” and dash up the stairs.
By the time Janie’s mom drove us back to Sky Top, the sun had gone down. The houses on the ridge, including ours, were built on the south side of the mountain, down the slope from the highway so people in passing cars couldn’t peer in our windows or drive gravel into our flower beds. Janie’s mom turned onto the steep dirt road, past the line of trees, and wound down until the road branched into our driveways. I noticed the station wagon was gone again, which was sure to put Gram in a bad mood. I really wanted to talk to her about what had happened, but when she was tired and mad she tended to complain about her sinuses and brush anything I said to one side.

I waved to Janie and her mom and walked across the lawn to our little white house. The air smelled sharp from people burning their garbage. Songs from youth group were still rolling through my head, and I wished there was some way God could come down and tell me what to do to my face, without working though mysterious voices that might be there or not.

Inside the house, things were worse than I’d thought. Gram was at the kitchen table talking on the phone, while she read what looked like a magazine subscription flyer. Her cheeks were flushed, and she kept on shaking her head and sighing with explosive little puffs, which she usually did to prevent herself from smacking the mechanic every time he found a new part broken on our car. She’d already laid dinner out, ham and baked beans and frozen asparagus, all clumped together in their serving bowls which she hadn’t even touched to move the potholders.

“I should just bury this in the catbox.” She waved the card around like she was giving a sermon. “Yeah, that’s what he needs. Ridiculous son of a bitch thinks he’s some
sort of a movie star, flouncing around in California with some whores in bathing suits that
don’t cover their backsides.” After she shook her head some more, I finally caught her eye.

“Honey, Rachel just come in.” She pressed the phone lightly against her sweatshirt. “Rachel,
dear, we just got a postcard from your father.”

I took the card from between her two outstretched fingers. This was the first postcard
we’d had from Daddy in two months. He never wrote much, but I never expected any
lengthy pronouncements. When we lived in town together, my father, mother, and I, he was
always a quiet man. In fact, I absolutely could not see my Daddy, in his lumberjack shirts
and holey army boots, dancing around on sunny beaches with a girl from a beer commercial
under each arm. That kind of life amounted to fornication, as Nathan said, and my father
was not that bad. I was almost afraid to glance at the postcard, for fear my grandmother
would be right this time.

The postcard stayed shoved under my napkin as I snagged a piece of ham with my
fork. Gram’s voice wound through my ears like soft ribbons. “Well, she seems to be doing
okay. She likes school and is in this church group a whole lot. Yes, we both miss you,
dear.” She sighed silently, just a lift of her chest. “I wish you’d get this city infatuation out
of your system and come home. Isn’t the college here good enough for you? They’ve got
35,000 people. Yes...yes, I know about bad memories, I know, but...your daughter needs you
here.”

When she said the part about me, she lowered her voice and rushed into the living
room. This usually happened during phone calls with my mother. I learned not to mind
them. I also learned, even better than Gram did, not to worry too much about Mom being in
Philadelphia. She was so different after we sold the house and Dad moved. She started
swearing, she talked about men all the time, and dyed her hair red, which Gram and I thought
looked sloppy. It was obvious that my mother needed to wake up from whatever trance the
world had put her in and come home. But she never asked me—instead she fought the same
fight with Gram every week.

Gram’s chatter was now a muffled hum, like the sound of a vacuum cleaner from a
different room. After a brief prayer for strength in adversity, I slid the postcard out from
under the napkin. The front had a picture of a redwood tree, so big they’d drilled a tunnel
down by the roots for cars to pass through. I flipped it over and read the message:

“Dear Martha and Rachel, I thought Rachel would like this shot of the woods in
California. The scenery’s beautiful out here, sweetheart. San Francisco’s great, and so’s the
beach. Maybe you can come and visit me sometime. Love Mark (Daddy).”

I realized I’d been holding my breath and blew it out in a slow stream. Really, the
whole thing didn’t seem bad at all. I’d been expecting hedonistic revelry, and instead I got a
picture of an enormous tree to add to my postcard collection. For this, I said a little thank
you prayer, because I knew it was good to praise God for the nice stuff while it was still
coming. As the song said, “I will trust in You.”

Gram came in with the phone’s receiver smothered against her wide palm. She
stretched out her arm and murmured, “Your mother wants to talk to you, dear. Don’t say
anything about the postcard. We’ll throw it in the garbage after dinner.”
Without Gram noticing, I managed to rescue the postcard from the trash and store it under my bed with my other private stuff. I realized I was going against my grandmother’s wishes on this, but I couldn’t give up that picture of the giant tree. Although some leftover baked beans got on the side with my father’s writing, I scraped most of it off so you could at least make out Daddy’s signature at the bottom and a few words like “beach” and “sweetheart.”

Before I went to bed that night, I decided to take a risk and ask Gram about the voice I’d heard. I thought God wouldn’t mind if I did this while I was supposed to be saying prayers, so I slipped out of bed in my blue-flowered nightgown and headed for the living room. Gram was watching news and reading a Good Housekeeping there. Her face looked very serene, as light cradled the pockets of soft skin around her chin and cheeks and nose. Those curves and her thick, boat-shaped reading glasses let me know how wise she was, and that I could trust her to keep my secrets.

When she looked up from her magazine and saw me in the doorway, she gave a little jump. “Good lord, Rachel!” she laughed. “You just about took ten years off my life. What are you doing lurking back there?”

I took a step into the lamplight. “Gram, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course, darling.” She folded the magazine shut.

“What would you do if you heard God’s voice?”

“I don’t believe I intend to hear the voice of the Lord until I’m in heaven.” She eyed me more closely. “What makes you say that?”
A door inside me slammed shut, so I just said, “We’ve been talking about Isaiah in youth group, and I was just...curious. What would you do, Gram?”

She sighed, taking off her glasses and shoving them into her thick, greyish curls.

“Well, I can’t say that I’ve thought about it much. I guess if it was really him, I’d want to ask him a lot of questions.”

“But wouldn’t you think He’d have some mission for you? Like a prophet?”

“I guess if He did, He’d tell me.”

“But what if he didn’t quite tell you? What if he said things to you, like in the Bible, that you needed to have wise men figure out, like the stuff about Jesus being King of Kings and getting called out of Egypt?”

“Well, if he wanted me to do anything, he’d have to tell me like it is. I don’t know any wise men.” She laughed and went back to her magazine.

“But Gram, He’s God! What if--”

“Sweetheart, really, I’m too tired to think about this right now.” She looked up at me over her half-moon lenses. “Try not to get so tangled up in all this Bible study, dear. Parts of the Bible are very old and hard to understand. You can’t take it all like it was happening yesterday.”

I said good night to Gram and ran back to my room so she couldn’t see my cheeks burning. Though I didn’t want to believe it, I felt she must be steering me down the right path.
At 5:30 am, I scared myself awake. I'd had a horrible nightmare about God as a gigantic tree that I was supposed to climb, a tree that kept shooting upwards into the cold, blue clouds, even as I was trying to race to the top. In the end, I wound up as Daddy's redwood with a big hole punched through my belly and cars streaming in that couldn't be stopped by my branching fingers. I woke up with a stomach ache and decided to take a walk.

Only a few drivers passed me on the highway as I trudged up the mountain. There was a great lookout point right beside the chiropractor's building and across the street from the old candy shop that had started peddling dirty books. As I walked, I had to pull up my jacket collar against the air that bit my neck and blasted my lips till they cracked. So far, they hadn't begun to bleed.

When I got to the lookout, a few red rays had begun to squeeze through the clouds. This was enough light to give me a view of the mountain ridges, layered to the horizon like faraway cities. I watched the sun rise and the mist burn off the slopes, and every once in a while, for an instant, I felt like Moses gazing on the Promised Land, that perfect, God-given home that he could never quite touch.

Later that week, when I had convinced myself that I wouldn't become God's messenger, the voice appeared again. This time it happened in phys ed while we were running laps around the gym. For a small group of us, the warm-up laps were the most painful activity in school, and not just because our lungs felt hacked to pieces afterwards. All of us in the group had the wrong sort of body for gym class: some had back braces, bony elbows, wide, lumpy thighs. Being forced into a line in skimpy shorts and a t-shirt, then
scrambling along, way behind the rest of the class, set the members of our ragged bunch up for attack at any moment. The meaner kids preyed on us one at a time, and while we each might have felt close while we watched another get humiliated, you knew no one would help you when it was your turn. We all had a heaping plate when it came to torture, and nobody wanted yours.

During that day's two-minute run, poor Rodney Wilkins had the honor of being class target. I was jogging just behind him, so I could see it all. A big clot of track jocks, led by Charlie, Iris's Charlie, sprinted up to him and like a wind sock slipped around his bobbing form so the gym teacher couldn't tell what was going on. Rodney tried to back out, but Charlie's shorn-headed chums hemmed in his escape route and, catching him under the arms, began shoving him back and forth between them like a pinball.

"Come on, Rod, run faster!" they whined, imitating his nasal hollers, "You can do better than that, Roddie! Don't let us down, Rod!"

Charlie was by far the worst of the gang. "Why don't you go hide in the girls' room, Roddie! How'd your wrists get so limp, Roddie? Think you can beat me up? Ooh, stop scaring me, Roddie!"

Since I was the next loser down the line, I almost wished the group of them would take Rodney and pitch him around somewhere else. They made me feel like I was out in the open with nothing on but my underwear and a big "kick me" sign. I kept my eyes on the ceiling, because the bright fluorescent tubes made me think of angels or clouds or something that would break my phys ed shackles.
The voice spoke while my eyes beheld the light. Actually, my eyes were burning since I'd stared at the bulbs so long, so I started blinking. On the insides of my eyelids I saw imprints of the fluorescent tubes, like vibrant fingers. The voice seemed to start from there:

The upholders of evil shall be stripped of their might.

This time I didn't need God to come down and explain what was about to happen. I could see Charlie's downfall dangling from the strings of his untied gym shorts. Now, I realized, was my chance to open my mouth and pour out the power God had stored up in my soul. So as Rodney hurtled toward Charlie, and I could see those frail knees about to buckle, I shouted, "Rodney, go for his shorts!"

In one quick burst, Rodney grabbed the loose, black cotton and dropped to the ground. Charlie got knocked over, too, but not before everyone else got a glimpse of his bright red bikini underpants. The entire class started howling and screeched to a halt. After covering his shame, Charlie stood up, and he and his buddies turned slowly toward me. They all knew my voice. Each of their faces, red as Charlie's undies, stared at me as if imagining all the ways they could break my arms, but I knew they couldn't lift a finger to hurt me. Now God would always be standing at my right shoulder, and I was the one with muscle.

Sure enough, Coach Walker, already screaming, came bounding up to Charlie.

"Stewart, just what do you think you're doing?! Didn't I tell you not to jerk my chain?! Huh? Huh? Answer me!"

Charlie had nothing to say, so Coach made him run three laps around the gym all by himself. Nothing anyone could have said to me that period would have brought me down from my victory flight. All through gym class, I couldn't stop laughing.
In the weeks after I heard my call, I had to prove myself several times before people realized I was a force to be reckoned with. After the red bikini incident, I caught members of Charlie’s gang spitting all over the lock on my locker, and I warned them that sin never goes unpunished. The next day, they were all out sick from eating bad potato salad. When I wore my new yellow-and-black sweater to school, my pal Scott Madison and his bunch followed me around the halls chanting, “Here comes the Queen Bee! She’s really ug-lee!” I sent him a note that said, “Tyrants must fall before the angel’s sword.” Later, in Math class, I heard he’d been taken to the nurse’s office with a pencil point jammed in his arm. I really wished God had let me watch that, so that Scott could’ve seen my face as the lead pierced his skin. But I knew God would have considered that an act of pride.

The Lord’s voice was very strong with me then, although it had changed, and I learned how to summon His word at will. The process was similar to holding my mind shut against the old taunting, except that instead of clenching my thoughts, I expanded them like a fist opening and drew in the power I needed. God’s will was generous toward me, and so after a while, people stayed out of my way. I relished my freedom.

Janie and my youth group friends feared my strength, I think, and started eating lunch with me less. I didn’t mind, though. God’s angels were all the company I needed. I regularly saw spirits in my sleep—three little girls in white dresses who took me to dance in their holy playground. Their gold and black locks were long and flowed everywhere like river rapids, mixing with my red hair as we ran in circles. These were the times when I felt
happiest. I didn’t have to worry about my height or my pimples or my hick accent when I
was with the beautiful spirits. I could set my limbs free and spin as wild as a hurricane.

A couple of weeks after Charlie and friends had tasted God’s wrath, I had what was
maybe the worst run-in with torturers since I had begun to speak for the Lord. I was in the
girls’ bathroom combing out my hair and trying to relax after an oral report in English. That
report itself had been another of my triumphs. Mrs. Barclay, my teacher, complimented me
on my “expert analysis” of Percy Shelley’s poem, “Ozymandias,” and the class liked the way
I read it, too, in a deep booming voice, like an ancient king’s.

As I was taking my hair down from my barrette, in walks Iris. She came into the
bathroom followed by about four or five of her giggling minions, one of which, I noticed,
was Julia, another of my former so-called friends. In the mirror, I saw her tall, blonde figure
take two steps toward me, then slip into a stall. The rest of the girls congregated at the
window, with Iris giving me the meanest looks you could imagine. She was in my English
class, too, and had done her report right before mine. Hers was about this woman I never
heard of who twisted Bible stories and wrote disgusting poetry about people picking worms
off a dead woman. Needless to say, it went very badly. She couldn’t stop giggling and
looked like an idiot in front of the whole class. So I suppose she needed to test whether or
not she could mock God’s power. For my part, I wasn’t moving, and kept raking out tangles
with my comb.

Iris shot me another dirty look. “Nice vest.” She was referring to my green and
brown sweater vest, a hand-me-down from my cousin. I kept right on combing.
Leela Thompson took a swig from her Coke can and set it on the window sill.

"Where’d you get it? K-mart?"

There was a burst of giggles. My faith began to tremble, but I managed to stand firm.

"That’s no concern of yours."

"Oh, come on, Rach, you can tell us!" Iris slinked over. "Don’t you get it? We all want one. Come on, Rach, we want to be just...like...you."

On each word, she’d taken a step closer to me, until her chest brushed my arm. Then suddenly, she grabbed my purple barrette off the sink and shouted, "Here, Jen, catch!"

Shrieks of laughter rose around me in a flood as they pitched my barrette back and forth. I was shrieking, too—I was too angry to speak. I ran between their grins, satanic and pearly-white, while I tried to catch my barrette, a gift from my mother for my sixth birthday. Finally, two of them snagged my arms and held me, while Iris dangled my beautiful, purple-beaded barrette over the garbage can.

Meanwhile, Julia had emerged from the stall. As my barrette hung from Iris’s fingers, Julia spoke up. "Come on, Iris, be nice to Rachel."

"But I am, Jule, I’m giving her some fashion advice." Her evil eyes turned toward me. "Rachel, honey, you have red hair. This barrette is purple. Everyone with a brain knows that red hair and purple jewelry don’t match. Plain and simple. So, now that you know, I’ll just do you a favor and help you get good taste."

My throat clenched as I watched my barrette plummet into the garbage. Surrounded by their cackling, I sprang toward the foul-smelling barrel, and in the process of knocking it...
over, I tripped, slammed my head against the window sill and spilled Leela’s Coke all over my nice blouse and sweater-vest.

Feeling my head swell against the radiator, I watched the slavish girls, primped and hairsprayed, file out of the restroom, except for Julia and Iris. Julia was tugging at Iris’s sweatshirt, but Iris’s dagger-like face only reflected pride at her treachery, her sin. Her tiny nose seemed to point down at me as she gloated, smile wide as a jackal’s snarl.

I peered straight into her black eyes, filthy with make-up. The pulsing in my head slowly brought a vision into focus: I saw the hand of God pick up a rock and crush her pretty face flat. This made me smile, too. Then I let the growing throb burn until it formed the words that shot out of my mouth like a lightning bolt.

“God will shatter you.”

Even though I only whispered it, she heard me. She kept on smiling, but the proud, liquid black in her eyes drained out, and her mouth stopped being so sharp. God and I, it seemed, had burst her sinful bubble. I was satisfied.

“Come on, Iris, let’s just go.” Julia managed to drag Iris, whose steps had weakened, through the swinging door.

My vision kept me occupied for a week after God sent it and changed my mission. I was now needed to look after this sinner and see that His words would be fulfilled. So I started keeping track of Iris’s movements, watching her at her locker, following her when she and Charlie skipped class to smoke cigarettes, even catching a bus home with her once. I got in a lot of trouble with Gram after that, although the things I learned about her decadent life
were very revealing. She and Charlie sampled vices as if they were judges in a pie contest: beer, pot, strip poker, you name it, they fouled their fingers with it. I could only imagine what they did when I couldn’t see them. But then, this didn’t concern me, because all I was called to do was wait for the day when punishment would be dealt for all her sins. Then God would give me my best reward.

After Youth Group that Wednesday, Nathan asked me to stay and talk with him for a few minutes. I guessed Gram must have gotten to him about my activities as a prophet, and sure enough, when he sat down next to me, the first words out of his mouth were, “Rachel, your grandmother called me the other day. She says she’s been concerned about your behavior recently.”

He gazed at me deeply, but his face seemed hesitant. “I’m only doing God’s work,” I answered.

“Is there...specific work you believe God wants you to perform?”

“Yes.” Now I had to pause, to decide, but I thought he of all people should know. “I am a prophet.”

As soon as it left my lips, I knew I shouldn’t have said it. The room was absolutely silent. Nathan stared at me, his face burned onto my eyes like an old t.v. screen. “Rachel,” Nathan murmured, “what makes you think you’re a prophet?”

“Because God spoke to me, just like he spoke to Isaiah and Ezekiel. Remember? They heard voices and saw visions, and so do I.”

And then, as if he had uncorked me, the whole story came pouring out, from the first day in the cafeteria until that very moment. I left out a few details, especially the part about
my vision of Iris's punishment, because I couldn't tell him without knowing if he was truly a servant of God, like me. I waited for Nathan to give his answer.

Taking off his glasses, he let out a long breath and rubbed his eyes. When he looked up I saw red shot through the whites. "Rachel, honey," he spoke very slowly, "God doesn't work in ways like that. He doesn't want to hurt people..."

The words faded in the air as God stopped his tongue. Nathan's faith was not so solid after all. It was a disappointment to me, but not as much as it was what my teachers would call a "learning experience." As I stared right into those weak green pools, I saw a blurry shadow of myself and knew I was the one chosen to teach God's will, not Nathan. I vowed I would never go back to Youth Group again.

The signal from God came a few days later, while I was watching Charlie and Iris at the lockers before first period. Both of them were giggly today. It was strange to see Charlie's face, hard like a brick wall, cracking up in goofy grins. At one point while he was kissing Iris on the mouth, he pulled a tall, clear bottle out of his backpack and said through his busy lips, "Want to celebrate with the Birthday Boy?"

"What is it? Rum?" Her slow hands reached for the bottle, which Charlie held a hair away.

"Nope, vodka. I think, since I'm fourteen now, I should introduce you to my favorite drink." His sloppy lips brushed her cheek. "And a few other treats..."

She giggled. "When and where?"

"Out behind the upper parking lot, after school."
After this, they started choking on each other's tongues again, but I didn't need to hear anymore. I knew this was the moment, I recognized it as if I'd lived it before. All I had to do now, I thought as I slipped away, was to be careful and bide my time. My hands were already trembling.

At around 3pm, very conveniently, God brought Iris into the girls' bathroom while I was in a stall. She didn't seem to care if there was anyone else there with her, so I peered out at her from the joint between the wall and the door. Carefully, she pulled out make-up pots and tubes from a flowered case, laid them on the sink, and began smearing the greasy paints on her face one at a time, first dark-tan cover-up, then brushfuls of blush, eye liner, lip pencil, and so on down the line. She did this very slowly, as if she were performing a magical ceremony, affecting me so much I almost coughed and betrayed my post. Luckily, the final bell rang, which made her brush her feast of cosmetics back into her bag and race out of the room. Since I knew where they would be, I decided to hold back for a few minutes and let them get settled. God would wait to show me the fruition of his will, the moment I'd helped to create.

I hid out in the stall for a while, with my legs curled up on the seat like spies do in movies, and when I thought the time was right I set out. Knowing they could be anywhere, I carefully crept up the path to the upper lot. Most of the teachers who parked up there had already left, so the lot was basically empty. This wouldn't make for very good observing, except that there were trees surrounding the asphalt like hair around a black band-aid--thick and plentiful. After a lot of dashing behind branches at the sound of imaginary footsteps, I spotted my targets on the far hill. They weren't even trying to hide. In fact, they were acting
as if they were watching a t.v. show—laughing and hooting and shouting obscenities. I concealed myself in a group of bushes where I could both watch and hear.

At first, they were doing a lot of what I’d already witnessed: drinking, swearing, putting their hands all over each other. I had a hard time watching this because it disgusted me so, but I knew I had to keep my eyes open, for the moment would soon come when I would be eternally vindicated. The old show went on for a while, until Charlie started getting a little more harsh in his movements. He started grabbing handfuls of her body and squeezing them toward himself, snarling like a grizzly bear. This made Iris mad. She squirmed, shoving his hands away, and after a bite or two wriggled out of his arms.

“Will you stop?!” she shouted, standing up. “I can’t stand it when you’re like this. You smell bad.”

“Shut up, bitch!” He stood up, too, and spoke with high-pitched needles in his voice. “I’m sick of you drinking my stuff and then treating me like shit. Now put out or go the hell home.”

She let out a sharp laugh. “See ya later, alkie sicko.”

As she turned her wretched back on him, his whole body lunged, and she went sailing down the hill. In a breath, she hit the ground and, after rolling a couple of times, landed face down on the pavement, hard. The whole thing was silent and graceful, like a sea gull diving into the ocean for its dinner. I don’t even think she knew what was happening until the ground rose to break her flight.
When she landed, she let out a cross between a shriek and a growl, and turned toward Charlie. Instantly, he tore off into the trees while she bellowed, "You evil bastard! I'll kill you, I swear to God!"

Then she was alone, small and motionless in the deserted lot. I took in a breath and let it out, eyes wide in amazement. Truly, the Lord's might was something to behold. Now was the time when I would go soak in my total victory, and maybe kick Iris in the chest for good measure. This was the result of God's rage, and God's rage was my own.

Grinning ear to ear, I stepped out of my hiding place and marched over to her. On the black pavement, her body looked like a pile of distraught stuffs stuffed in a corner of a basement. When I got closer, I realized she wasn't totally still; her arms and back were twitching, and I heard some wheezy sniffles. Finally, I stood before her, practically with my feet on her head, but she still didn't notice me until I brushed my toe against her scalp. Then with a gasp, her head darted upward, and she looked me square in the face.

I could barely recognize Iris. Aside from the tears and blood, which had smeared most of her make-up, the bridge of her nose had a dent in it the width of my finger. Her lips, covered with wide brushburns, were shaped wrong and starting to swell. The only thing I remembered as being Iris were her eyes, which stared at me with a horrible look, one I'd only ever seen on a dying deer.

It was her eyes that were so terrible, that made me walk away from her. I couldn't bear the thought of seeing myself, even as a shiny blur, in those dark brown discs. In elementary school, I remembered, I'd always loved her eyes. My stomach burned. After a strangled squeak from Iris as I turned my back on her, silence descended, filling up the
cracks between the trees, like iron walls, telling me nothing. No sound, not wind or even my footsteps, got through my thickening ears. On the way down the path, I met Mrs. Barclay and a couple other teachers I didn’t recognize. They were running and slowed down when they saw me.

“Rachel!” Mrs. Barclay’s call slammed through my mind like a rifle bullet. “Rachel, what’s going on? We heard screaming.”

I stared at their faces, anxious, waiting for me to speak. They knew I was the only one who could teach them.

“Some girl fell.” Parting their circle, I continued down the sloping path.
There is something I never told you about. I never told anyone, really. It happened before I knew any of you, before I went to Easterly. I lived in Boalsburg then, out where the bypass is now. They actually destroyed a whole town building that bypass. Oak Hall, I think it was called. It was a cute Victorian village, full of kids playing marbles, housewives hanging sheets to dry, pumpkin pies on windowsills, and all of it framed in that gingerbread crap, wrapped up and down porches like fancy tissue paper. Just imagine the sight the day the bulldozers came: housewives and kids, mouths hanging open while construction crews splintered their white shingles like snow forts and scattered Ma’s laundry and punched down everything but the house frames, which they set torches to, so the land would be level for the concrete to be poured, so the cars could drive through the gorgeous mountain scenery. Anyway, that’s how I picture it. Don’t ask me why I remember these things so clearly, because I don’t know why. Even though it all took place when I was in kindergarten, my dreams are precise, like a book read cover to cover. There are no worn edges, water stains or pictures filled in with crayon. These dreams I have—and now I have them whenever I sleep—are nightmares.

Before Dad bought our current place, we lived in a gray, one-story ranch that reminds me now of something Frank Lloyd Wright would have built. The structure, surrounded by thick fur trees, had a square body with several boxy arms creeping into the bushes. There was a garage, a tire swing, an attic but no basement, and an inner hallway
wrapped in a circle, so my brothers and I could chase each other forever without getting trapped. To us, our bungalow felt safe as a cradle. We hardly ever needed to lock our doors.

Across the street, a field stretched from the curb of Boalsburg Lane to the foot of Mount Nittany, twenty miles away though we felt it lying on top of us, like a mother bear. My brothers and I would go exploring in the weedy patches and sometimes combed the dirt for treasure. I think when building crews were putting together the housing development down the road, they stationed their equipment in the field, because when we went digging, we found armfuls of rusty wonders. Mostly there were steel rods, coated with dark, peely rust, but sometimes wire knots would turn up or even—and Bobby was an expert at finding these—moon rocks.

I’m not sure now what these things were. Probably we were unearthing ancient chunks of asphalt. To us, though, each cache was alien and priceless: heavy and black, irregular, pitted like a thousand lunar eyes, rough edges scratching your palm and making you feel you’d uncovered a galactic secret. They were mysterious, they only appeared once in a while under a plain gray rock or behind some innocent-looking queen anne’s lace. Of course, my brothers and I always took a sample of our findings to Dad, who listened to us very seriously and kept our specimens to take to a moon-rock “research committee” in his lab at Davey Observatory. It was an ongoing project, he told us, even though he never relayed back any committee theories.

I’m getting off course now. I haven’t told you about Vida.

The year I turned five, my parents went on sabbatical to California. Grandma Manning came from Chicago to take care of my brothers and me for the winter—the same
winter I met Vida. Bobby and I discovered her on one of our moon rock expeditions. At the time, we were drawing a map of the best moon-rock sites for Dad’s committee. Matt had basketball practice that day, but we couldn’t wait and decided we should move into new territory immediately. So with our findings plotted on three dittos scotch-taped together, Bobby and I crossed the street and set out toward the mountain. Every few feet, Bobby would pull out his chewed-up pencil and scrawl something, I never knew what since I could barely read and he would never tell me. Instead, he made it his job to scan the horizon and give me orders: “check out those weeds, Iris. No, lift up that rock. Hmm...okay, that’s enough. Drop it and keep going.”

Even though it was almost December, the ground was bare--cold, but no snow or frost. Picking up rocks left my gloveless fingers stinging. While I ran between the dried grass, as usual, I listened to my breath through my pointy green cap. The rhythm of my lungs put me in a trance, I listened to hear and get away from the steady wind. It also felt good to run. I listened to my breath getting faster, felt my legs lunge and shove down the ground as if I could push the earth away and take off into space, through the vines and stickers, completely cut off from the world. Mostly when this happened I got yelled at by my brothers. That day I fell over something.

I only saw my feet plow through weeds, then a round, red form, then my face hit the dirt. When I lifted my head, two green eyes bored into mine. I jumped back and screamed.

Bobby came running, and spotting the red intruder, shouted, “What’s going on here? Identify yourself, right now!”
He threw his hands on his hips and stood tapping his foot like a miniature dictator. A pale head with reddish, fuzzy hair uncurled from its shell and stared at Bobby. This was obviously a girl, because she had lipstick, also red, smeared across her large lips and chin. Her face was square and as hard as her eyes, and the longer those green slivers peered at Bobby, the more his posture wilted. The minute I thought he’d cave in and howl, the round form suddenly lurched and began to unwind like a flower shoot. Bobby and I froze. Her body billowed outward from a tight red knot to the point where I thought she’d separate into petals and blow away—then, amazingly, she resettled into human form. I’d never seen anything like it, even from my friends who could pop shoulders in and out of their sockets. Standing up, this new girl, wearing an oversized red coat, was taller than me and older, I decided, from the pools of freckles showing under her rolled-up sleeves.

Next I realized, as my eyes traced her bony arms down, the dots couldn’t have been freckles, because near her wrist they became strands, then puddles of dark blood that kissed her fingers and dangled from the tips in drops. Scanning the dirt at her feet, I found a rabbit, freshly dead.

Bobby could not stand blood, so when he got a glimpse of the rabbit and her fingers, his face went green and I thought he was going to toss his spaghetti-o’s right on her shoes. The girl looked more confused than disturbed. Screwing up her face, she stared at Bobby as if fishing for the punchline to a joke. He jerked around to run.

“Don’t worry, it’s just blood,” the girl offered.

But Bobby had sprinted halfway to the street before she’d finished her sentence. I stood motionless and watched him go. Bobby had never left me before, not without
directions, so I had no idea what to do. The thought crossed my mind that if I stood still long enough, I might go invisible, which would make the girl go back to playing with her rabbit corpse and leave me a way to escape. This decided, I planted my feet side by side, looked straight into the girl’s smudgy face and waited for her to stop looking my direction.

She didn’t. She peered down to the bottom of my eyes until I had to catch myself from falling over.

The noise of my feet scrambling made her shake her head like a sheepdog. After that, she seemed to rediscover the dead bunny. “Come look,” she said, crooking her finger at me as she knelt down.

“I can’t, it’s too scary.” To keep from watching, I covered my eyes with splayed fingers.

“No, come on, it’s okay.” She bent over the rabbit and started pulling on its legs. “Just blood and bones like we all got. You just can’t see ‘em on you. Come on, you got to help me help him die.”

Her voice, even though it was a little girl’s, sounded strong and soothing, like my mother’s. I wondered if my mother could really be there, behind this girl’s face, and that this was something I needed to do. After a minute of thinking and sucking on the ends of my hair, I squatted down beside her and the bunny. “Did you...make him die?”

She burst out laughing. “No, silly! A cat got him, see?” She pointed out some tears on the rabbit’s neck. “I chased the cat away, and the bunny ran out here. I think he’s dead for sure now. So now we can perform the cery-mony.”
With careful fingers, the girl positioned the legs so that each pointed in a different direction. The body had started to stiffen, so she stuck her fingers down on the paws until they hardened in place. Then taking a fingerful of blood from the runny mouth, she drew circles and spirals over her arms, not in any pattern, just wherever there was a free patch of skin. She tried to mark me, too, but I didn’t let her. I didn’t like being dirty.

“What’s your name?” I asked her.

“Vida.” With her fingernails, she brushed the bunny’s fur.

“I’m Iris Kansil. I live at 1710 Boalsburg Lane. Want to come over sometime?”

“Sure, sure. Now we have to pull out the heart so it can melt in the sunshine. Do you have a scissors? No? Okay, I’ll just yank.”

The bunny’s skin ripped apart with a nauseating wrench, a cross between cloth tearing and fruit being crushed. One look at the red froth underneath, overseen by a glassy eye, and I was running for my house, screaming, practically peeing in my pants. It wasn’t the blood I minded so much as the fact that the bunny was staring at me, and whatever he was thinking, I could see it, and he could see me as clearly as a mirror.

II.

Vida told me she’d just moved somewhere in the historic section of town, although she never showed me where. She also never explained how she got back and forth between the field and Main Street, separated by half a mile and Route 322, a river of cars that slit Boalsburg down the middle. Mom had warned us never even to go near, that we couldn’t avoid being squashed under the racing tires. I wondered how Vida could do it. Sometimes I
pictured her scuttling across on all fours, not for bravery's sake but a necessary urge. An inevitability, a deer herding her fawns to find water. I liked to think Vida risked her life to visit me.

We met every day by a half-buried cinderblock in the moon-rock field. I discovered she went there to dig for worms, so daily I waited to follow her around. The first few days she noticed me, she would spit, hurl fistfuls of weeds or try to run, but I had much stronger legs, though shorter, and I always caught up. Toward the end of each afternoon, she usually gave up and let me join her on her secret journeys. Later, she would sulk by the sidewalk if I was late. I saw this annoyance not as a temper tantrum but as the mark of a master fed up with a pupil. She was the ancient witch, crouching beside her steaming pot, and I was the apprentice, or maybe the black cat.

She gave many lessons, most of which have slipped out of my mind since then. One involved a sheet of construction paper she swiped from school. Vida usually didn't use props, but this was a very special lesson, she said, that couldn't be learned without a visual aid. Plunking me down on the icy cinderblock, she fished the black rectangle out of her book bag, laid it across my lap, and started shaking her fuzzy hair. Little flecks of white, like salt crystals, began raining on my covered knees.

"Ew! Stop it! What are you doing that for?!” Squinting, I held my breath so I wouldn't catch germs.

"I'll show you in a minute. Come on, you do this, too. We need a lot before I can show you what you need to know."

"Won't I get bugs?" I opened my eyes a crack. "Mom said I would."
"No, no, bugs live on the ground. Your mom just said that to scare you." Her part, crooked and colorless, nearly brushed my chin. "You don’t have to if you don’t want to."

I didn’t see how I could refuse because of what I wanted, so I tried to figure out what I should do. Mom probably would have told me to run away, but with Vida’s head like a boulder leaning into my chest, I was immobilized. So I decided sitting on my hands was the best I could do. My knuckles throbbed against the flat concrete as I watched Vida’s nails flurry across her scalp. I found I couldn’t take my eyes off her hands. They seemed to be the most graceful beings on earth, scouring each inch of skin with a machine’s precision and a ballerina’s grace. The rasping sound sent prickles wriggling under my ponytail, a sensation so intense that once in a while I had to sneak a scratch in my hair to keep from going crazy. For the record, though, I mainly watched Vida’s hands.

"Okay, that’s good enough." When she stopped, we had an even coat of dandruff lying on the paper. "Now, this is the good part. Give me your hand--here." Scooping up my wrist, she pulled my arm down to the filmy blanket and dragged my fingertips across. I made squirming faces. "Do you know what this stuff turns into?" she asked. "Dust."

"Really?" I gazed at the powder, pure white instead of the gray that collected in lumps by my bed. "Are you sure?"

"Yup, it’s true. Whenever your mom dusts your shelves, she’s really dusting up you. You everywhere. Even the dustbunnies are you. That’s where they get that saying, ashes t’ashes, dust to dust." She stood and stared down at me like a museum portrait. "You know that saying, don’t you? Ashes t’ashes, dust to dust."
Solemnly, she rose, lifted our experiment to her lips, and sent a sharp puff across the surface, as if blowing out a birthday candle. The flakes that swirled into a fan flickered, gray on white, against the clouds, then dissolved. At that instant, I remember feeling two things, distinct but simultaneous: like I was watching the tiniest gnats breaking free from a glass jar, and that I should have reached up and caught the pieces of Vida while I still knew where they were. That, whatever it says or means, is what I learned from my lesson.

The day Vida let me take her to my house was a day of triumph for me. We linked arms and pretended we were sister princesses, strolling to our castle on an August afternoon. The fact that we were mittened and padded an inch around in winter clothing didn’t discourage us a bit. Vida enjoyed things that didn’t fit the way they should. She walked right up to my front door as if she’d crossed our stoop a hundred times, and when we got inside her eyes, peeking from above a red scarf, never needed to move from mine.

“It’s hot as an oven in here!” she said, and started to unwrap.

Behind me, Grandma Manning hurried into the living room—I could tell from the gust of hot perfume and a shadow that fell over Vida’s face as it emerged, pale and damp, from the rosy wool.

“I thought that was you, Iris dear!” Her voice boomed through the house. “My goodness, you’ve been coming home later every day! And whose your little friend here?”

My heart raced a little, because I didn’t know what Grandma would think of my new best friend. The tastes of both my mother and Grandma were very particular, and I was old enough to realize Vida was very different from other little girls. She didn’t like to play Barbies or dress-up, never wore make-up right and wasn’t even that excited about astronomy,
even though I tried to interest her in moon rocks. Today, she’d smeared green powder on one eyelid, from the bridge of her nose up over her eyebrow, and on her cheeks there were still traces of the circles she’d drawn with brown lipstick the day before. I was almost afraid to turn around as I heard my grandmother approach.

“Dear Lord, girl, what have you got on your face?!” With one giant hand, she took Vida by the shoulder and jerked her toward a lamp. “Good God, but you’re filthy. Smells like you haven’t had a bath in a while, either. What’s this brown garbage all over your arms? Well, you’re not coming in here tracking dirt and germs and God knows what else all over this house. If you want to stay here, you’re coming with me.”

Grandma started hauling Vida toward the bathroom, as Vida broke into squeals and strained like a wild animal against the enormous arms. Of course, since Vida barely came up to Grandma’s waist, she had no problem pitching Vida in, and I didn’t want to imagine what was going to happen when Grandma slammed the bathroom door. There were a lot of screams and shouts and water running, and then Vida burst into the hallway, the ends of her hair dripping, her skin pink and scrubbed, smelling like Grandma’s rose soap. Vida scowled as the victor emerged from the battlefield.

“My, you certainly are a little hellcat, aren’t you?” Laughing, Grandma wiped her hands on a towel and hung it back on the rack. “Well, now you’re pretty as an angel. And don’t you ever come back here looking like that again, you hear me? Shame on your mama for letting you out of the house like that.”
Slowly, she wandered back to her bedroom, presumably to lie down, which she always did in the afternoons. Vida shook her fist at the wide back, then started squeezing her hair out on the hardwood floor.

"Are you mad, Vida?" I asked in a whisper.

I was afraid she would glare at me with those dagger eyes and run away forever. Instead, she gave her curls a thorough shake.

"Naw, she wasn’t so bad. Believe me, I had her in the palm of my hand."

Dizzy from shaking, Vida almost plowed into a hall table that held one of my father’s sculptures. I grabbed her by the elbow just in time.

"Don’t touch that! It’s bad." This piece of artwork was one of the most hideous in my father’s collection. My brothers and I were terrified of it, and I vividly remember the roaring fight my parents had when Daddy brought it home. Pieced together with thousands of pruned nails, this hulking creature came out of Indian mythology, a monster with a bird’s skull and legs that merged into a two-tiered chariot with moveable wheels. Several compartments in the chariot held twisted human figures, male and female, bent in distorted ecstasy: embracing, praying, or being dangled from the chariot’s windows. I didn’t want to look at it; to me it embodied all that was evil in our house. Vida, however, scrutinized each length of nail with eyes gloriously wide and an open mouth. I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised.

"Come on, Vida, don’t look at it." I jerked on her elbow. "Mom said I shouldn’t look."
"Mom said I shouldn’t look," she said in a nasal sneer. "Your mom doesn’t let you do anything. Isn’t that boring for you? I think I’m starting to hate your mom."

I started to snuffle. "Don’t say that! I can like my mommy if I want to. And I don’t like this thing. It makes me have bad dreams."

"Okay, okay, you don’t have to go and start crying." She put her arm around my shoulder. "I don’t really hate your mom. She has nice-smelling towels."

I smiled and stopped sniveling. Silently, we surveyed the creature looming in the corner, the figures contorted in their freakish poses. "Do you know what it is?" Vida asked.

"No." Later I learned it was called the Juggernaught.

Vida suddenly giggled and poked at a knotted pair suspended from the chariot’s floor. Her push sent the couple swinging. "They’re doing it," she snickered at me.

"How can you tell?" All I saw were two heads and a mess of rusty wire.

"Oh, I know about these things. You’ll find out once you’re seven." She stuck her head further under the carriage. "And look at this guy," she exclaimed, pointing to a body lying on the wheel axle. "He’s all smushed up! I wonder what happened to him."

"I don’t know." I could only look at the wire man out of the corner of my eye. His pulpiness seemed contagious. "Maybe he got run over."

Vida’s eyes widened. "Yeah, I bet you’re right." She scanned it again and nodded. "Well, this thing doesn’t seem that scary to me. Nope, it’s not scary at all. Your mom tells you all these things are scary because she doesn’t want you to look, that’s all."
With Vida patting me on the shoulder, the bare smile from the skeletal head seemed far away, as if I were watching it from an electrical tower. But by myself, I knew that beak could leap to life again. “What if I still get nightmares?”

Vida scratched her head. “Well...I could come with you into your dreams. That’s it! Every night I’ll sneak out of my own head for a little while and fly in your window. How about that?”

I peered at her, then started giggling. “You’re really weird.” We both laughed, but I knew she would.

A week later came the first of the torrential snowstorms that winter. Bursting clouds dumped two feet on us at once, and all the area schools closed down. After two days the township managed to clean off the roads but left most of the ice, so my brothers and I had to skid to school. Each shiny patch of asphalt glinted when the sun shone, inlaying the road with broad mirrors.

When I made it into the school lobby, Vida was waiting beside one of the plastic ferns. Standing firmly in her draping red habit, she somehow made me feel like I was seeing ghosts. I’d never seen Vida at school before. She peeked hurriedly left and right, then wiggled her arm, which, I figured, meant she wanted to talk to me.

“What’s going on?” I whispered, slipping behind a sheet of fake fronds.

“I found something near my house I want to show you,” she muttered back. “In the snow. Can you ride home on the bus with me?”

“I have to ask Grandma first.”

Vida sighed. “You know you don’t need to do that.”
"But she'll find out!" From what I could tell, the grown-ups in my family had developed ESP when they became parents.

"No she won't, stupid! My mom or dad can take you home before supper. She'll never know you were gone, trust me."

I grinned, knowing Vida could think her way around any obstacle. Grandma Manning's protesting shout immediately faded in the back of my mind. It was my fate to be on that bus. "Where will you be?"

"On the sidewalk by the wall. Come back to school when Mighty Mouse comes on channel ten."

The bell rang, and I lost Vida in the homeroom scatter.

Since I was a morning kindergartner, the plan for sneaking on Vida's bus was simple. I went home for lunch and told Grandma I was going across the street to build snowmen, then weaving as fast as I could between shrubs, I bounded back toward the school. Near driveways, the mounds of shoveled snow, sometimes reaching my thigh-level, chilled my legs numb, even in snow pants. At that point, though, I was immune; I was the Indian princess escaping vicious white men; I was the revolutionary spy. When I made it back to the school, I hid under the sliding board and waited, gnashing on red licorice I'd swiped from our pantry. It took me five sticks to gulp down before lines of yellow buses roared up the school driveway.

I found Vida, like she'd said, by the brick wall. Without a word, she tucked me inside her coat and swiftly herded me on the bus. The silky lining, warm as it trapped my breath against my mouth, smelled like dirt and musk, dangerous, exactly like Vida. At the
time, I thought we were very secretive, though now I don’t see how the teachers could have missed us, a lumpy red creature with four legs.

When we made it to the back of the bus, Vida unveiled me and sat us down in our own vinyl seat. The bus lurched and swung onto the road. My palms felt clammy as we passed the familiar town sights: the highway, crossed without incident, the twin brick churches, cozy old houses on the Diamond and along Main Street, now bulging with white. The bus kept pulling over to let a few kids off, but we never seemed to get to Vida’s house, which confused me, because she’d said she lived in town. I was about to ask her when the packed bus lulled to a stop.

“This is the place. Get out.” Vida elbowed me into the isle, swirling with mittens and colored caps. Instantly, I reached for Vida’s hand but was shoved forward with the current of fast-moving bodies. We careened down the aisle.

Three huge steps emptied me onto a residential street, lined with trees and high snowbanks. I crossed in front of the bus with the group, who moved as one organism having made so many trips on and off together. Our feet hit the sidewalk, and I turned back to look for Vida. Only she wasn’t in the crowd. Scanning each foreign face, my eyes couldn’t take in the fact that she wasn’t one of these people, and so I looked more. At the last second before the bus pulled away, I saw Vida sitting on the road. She’d slipped on a patch of ice, where she still reclined, dazed and blinking. The giant, smiling grate hung six inches from her head. A moment overlapped when I let out a sigh that I’d found her and when the bus groaned to life again, and the tires rolled across the pavement. My stomach went cold to hear Vida shriek.
The driver tried to stop, but only sent the bus into a skid, hitting her body with both sets of wheels. Then a cry exploded, a high choral note. Hundreds of figures rushed toward Vida’s ruptured shape. I followed the rush, and I might have sounded the scream, too, I must have, although I don’t remember making a sound. Her blood ran into her hair, stained the street, the people’s hands who tried to hold her, and made murky continents on her silky red coat. She was breathing fast.

I had pushed to the front but didn’t dare go near her. She might have been in a different country. Her eyes darted in their delicate sockets until they found my face and locked on tight. The emerald point of those liquid irises blasted my skin and bone away, and I stood at her feet as all I would ever be known, unshrouded. Then, in an energetic clap, she let out one giddy laugh and died.

III.

“Well, she didn’t know the little girl for very long, but I’d think seeing someone go like that would be a horrible experience on it’s own.”

That was Grandma Manning, two weeks after Vida’s funeral, speaking to the child psychiatrist in our living room. He had light wavy hair and a bristle brush mustache. Whenever he talked to me he let me scratch my knees. Grandma used to when it all began, but now she wasn’t so patient.

“Iris needs a lot of time to let this work through her system.” The man twirled his pen between his long fingers. “In circumstances like this, I’d be surprised if she wasn’t having a bad response. But you’re definitely doing the right thing in staying with her, reading to her,
letting her sleep in your bed. Try to have someone in the room with her at all times, and I'll be back to do some more work next Tuesday.” With a hairy grin, he bent toward me and put a hand on my swaying shoulder. “Take care, Iris. Try to get some sleep. Can you do that for me, honey?”

I nodded, more in rhythm to the rocking than as an answer to his question. His presence in my living room was negligible; he could talk to me, he could disappear, and my house would not change. Grandma got him through the school, after she consulted both the elementary counselors and my parents about the scratching. At first, she thought I had fleas. Then I was shipped to a skin specialist, who surveyed every inch of flesh while I lay naked under a paper hospital wrap. The psychiatrist was the final station in the search for my disease. That afternoon, I'd undergone a diagnostic visit.

If I told people what was wrong, I said I had bugs. Thread-like worms, coiling pits under the surface of my skin, burrowed pathways that criss-crossed my limbs, torso, scalp. They moved in a swarm. For a few days they would anchor in my shins until I’d just scraped away their protective epidermal layer, then while I slept they crept along my calf muscles and settled in the arches of my feet. Scratching gave the only release from their red burning bites, and so I scratched constantly. The body motion back and forth seemed to accompany the scratching naturally, a dance movement for the rhythm I set up in my hands. It all seemed solid, more real than what was swirling around me.

Bobby and Matt watched from the kitchen doorway as the man shook hands with Grandma and left. Looking down at me, I could tell she was trying to smile, but her face
only screwed open to show her teeth. Then with a strangled sigh, she lumbered back to the kitchen to fix supper.

“Matt, go in the living room and watch your sister.”

As Matt slunk in, trying to avoid me to get to the t.v., Bobby bounced around Grandma like a baby bird. Once hidden by the walls, I heard his loud whisper: “Grandma, is Iris crazy?”

I considered his question with mild curiosity. Was this what a crazy person did? It seemed so normal to be infested with bugs, even though Vida had said they only live on the ground. I knew better now, I had asked Daddy. I wanted desperately to tell Vida the truth, but there was no one to go to even to give her a picture or drawing or a bottle of glue.

Grandma wouldn’t take me to Vida’s funeral, because she said the coffin and the funeral parlor would be too frightening for little girls. We did get a visit from her parents, though. The father and mother resembled each other, with their long, tired faces, always in shadow. Apparently, Vida and her parents, along with several brothers and sisters, had moved in with an aunt—who lived near the trailer park and not in a big historical house, as Vida had said—after a kitchen fire burned their old house to the ground. Only her father spoke directly to me; he said Vida talked about me a lot, that I was the first friend she’d made in Boalsburg, and because of that he wanted to give me something of hers, to remember her by. This possession, which he handed to me wrapped in tissue paper, was a pale pink teddy bear, almost new, with a hideous plastic grin. Even at five, I could tell she’d never touched it after she took it out of the box, an unloved birthday gift. But I took in the
poor monster, because I knew it had sat in her room, on her pillow or on a shelf, because it was an outcast, and because it was clean.

Another steady snow was developing as dinner boiled. This made the fourth heavy storm in two weeks. I stared out at the fur trees, black towers against a backdrop of deepening blue, staining the white, unbroken land. Watching blue turn black was better than seeing red. A knotted hair band had the capacity to make me vomit. I was getting better, though. "Don’t worry, it’s just blood.” A dripping hand, darker than ink, clutching at my wrist.

She should still be here, I said to the teddy. I continued to dream but had no guardian. The metal beast leered at me from its shadowy corner, and I was defenseless, night after night, from the tearing mouth. Ripping to bloody froth. That was why I couldn’t sleep in my house, although I had no words to communicate it. Grandma’s huge body did no good when I was alone, wrapped in my own mind as if suffocating in my green cap. Listening to my breath going away and returning. Maybe I could go out again, I would think, into the field, and run and trip and fall. Maybe she was out there, buried in the snow where I had left her, a red-tipped shoot ready to open again.

But I knew if I tried to tell, I’d only get another lecture on the Meaning of Death. Dying is the end, sweetheart. She won’t be back anymore.

In bed that night with Grandma snoring, I continued to rock and scratch. Moving was infinitely harder lying flat. My lurches shook the bed, and when Grandma was awake, would get me short, raspy complaints, Will you stop, dear, go to sleep. I’d learn to go rigid, except for a few wiggling toes, until Grandma was so far into her snoring she couldn’t feel the bed
squeaking underneath her, and I could scratch in peace. The only problem came when I tried
to sleep, and the beast would slip in, stealing Grandma’s gargling snore for its growl, to
follow me with to the edges of my mind, farther than I could run.

That night, too, I could hear the beast coming. I tried to concentrate on the worms,
now nibbling my belly, and scanned the window for the invisible snow. But the gentle	
tapping on the pane wasn’t enough to drown out the faint rumble, metal hooves’ clank from
down the hall. The Juggernaught was on its way, carrying its minions spastic from ecstasy,
growing, humming, vibrating. The roar of pistons scraping iron. I could see it only if I
closed my eyes; it was rolling off its wood pedestal, smiling, slowly rounding the corner
toward the bedroom. The rusty ribs glowed red, eyes green. That’s not right, I shouted, you
don’t have green eyes. He shorted, gurgling bile, and moved ahead. Soon he would peek
his head around the door and I would be a goner for another night. If I didn’t shut my eyes I
couldn’t see him, but if I couldn’t hear Grandma snore, I couldn’t hear the snarling laughing
shouting. I could take his voice away.

My feet were taking me across the room, through the den, and into my own room,
nervously calm. The beast could still reach me, but at least I was on my own territory, and I
knew the places to hide. With the pink teddy tucked under an arm, I sunk on the bed.

In a wide field, a closed gray room. Vida, Vida, where are you, you promised you’d
come and here I am. My voice echoed along smooth metal. Voices, a chorus on an
overtone, go away little girl we’re fine without you. Take your teddy, go home. Stay out.

A tap. A knock. Green eyes burned through textured plaster. Muffled voice, I can’t
get in I’m coming I’m coming I’m coming.
My eyes flew open. Above my pillow I heard a sound like someone beating a drum. One tap followed another slowly, secretly. So it was true. I almost expected her face to grow from the ceiling cracks. Vida’s coming, I told teddy, your mommy who never loved you is coming to take you back.

The next day was Saturday morning. The snow was still coming down, only more quietly in flurries. For some reason, there seemed to be fewer worms in my belly than the night before, or else they were asleep. In any case, I only had to scratch for a few seconds at a time. Grandma noticed and smiled as she dished out my pancakes.

“Good morning, dear.” She poured me my maple syrup. “I saw you slept in your own bed last night.”

“Uh-huh.” I sucked the syrup from my fork.

“Do you like sleeping in your own bed? Do you want to sleep there from now on?”

I nodded vigorously. Everyone around the table, even my brothers, sighed with appreciation.

“Finally, thank God. You’re going to be all right, aren’t you, dear?” She circled the table to hug me.

We all went back to chewing. I had no intention of telling them about Vida.

The snowy Saturday was free for us kids to sled and build snowpeople. When I had on all my gear, including my cap, I was particularly good at making angels. The field was sprinkled with more bundled children enjoying the cold weather, and beyond that was the mountain, observing silently. My brothers carefully avoided taking me into the field, whether for my sake or theirs I’ve never been sure.
That evening, while all quietly clustered around the t.v. set, Matt came in from the
bathroom with an odd look on his face. “Grandma, I think there’s something caught on the
roof.”

“What’s that?” Grandma shouted. She could become a little deaf when watching the
Saturday night movie.

“I said I think there’s a raccoon or something flopping around on the roof! I don’t
know. It may not be, but there are some pretty strange sounds coming from the ceiling out
there.”

Both Grandma and Bobby sprang up and trotted toward the bathroom to listen.
Afraid of giving Vida’s secret away, I closed up over the bear and rocked. I could hear the
rest of their voices clearly.

“Did you hear that?” “Hear what?” “That!” “Weird...” “I still don’t know what you
boys—” “That right there, Grandma! Did you hear it?” “Yes.” “Listen again.” “Sounds more
like a bear than a raccoon.” “I guess I’d better go take a look.”

Grandma rustled through the closet, then came pounding toward the door. I peered
through the curtains as her tall form, now drenched in blue, plowed through the fresh snow to
get a better view. Vida, she’s looking for you, I whispered. Don’t let her see you. I didn’t
know if my words would do any good, I just had to keep stiff and keep my secret in.
Grandma scanned from several different vantage points, stood on her toes, craned her neck,
then shook her head firmly and came back inside. I knew we’d won for now.
"Well, there's nothing I can see up there." A damp-headed Grandma shook off her scarf. "No animals, just a little snow. There's probably a tad of weight building up on the beams, that's all. Nothing to worry about."

A grin slid onto my face, but I pretended to play with teddy. Won't they be surprised to see what will happen? I asked the rubbery pink mouth.

Another week went by, and Vida's knocks got louder. The quiet taps grew deeper, more ringing like a marching band's bass drum from a hilltop three blocks away. I wasn't quite sure where it was coming from. In the dreams, there were explanations Vida gave me that made sense at the time but drained from my mind the instant the sunlight hit my eyelids.

I kept assuring myself, though, that Vida was on her way, that as always she knew what she was doing. Once she came crashing meteor-like back to earth, all would be told, and things would go back to normal again.

At the end of the week, the ceiling noises had risen to a symphony, kettle drums and cymbal crashes. By now, Matt had convinced Grandma that these weren't the innocent sounds of a house settling. Monday afternoon, he volunteered to climb a tree and take in a birdseye view. I knew they would find out about our secret once Matt gave the report, but it was too late to stop Vida anyhow, so I didn't need to protect her anymore. Sesame Street credits were rolling across the t.v. screen when Matt came charging through the front door.

"Gram, we've got to do something! I swear the roof is falling in!"

"Now just hold on," she said, walking in from dusting the dining room cabinet.

"What makes you saying that? Is there something wrong with the roof?"
Matt panted a few times. "What I saw was a huge sinkhole in the snow over part of
the roof. It looked like it was just...hanging there. It didn’t look natural, Grandma. Maybe
we should call Dad."

"Well, let’s not worry him yet." She stood in the middle of the living room, dust rag
in hand, expecting. "I think I’ll call a builder."

The contractor, a tall man in a big blue parka, circled our house a couple of times
before he came in. When he walked through the door, he barely nodded to my grandmother
as he strode into the back hallway, ear cocked to the ceiling. Slowly, he wandered through
the bathroom, Bobby and Matt’s room, and finally my room, where he stayed a long time.
Afterward, he barged straight through all the other rooms and ran up to Grandma.

"Ma’am, you’ll have to leave the house right away."

"Wh...what? You mean now?" I didn’t think I’d ever seen my Grandma so flustered.

"I mean right now. Take the kids, go to a neighbor’s. I’ll go pick up my men and
equipment. This roof could go at any minute."

In a burst, Grandma started to shake. "Bobby! Matt! Get your coats on right now!"
Her voice had risen twenty pitches.

With one swoop, she picked me up by the shoulders and pushed me toward the door.
When I realized what was going on I started to howl. They couldn’t take me, Vida needed
me. The rooms reached out, afraid of being left empty.

"It’s okay, honey, we’re going to be all...right!" Grandma, I suppose, thought I was
panicking. Feeling my body tense, she shoved me harder across the carpet, yanking,
dragging, until I popped out the door, and into the car I flew. With my dramatic exit, my
brothers didn’t need to be pushed.

We only drove across the street to the Burns’ house. I guess Grandma thought she
was doing good by fleeing with our most valuable possession. When we got inside, Mr. and
Mrs. Burns swarmed around us and tried to comfort my grandmother, who by this time was
doing a lot of shrieking herself. “Call my daughter in California, call my daughter in
California.” With so many bodies running in different directions, no one ever saw me leave.
My legs, racing through the thick snow, felt no pain aside from a few leftover worms like
cinders eating through my soles. The house stood at ready.

I easily pushed open the front door to the sound of crashing. Like the man had
predicted, Vida’s arrival was about to take place. Quickly, I hopped through the bedrooms
until I reached my own, where the pink teddy lay on my flowery bedspread. The drums were
loudest here. Crash, hiss, roar, screech. A full orchestra, accompanied by choirs. Filled in
by me, of course. I lay on my bed, stroking the pink fur, and hummed any tunes I could think
of. Ugly notes, noise that could wake the dead. Smile, laughter, splash of blood. Though
blood gushed from her mouth, her crystal eyes could still slice through life and death.

Flash.

What I remember afterward couldn’t have happened, but I’ve managed to piece
together at least one ending that makes some sense. The construction people found me under
my parents’ bed, partially crushed after a beam and part of the attic floor landed on one end.
Miraculously, I was not under that end. I did go to the hospital with a major concussion and
several broken bones, plus the scar I know you’ve seen behind my right ear. My parents flew home right away and never went back to California. We sold the gray house and moved out by the mountain—into this house I’m sitting in right now. On my first day of school at Easterly, you may not have known it, but I’d already been through hours of home tutoring and therapy so I could put the whole event behind me. New school, new dresses, new life. The pink teddy bear mysteriously disappeared, forever.

You may be wondering what I remember before I woke up in the hospital. All of those memories are vague, confused, messy like a dream. And it all could have been a dream, just like on Dallas. You don’t have to believe this part if you don’t want to.

I remember a ripping sound, a scream and a roar together. Splinters began to fall: wood, metal, bone. A black wound opened. Something large and heavy began to tumble toward me. I was afraid until I saw a flash of green. Silky, blood-stained mouth. A hand, mangled, spilling, reaches out.

I would not take the bait.